

ALEXANDER MCCALL SMITH

THE NEW
NO. 1 LADIES' DETECTIVE AGENCY NOVEL



THE
**HANDSOME MAN'S
DELUXE CAFÉ**

**BOOKS BY
ALEXANDER MCCALL SMITH**

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**THE HANDSOME MAN'S
DE LUXE CAFÉ**

Alexander McCall Smith



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This book is for Alan and Sally Merry.

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About the Author

THE WOMEN OF BOTSWANA NOW FLY AEROPLANES

PRECIOUS RAMOTSWE, creator and owner of the No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency, friend of those who needed help with the problems in their lives, and wife of that great *garagiste* Mr. J.L.B. Matekoni, felt that there were, broadly speaking, two sorts of days. There were days on which nothing of any consequence took place—these were in a clear majority—and there were those on which rather too much happened. On those uneventful days you might well wish that a bit more would happen; on days when too much occurred, you longed for life to become a bit quieter.

It had always been like that, she thought, and always would be. As her father, the late Obed Ramotswe, often said: there are always too many cattle or too few—never just the right number. As a child she had wondered what he meant by this; now she knew.

Both sorts of day started in much the same way, with the opening of her eyes to the familiar dappled pattern made by the morning sun on the ceiling above her bed, an indistinct dancing of light, faint at first, but gradually becoming stronger. This intrusion of the dawn came from the gap between the curtains—the gap that she always intended to do something about, but did not because there were more pressing domestic tasks and never enough time for everything you had to do. And as long as curtains did their main job, which was to prevent nosy people—*unauthorised people*, as Mma Makutsi would call them—from looking into her bedroom without her permission, then she did not have to worry too much about their not meeting in the middle.

She woke up at more or less the same time each morning, thought for a while about getting up, and then rose, leaving Mr. J.L.B. Matekoni still deeply asleep on his side of the bed, dreaming about the sort of things that mechanics, and men in general, dream about. Women, she felt, should not enquire too closely as to what these things were, as they were not the sort of things that women liked very much—engines and football, and so on. A friend had once said to her that men did not dream about things like that—that this was just what women *wanted* men to dream about, while men, in reality, dreamed about things that they would never reveal. Mma Ramotswe doubted this. She had asked Mr. J.L.B. Matekoni one morning what he had dreamed about and he had replied: “the garage,” and if this were not proof enough, on another occasion, when she had woken him from the tossing and turning of a nightmare, he had replied to her question about the content of the bad dream by saying that it had all been to do with a seized-up gearbox. And then there was Puso, their foster child, who had told her that his dreams were about having a large dog that chased away the bullies at school, or about finding an old aeroplane in the back yard and fixing it so that it could fly, or about scoring a goal for Botswana in a soccer match against Zambia, with the whole stadium rising to its feet and cheering him. That, she thought, settled that. Perhaps there were some men who dreamed about other things, but she felt that this was not the case for

most men.

Once up and about, clasping her cup of freshly brewed red bush tea in her hand, she took walk around the garden, savouring the freshness of the early morning air. Some people said that the air in the morning had no smell; she thought they were wrong, for it smelled of so many things—of the acacia leaves that had been closed for the night and were now opening at the first touch of the morning sun; of a wood fire somewhere, just a hint of it; of the wind and the breath that the wind had, which was dry and sweet, like the breath of cattle. It was while she was standing there that she decided whether the day would be one in which things might happen; it had something to do with the way she felt when she considered the day ahead. And most of the time she was right, although sometimes, of course, she could be completely wrong.

On that particular morning as she walked past the mopipi tree she had planted at the front of the garden, she had a sudden feeling that the next few hours were going to be rather unusual. It was not a disturbing premonition—not one of those feelings that one gets when one fears that something is going to go badly wrong—it was more a feeling that something interesting and out of the ordinary lay ahead.

She remarked on the fact to Mr. J.L.B. Matekoni as he sat at the kitchen table eating the brown maize porridge that he liked so much. Puso and his sister, Motholeli, had already eaten their breakfast and were in their rooms preparing to leave for school. The school run that Mma Ramotswe had become so used to was now no longer necessary, as Puso was of an age to make his own way there—the school was not far away—and he was also able to help his sister with the wheelchair. This gave the children an independence that they both enjoyed, although departing on time could be a problem when Puso had some boyish task to complete—the catching of flying ants, for instance—or Motholeli had at the last minute to find another pair of cotton socks or locate a book that needed to be returned to the school library.

“I have a feeling,” announced Mma Ramotswe, “that this is going to be a busy day.”

Mr. J.L.B. Matekoni glanced up from his porridge. “Lots of letters to write? Bills to send out?”

Mma Ramotswe shook her head. “No, we’re up to date on all of those things, Rra. Mma Makutsi has been busy with her filing, too, and everything is put away.”

“Lots of clients to see, then?” He thought of his own day and imagined a line of driverless impatient cars, each eager for his attention, their horns honking to attract his notice: cars, in his view, were quite capable of all the human emotions and failings, including a lack of patience or restraint.

Mma Ramotswe had looked at her diary just before leaving the office the previous day and had seen that it was largely empty. “No,” she answered. “There are no appointments with clients. Nothing this morning and nothing this afternoon, I think.”

He looked puzzled. “And yet it’s going to be a busy day?”

“I have that feeling. It’s difficult to say why, but I am sure that this will not be a quiet day.”

Mr. J.L.B. Matekoni smiled. People talked about the intuition of women, but he was not sure that he believed in it. How could women possibly know things that men did not know? Was their hearing more acute than men’s, so that they heard things that men missed—as do,

or cats might pick up frequencies audible only to them? He thought not. Or was the eyesight more acute, so that they saw clear details where men saw only indistinct blur. Again, he thought not. What we knew, we knew from our senses, and the senses of women were no different from the senses of men.

And yet, and yet ... As he returned to his porridge, Mr. J.L.B. Matekoni reflected on how there had been so many instances in which Mma Ramotswe had shown a quite uncanny ability to notice things that he himself had simply missed, or to know things about others that most people—most ordinary people, or men, to be specific—would not be expected to know. He remembered how, while out shopping with her a few weeks earlier, she had whispered to him that a woman walking towards them was probably one of Mma Potokwane's cousins. He had cast an eye discreetly over the woman and wondered whether he had ever met her in the company of Mma Potokwane, but decided that he had not. How, then, could Mma Ramotswe tell?

"She was carrying one of those bags that the orphans make in Mma Potokwane's craft workshop," said Mma Ramotswe. "That's the first thing I noticed. Then I saw the shoes that she was wearing. They were very unusual shoes, and I had seen them before—when they belonged to Mma Potokwane. She must have passed them on."

He had dismissed this as fanciful, but several days later, when he had gone out to the Orphan Farm to attend to one of the vans, on a pro bono basis of course, he had remembered the incident and asked Mma Potokwane whether she had any cousins visiting her. She did. And had she passed on an unusual pair of shoes to this cousin? "As it happens," said Mma Potokwane, "I did. But let's not waste time talking about these small things, Rra. Now there is something wrong with the spare van too, and I was hoping that you would have the time to look at that one as well."

He had sighed. "I am always happy to help you, Mma Potokwane," he said. "But there are places called garages, you know, and they are there to fix vehicles. That is their job. Perhaps you might try in future to—"

Mma Potokwane did not let him finish. "Oh, I know all about garages," she said lightly. "But I would never go to one of them—your own garage excluded, of course, Rra. Oh, those garages are expensive! You drive onto their forecourt and straightaway that's two hundred pula. You get out of the car—that's another fifty pula. They say, 'Good morning, Mma, and what can we do for you?' That costs seventy-five pula to say, and so it goes on. No, Rra, I will not go near those places; not me."

Now, as he finished the last of his porridge, Mr. J.L.B. Matekoni reminded himself that the one thing he felt certain about when it came to women was that you could never be sure. Mma Ramotswe said she had a feeling about something, then it was perfectly possible that her instinct was correct. So rather than say, "We shall see, Mma," he muttered, "Well, you're probably right, Mma." And then he added, very much as an afterthought—and a hesitant afterthought at that—"Who knows, Mma, what will happen? Who knows?"

WHEN MMA RAMOTSWE ARRIVED at the office that morning, Mma Makutsi was already there. Grace Makutsi, wife of Mr. Phuti Radiphuti and mother of Itumelang Clovis Radiphuti, had recently been made a full partner in the business. It had been a long road, one that stretched from her

first appointment as secretary in the fledgling agency, to assistant detective, to the vague rather unsatisfactory status of associate detective, and finally to partnership. It had been a road that started in distant Bobonong, in the north of the country, in a home that housed six people in two cramped rooms, and from there had led, through much scrimping and saving by Mma Makutsi's family, to the Botswana Secretarial College. At the end of her course the road had climbed sharply uphill to the glorious mark of ninety-seven per cent in the final examinations—a result never before achieved at the college, and never since then equalled. But even that distinction provided in itself no guarantee of a life free of struggle, and for some years Mma Makutsi had been obliged to endure an existence of parsimony and wariness. Mma Ramotswe would have paid her more had she been able, but the No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency made no money at all, and there was a limit to how generous a loss-making business could be. There would have been no point, she thought, in giving Mma Makutsi a bigger salary and then having to close the business down after a month or two when it went bankrupt.

Mma Makutsi understood all this. She was grateful to Mma Ramotswe for all she did for her, and so when her fortunes changed dramatically on her marriage to Mr. Phuti Radiphuti she made it clear that she would not give up her job, but would continue to work at the No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency. As a partner in the business, her devotion to the enterprise became even more intense—hence her new habit of arriving earlier than Mma Ramotswe on most mornings.

To begin with, her baby son, Itumelang, accompanied his mother into the office, sleeping contentedly in his carrycot while she got on with her work. Now, however, he had become more wakeful, and consequently more demanding, and this meant that he was left at home with the woman from Bobonong who had been employed as a nursemaid.

"I am very happy with my life," said Mma Makutsi. "I find professional satisfaction in my work, and at the same time I have all the pleasure of running a home. It is a very good thing when a woman can do both of these things."

"Yes, we women are doing very well in Botswana," agreed Mma Ramotswe. "We don't have to sit out in the lands all day. We are running businesses now. We are building roads. We are flying aeroplanes. We are doing all the things that men used to think were not for us."

For a moment, Mma Makutsi pictured Mma Ramotswe at the controls of a plane. It would be hard for her to keep the aircraft level, she thought, as her traditional build would make her far heavier on the side on which she was sitting. It would be possible, she felt, to adjust the controls so that the wing on her side came up a bit, but she still imagined that landings would be a bit heavy, and bumpy. Of course it would be quite a shock if one were to get into a plane and see that Mma Ramotswe was in the pilot's seat. It would be rude to refuse to board the plane in such circumstances, and one would simply have to put a brave face on it and hope for the best. Perhaps one could hide one's surprise by saying something like, "Oh, Mma Ramotswe, I did not know that you had taken up flying. This is good news, Mma. This is a big victory for women."

Coming into the office first, Mma Makutsi took it upon herself to have the early morning cup of tea—as distinct from the mid-morning and late morning cups—ready for when Mma Ramotswe arrived. This cup was an important one, as it enabled the two women to consider their plans for the day ahead. There might have been no scientific connection between

drinking tea and getting one's thoughts in order, but that was the way it seemed, at least in Mma Ramotswe's opinion. Tea brought about focus, and that helped.

"So," said Mma Ramotswe. "What have we today, Mma Makutsi?"

"We have tea to begin with," said Mma Makutsi.

"That is very good."

"And then ... well, we have nothing, as far as I can see, Mma." Mma Makutsi paused. "Unless, of course, something turns up. And it might. Sometimes there is nothing at eight o'clock and then at ten o'clock there is something."

"I have a feeling there'll be something," said Mma Ramotswe. "When I was in my garden this morning I had a feeling about that."

Mma Makutsi, looking down at the surface of her desk, moved a pencil from one place to another. "Yes," she said pensively. "There might be something. Later on."

"You think so, Mma?" asked Mma Ramotswe.

Mma Makutsi waited some time before answering. Then at last she said, "I am expecting some news, Mma. It might come today."

Mma Ramotswe knew better than to ask exactly what this news might be. Mma Makutsi sometimes liked to shroud her affairs in mystery, and did not always respond well to direct questioning. So she simply said, "I hope that you get your news, Mma."

"Thank you, Mma. When you are waiting for news, it is better to get it. It is not easy not to get news that you're waiting for. Then you think: What has happened about the thing that I'm waiting to hear about? Has it happened, or has it not happened?" Mma Makutsi stared at Mma Ramotswe as she made these remarks. The light caught her large glasses and danced, like shards of gold, across the ceiling.

"And if you don't hear anything," she continued, "then you can spend the whole day worrying about it."

"This news of yours," said Mma Ramotswe, trying to sound as if the matter under discussion was barely of any interest at all, "will it come in a letter, or ..."

"No," said Mma Makutsi, shaking her head. "It will not be in a letter."

"Or a telephone call?"

"Yes, it will be a telephone call. It will be a telephone call from my lawyer."

This could hardly be ignored. "Your lawyer, Mma?"

Mma Makutsi waved a hand with the air of one who is accustomed to having a lawyer. Of course she might have a lawyer now, thought Mma Ramotswe, but she would not have had one all that long ago. Yet she did not begrudge Mma Makutsi the satisfaction of having a lawyer after having lived so many years without one, even if she had no lawyer herself, now that she came to think of it.

"It is nothing very important, Mma Ramotswe. Just a little ..."

Mma Ramotswe waited.

"A little personal matter."

"I see."

Mma Makutsi rose from her desk. "But we should not be talking about these things. We should perhaps be going over that business plan I drew up, Mma."

"Ah, yes," said Mma Ramotswe. "The business plan."

Mma Makutsi had drawn up a business plan when she had seen one that Phuti Radiphu

had prepared for the Double Comfort Furniture Store. Of course the two businesses were as different as chalk and cheese in terms of turnover and profit, but Phuti had told her that every concern should have a plan and she had volunteered to do the necessary work.

Mma Ramotswe took the sheet of paper passed to her by Mma Makutsi. The heading at the top read *The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency: Challenges Ahead and Options for the Future*.

"That is a very good title," said Mma Ramotswe. "Challenges and options. I think you are right to mention those, Mma: they are both there."

Back in her seat, Mma Makutsi accepted the compliment gracefully. "It is forward-looking, Mma. You'll have noticed that."

Mma Ramotswe glanced down the page. "And there is this paragraph here that talks about enhanced profit. That is good, Mma."

Mma Makutsi inclined her head. "That is the objective of every business, Mma. Enhanced profit is what counts. If we were a company, that would drive the share price up."

"Yes," said Mma Ramotswe, knowing even as she spoke that she sounded rather vague. She had no head for finance, especially when it came to companies and share prices and so on, although she understood the basics and was particularly good at counting. This she had learned from her father, who had been able to count a herd of cattle with astonishing accuracy, even as the animals moved around and mingled with one another. She frowned. Enhanced profit had to come from somewhere. "But where do these bigger profits come from, Mma?"

Mma Makutsi answered with authority. "They come from greater turnover, Mma. That is where profits come from: turnover."

Mma Ramotswe muttered the words *greater turnover*. There was a comforting, mantra-like quality to them, yes, but ... "Turnover is the same thing as fees?" she asked.

"It is," said Mma Makutsi. "Turnover is money going through the books." She made a curious gesture with her right hand, representing, Mma Ramotswe assumed, the progress of money through the books. It all looked so effortless, but Mma Ramotswe was not convinced.

"More money going through the books, Mma Makutsi, must mean ..." She hesitated. "More fees?"

"Yes. In a sense."

"In a sense?"

"Yes."

Mma Ramotswe looked down at the business plan. "So, unless I misunderstand all this, Mma, more fees means more clients, or, I suppose, higher charges to the clients we already have."

Mma Makutsi stared at her. Her large glasses, thought Mma Ramotswe, reflected the words back at itself. People looked at Mma Makutsi and saw themselves.

"You could say that," said Mma Makutsi. "That is one way of putting it."

Mma Ramotswe's tone was gentle. "And how are we going to get more clients, Mma?"

Mma Makutsi opened her mouth to answer, but then closed it again. She shifted her head slightly, to look past Mma Ramotswe, through the window behind her.

"There is one arriving right now," she said.

Mma Ramotswe slipped the business plan into a drawer. The trouble with plans, she thought, was that they tended to be expressions of hope. Everybody, it seemed, felt that the

should have a plan, but for most people the plan merely said what they would like to happen rather than what they would actually achieve. Most people did what they wanted to do whether or not that was what their plan said they should do. So plans were useful only in revealing what people wished for. If you wanted to know what they would actually do, the only way of finding out was by watching them and seeing what they did. Then you would know what they might do in the future—because most people did what they had always done. That, thought Mma Ramotswe, was well known—in fact, it was one of the best-known things there was.

“We can talk about plans some other time,” said Mma Ramotswe. “We would not want the client to think that we sit about making plans all the time.”

Mma Makutsi felt rather relieved. She was aware that her business plan was optimistic, but she had found it difficult to write anything that took a bleak view. After all, what did matter? The important thing was that they were perfectly all right as they were. She had Phuti Radiphuti and her baby and her new house. Mma Ramotswe had Mr. J.L.B. Mateko and her white van and Puso and Motholeli. She had her garden too, with her mopipi tree and the runner beans. And they both had the land about them; the sky that went on forever, seemed, and was filled with sun and with the air that they all needed, that the cattle needed that the animals in the Kalahari needed—there was plenty of that; they had Botswana. Surely everybody had the things that mattered, when you came to think of it, and if you had that, did you really need a business plan?

Those were the thoughts in Mma Makutsi’s mind as she watched the car being parked beside Mma Ramotswe’s white van under the acacia tree. Two people got out—two clients, not one: as in the business plan.

PEOPLE WITH VERY LONG NOSES

MMA MAKUTSI opened the door to their visitors.

“Mr. and Mrs....,” she announced, looking at them expectantly.

The man shook his head. “Not Mr. and Mrs.,” he corrected. “Mr. and Miss.”

Mma Makutsi was unembarrassed. “Then Mr. and Miss ...?”

The man shook his head again. “No, Mma. I am Mr. and this lady with me is my sister only. We do not have the same name because—”

Mma Makutsi cut him short. “Because your sister is married? Of course, Rra. That must be the reason.”

The man looked at Mma Ramotswe, who had now risen from her desk to greet them. A look of understanding passed between them—a look that said: we have both had over-zealous assistants—they mean well, of course, but have a lot to learn.

Mma Ramotswe stepped forward. “I’m Mma Ramotswe,” she said, extending her hand. “And this lady is my assis—” She remembered barely in time. “My co-director.”

The words slipped out. Technically, Mma Makutsi had become a partner in the business. If it had been a company, she might have been a director, but it had never been incorporated—“hardly worth doing when the shares would be worth nothing,” said Mr. J.L.B. Matekoni, the accountant, who, as a favour, did the accounts of the agency. *Partner*, though, had come to mean something else—as Mma Ramotswe had read in a magazine—and she felt a different word was needed. She knew that she could have called her a business partner, but that was cumbersome, almost pernicky, and Mma Makutsi was so much more than a business partner. She was the person who made the tea, who commented on the state of the world as they drank the tea she made, who answered the phone, did the filing, and kept the young mechanics in their place. It was a large role, one for which the term *business partner* simply seemed inadequate, but which seemed fully worthy of the label *co-director*.

The compliment might well have slipped out unnoticed, but it did not. Mma Makutsi heard it and its effect was electric. She seemed to grow in stature, become a bit taller, and smile a bit more broadly.

The man nodded at the introductions. “And my name is Sengupta,” he said. “And my sister ...” He gestured to the woman beside him. “My sister’s good name is Chattopadhyaya, which was the name of her late husband, my brother-in-law. It is a long name and so people call her Miss Rose, which is easier. That is not her real first name, but it is the one that people use. Just remember: red flower with thorns, and you will not forget her name.”

There was something earnest about his manner that endeared him to Mma Ramotswe. She smiled encouragingly. “It is a fine name to have.” She had been discreetly studying the visitors and the memory she had been trying to locate had now surfaced. *Sengupta Office Supplies*—she had seen their advertisements in the newspaper. Paper clips, staples, copi-

paper ...

“Exactly,” said Mr. Sengupta.

Mma Ramotswe looked surprised.

“You mentioned paper clips,” he said.

She had muttered the words without realising, as unintentionally as she had said *co-director*. It was a worrying prospect: if one started to say what one was thinking, the results could be very embarrassing. She might think, *Oh, there goes Mma Makutsi again—sounding off about the usual things*, and were she to say that, the consequences would be awkward. There would be all sorts of misunderstandings ... or would they be misunderstandings at all? Truth would break out, rather like the sun coming out from behind a cloud, and we would all understand one another perfectly well, because we would know what we thought of each other.

“Paper clips?” said Mma Ramotswe. “Oh yes, paper clips. You’re the office supplies manager, aren’t you, Rra?”

Mr. Sengupta seemed proud that his business had been recognised. “That is exactly who I am, Mma.” He looked about the office. “Perhaps you use some of our items?”

Mma Makutsi shook her head. “We do not,” she said. “We go to a company out near Broadhurst. They are—”

Mma Ramotswe shot a glance in her assistant’s direction. “I have seen your catalogue, Rra,” she said quickly. “They are very fine products, I think.”

“There is room for more than one company,” said Mr. Sengupta generously. “Competition in business is a good thing, I believe.”

“It is very important,” said Mma Makutsi.

“But you are the only detective agency in town,” went on Mr. Sengupta. “Unless there is some other outfit that I am unaware of. Perhaps it is in disguise.” He laughed at his own joke.

“That is very funny, Rra,” said Mma Makutsi. “They would be very good at disguises, but nobody would know they were there.”

Mr. Sengupta’s response was touched with annoyance. “That is what I meant,” he said.

Mma Ramotswe judged it was time to take control of the situation. “Please sit down, Mr. Sengupta ... and Miss Rose.” She gestured to the two client chairs before her desk. The chairs had always been in that position—ever since they had moved into the office—although recently Mma Makutsi had shifted them so that they were at least half facing her desk as well. Mma Ramotswe had not approved of this, as she found it awkward talking to people side-on, and had returned them to their original position, facing her directly. But now, as the man and the woman sat down, she realised that there would be further chair issues: one could not have clients sitting with their backs to a co-director.

Mma Makutsi was hovering behind them, and now offered the visitors tea. This offer was gratefully accepted by Miss Rose, who spoke for the first time. “I am very fond of tea,” she said. “I drink it all the time.”

“It is very good for the digestion,” said Mr. Sengupta.

“And for many other organs,” said Miss Rose. “It clears the head and the nasal passages.”

“Yes,” said Mma Ramotswe. “Tea does all of those things. And more, I believe. And yet people still drink coffee ...”

Mr. Sengupta started to shake his head. First it went from side to side, over one shoulder and then over the other, but then it started to move backwards and forwards. The signal

confused Mma Ramotswe; she knew the Indian habit of moving the head from side to side meant the opposite of what it meant elsewhere and signified approval rather than disagreement, but she was not sure what a combination of movements meant. Perhaps there was something wrong with Mr. Sengupta; perhaps his head was loose.

"I am in complete agreement with you, Mma," he said. "There is too much coffee being drunk. It is a serious situation." He paused. "But that is not the problem that I wanted to talk to you about. I am happy to talk about coffee some other time, but there is another thing that is preying on my mind."

"Then please tell me, Rra."

"I shall. But firstly, may I tell you about myself, Mma Ramotswe?"

"And me too," said Miss Rose.

"Yes, yes, I'll tell them about you, Rosie. But I shall be first because I am the one who is speaking, you see."

"DO YOU KNOW INDIA, Mma?"

In the background, the kettle, supervised by Mma Makutsi, began to make sounds of readiness—a faint whistling, like the first stirrings of the wind.

"I'm afraid I don't, Rra. There are many places in this world that I would like to see one day, and India is certainly one of them. It is high on my list." As she spoke, Mma Ramotswe reflected on the fact that she had never really been anywhere much, apart from a couple of trips over the border into South Africa, and on another occasion north to Bulawayo. That made a total of two foreign countries, but she did not think of Botswana's neighbours as being really very foreign. And as for the list, it was hardly an active one, as she suspected that she would never be able to get away, even if she could afford the fare, and somebody would have to take care of Mr. J.L.B. Matekoni and the children. And if Mma Makutsi were left in charge of the No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency there was always a risk that she would do something that would require sorting out later, co-director or not. Then there was another thing: even if India was on her list, there were other places that were higher up. There was Muncie, Indiana, to which Clovis Andersen, author of her *vade mecum*, *The Principles of Private Detection*, had given her an open invitation before he left Botswana; and then there was London, which she would like to visit in order to see Prince Charles if at all possible, although she was realistic about that and realised that he could well be busy when she was there and unable to fit her in to talk about the things that she had read he liked to talk about. She would like it if they could exchange notes on gardening, and she could tell him about her success with runner beans and her mopipi tree, and the difficulties of growing things when the rains were achingly slow to arrive. He would understand all that, she thought, because he had been to Botswana and had gone out into the Kalahari and she could tell that he knew and she could see that he was a good man.

Mr. Sengupta was saying something about Calcutta. "My family is from Bengal, you see, Mma. Perhaps you know of Kolkata, which they used to call Calcutta. I still call it that because I cannot keep up with all the changes in the world. Change this, change that—what are these people who tell us we must always be changing, Mma Ramotswe?"

Both he and Miss Rose looked at Mma Ramotswe enquiringly, as if the question were not

rhetoical but demanded an answer. Mma Ramotswe was not sure what to say; she agreed with the general sentiment, though. "They are tiresome people, Rra," she said. "You are right about that."

"But who are they?" repeated Mr. Sengupta.

Mma Ramotswe shrugged. "They are people who write in the newspapers or talk on the radio. They are the people who keep telling us what to think and to say."

Mr. Sengupta leaned forward in his enthusiasm. "Exactly, Mma! Exactly! I do not even remember any election in which I was asked to vote for people for the job—the job of telling others what they can say and what they can't say. Do you remember that election?"

Mma Makutsi had now made the tea and was passing a cup to Miss Rose. "There was no election like that," she contributed. "These are people with very long noses, that is all."

Mr. Sengupta turned to look at her. "Long noses, Mma?"

"Yes, they have long noses because they poke them into other people's business. That is why they think they can tell us what to say."

"I tell them to go away," said Miss Rose. "I say: go away, you people, just go away."

This remark was greeted with silence. Then Mr. Sengupta continued, "We should be more prepared to tell people to go away, you know. If more of us stood up and said 'go away,' we would have less trouble with government people and busybodies of every sort."

"That would teach them," said Miss Rose.

"But I must get back to what I was saying," said Mr. Sengupta. "As I was telling you, my family is from Bengal. My grandfather was a well-known man in Calcutta. He had a street named after him, you know, and he was very well off before he lost all his money in some political dealings with some very rotten fellows. That was a big tragedy for our family, but my father picked himself up and treated it as a challenge. He became a successful man and was able to give each of his four sons enough money to go and start a business somewhere. That is when I came to Botswana—that was thirty years ago. I was twenty-five then, Mma. I was young, but I came and started my office supplies business. It was not easy leaving India and starting up in the middle of Africa, but I did it, Mma. And the moment I arrived in this country I thought: this is a good place. This is a good place because people treat one another well and there is much work to be done. That is what I thought, Mma, and I have not changed my view."

Mma Makutsi passed Mr. Sengupta his cup of tea and he thanked her with one of his difficult-to-interpret movements of the head. "Then my sister came and joined us with her husband. He worked with me in the business, and started our branch up in Francistown. That did very well until he became ill and subsequently he passed over." He looked at his sister who lowered her eyes.

"I am glad that everything went well for you, Rra," said Mma Ramotswe. "But I am sorry about your husband, Mma. I am sorry that he is late."

Miss Rose raised her eyes and acknowledged the expression of sympathy.

"We lead a quiet life," said Mr. Sengupta. "We are both citizens now—I took citizenship fifteen years ago, and I am very proud of it. My sister took it a bit later, but she is also proud to be a citizen."

"I am happy to hear that," said Mma Ramotswe. She was not sure where the story was going. Mr. Sengupta had said that he was leading a quiet life, but not so quiet, it seemed, that

he had no need to consult the No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency.

Mr. Sengupta suddenly looked grave. "Then something happened," he said. "Something very unexpected."

They waited. For a full minute he sat in silence before continuing. "A woman came to our house," he said. "She was an Indian person, like us. She walked up to the house. We have a man at the gate. These days people like us have a man at the gate to watch out for people who think they can steal our possessions. They think that just because we are Indian we have a lot of money and they can come and help themselves to it."

Mma Ramotswe knew that what he said was true. There were people who preyed on others: many of them came from outside the country, she believed, but it was not only foreigners who were to blame.

"This woman told the man at the gate that she needed to see me and that she was a friend. He let her in—it was not his fault. These men think that if one Indian person comes asking for another Indian person, then she must be a relative or friend. It is natural—I am not blaming him. So this woman came to the door, and my sister was the first to speak to her. You tell her, Rosie."

Miss Rose leaned forward in her chair. "I had never seen her before in my life, Mma Ramotswe. She was a stranger—a complete stranger."

"We know most members of the Indian community here in Gaborone," explained Mr. Sengupta. "You see people at weddings. The big festivals too—Diwali and so forth. My sister will have met just about every Indian lady in the town—but not this lady, you see, Mma. Not her."

"So she was a visitor?" asked Mma Ramotswe. "Or somebody who was working for some firm? South African, maybe?"

Mr. Sengupta raised a hand. "No, unfortunately not, Mma. It would have been simple if that had been the case, but it was not. This lady was completely without any connection to Gaborone, or the rest of Botswana, for that matter."

"It was as if she came from nowhere," said Miss Rose.

Mr. Sengupta laughed. "Yes, that's exactly it. She is the lady from nowhere, Mma."

From behind them, Mma Makutsi joined in the conversation. "She has to come from somewhere. Nobody comes from nowhere. We all come from somewhere."

Mr. Sengupta half turned in his chair to address her. "Yes, Mma, that is correct. So perhaps I should say of this lady that she *appeared* to come from nowhere."

"Yes," said Miss Rose. "She appeared to come from nowhere. But perhaps that is just where she is from. Nowhere." She made an airy gesture to demonstrate the curious state of coming from nowhere.

Mr. Sengupta's head started to bob about once more. "We must not get confused. This lady obviously comes from somewhere, but it is not clear where that place is. And what makes this a rather unusual case is that she doesn't seem to know where she comes from."

"Or her name," said Miss Rose. "Can you believe that, Mma? She doesn't know what her name is."

Mma Ramotswe frowned. Clovis Andersen had said something in his book about a case of his in which somebody suffered from amnesia. This person could not remember what had happened to him when he was found lying by the side of a road. He had been hit by a car,

transpired, and it was only much later he began to remember the sequence of events. “Was she involved in an accident?” asked Mma Ramotswe. “Sometimes people cannot remember what happened to them if they have an injury to their head. It is not unknown.”

“No, it is not,” said Mr. Sengupta. “And that was the first thing that I suspected. Obviously I could not send her back out onto the street, could I, Mma?”

“Of course not.” She knew, though, that there were people who would do exactly that in similar circumstances.

“So I got my friend, Dr. Moffat, to take a look at her,” Mr. Sengupta continued. “You know him, Mma?”

“Yes, I know him.”

“He said that there was no sign of any head injury and that she seemed to be quite healthy in other respects.”

“Very strange,” said Mma Ramotswe.

“Stranger than strange,” agreed Mr. Sengupta. “So we told her she could stay with us. We couldn’t let an Indian lady wander around not knowing who she was—or where she was.”

“Did she really not know where she was?” asked Mma Makutsi. “Not even that she was in Gaborone?” She shook her head in disbelief. “You read about these things, but I’m sure they can’t be true. How can you forget everything?”

“I assure you, Mma, she had no idea,” said Mr. Sengupta. “I am not a person who is easily fooled, you know. I asked her if she knew that she was in Botswana, and she simply looked at me blankly. Like this.” He affected what he thought would be the look of somebody who had no idea of being in Botswana.

Mma Ramotswe suppressed a smile. “What did Dr. Moffat say about her story?” she asked.

“He said that he thought she was telling the truth. He said that sometimes people claim not to remember things in order to get themselves out of trouble. This lady did not appear to be lying. He said that he thought it was genuine amnesia.”

Mma Ramotswe looked pensive. “I assume that you want me to find out who this lady is?”

Mr. Sengupta sat back in his chair. “That is why we are here, Mma.”

“But why do you want to find this out, Rra? Is it for you to do that?”

Mr. Sengupta sighed. “There are two reasons for that, Mma Ramotswe. One is that I have taken this lady into my house. And once you have done that, then you cannot walk away, can you?”

“You cannot,” said Mma Makutsi from behind him. “You cannot walk away.”

“And the second reason,” Mr. Sengupta continued. “The second reason has to do with the immigration people. This lady has no papers—no passport, no driving licence, nothing. I went to see them about getting her permission to stay in the country, and they kicked up a very big fuss. They said they cannot receive an application from a person with no name and no address. They said that the most likely thing is that she is from Zimbabwe and that they will have to push her back over the border.”

Mma Makutsi knew what that entailed. “She will be in trouble,” she said. “Things are not easy there, and she would have to find somebody to look after her.”

“That’s quite right,” said Mr. Sengupta. “So I asked them if we could buy some time. I asked, if I engaged somebody to find out who she is, would they delay expelling her? They said that they would—provided the person I got to look into it is suitable.”

“We are very suitable,” said Mma Makutsi. “We are the only detective agency in Botswana.”

“That is what I said to them,” said Mr. Sengupta. “And you’ll be happy to hear, Mma, that they said the No. 1 Ladies’ Detective Agency would be perfectly acceptable for this enquiry.” He paused. “They have given us six months. That is very good, as it gives us a lot of time to sort things out.”

Miss Rose now spoke. “Will you take on this case, Mma Ramotswe? Will you find out who this poor lady is?”

Mma Ramotswe did not need any time to consider. She could imagine how uncomfortable the woman’s situation would be, how confusing and frightening it must be not to know who you are where you are. Of course she would help.

“We shall do this for you,” she said, glancing across the room at Mma Makutsi, who nodded enthusiastically. “We shall do our best.”

“We cannot guarantee results,” chimed in Mma Makutsi, “but my co-director and I will do our best, Mr. Sengupta.”

Co-director! It was as Mma Ramotswe had imagined it would be. There should be a new saying, she thought—after all, somebody had to be the first to coin a saying, no matter how well known and widely used it later became. This one, she thought, could become popular. *Give a secretary a new title, and it sticks.* She smiled at the thought. Life was like that: it revealed just how true all the sayings were. In that respect, at least, there were never any real surprises, no matter how surprising things seemed to be on the surface.

THE ONLY PURRING BABY IN BOTSWANA

MMA RAMOTSWE returned home that evening well before Mr. J.L.B. Matekoni. He had a meeting of the Mechanical Trades Association and did not get back to Zebra Drive until shortly after seven, by which time she had fed the children and was busy preparing a stew for their own dinner. It was this stew that he smelled as he walked in the back door, took off his work shoes, and went into the kitchen to greet his wife.

"It was a long meeting," he said. "But now ... that smell, Mma! That is a very fine stew." He sniffed at the air. "It is enough to make me forget all about the meeting."

"I have had a long day too," said Mma Ramotswe. "Some big things happened today—just as I told you they would."

Mr. J.L.B. Matekoni went to the fridge and took out a small bottle of beer. Mma Ramotswe did not drink, but she kept a supply of cold beers for her husband for this sort of occasion.

He sat down at the kitchen table, the opened bottle of beer before him. "So," he began, "this very important day of yours—I'm listening."

She told him about the visit of Mr. Sengupta and his sister.

"I know that person," he interrupted. "He is a charitable man: the Lions Club and so on. And I seem to remember Mma Potokwane telling me that he gave her five or six boxes of notebooks and crayons for the children to use."

"I am not surprised to hear that," said Mma Ramotswe. "He has taken in this poor woman who has lost her memory. That is another example of his kindness, it seems."

She retold the story of the Indian woman and her plight. Mr. J.L.B. Matekoni listened intently, and shook his head in disbelief. "It seems very unlikely, Mma. Surely ..."

"Dr. Moffat said it can happen," she said.

"Oh, I've heard of it, of course," said Mr. J.L.B. Matekoni, taking a sip of his beer. "But I've always thought it was one of those things that people talked about but nobody ever came across. Like *tokoloshes* and such things."

He used the common word for malignant spirits—the sort of thing that people would talk about when they were frightening one another around the campfire. He knew, of course, that there were no such things as *tokoloshes*, but when one was alone at night, on a remote place perhaps, when the sounds of the bush about you were magnified by the darkness, and there were no lights nor moon for comfort, then it was only too easy to believe in the things that you did not believe in. Even the bravest among us would feel a little frightened in such circumstances, and Mr. J.L.B. Matekoni knew that most of us are not quite as brave as we would like to be—although sometimes we can surprise ourselves in that regard.

Mma Ramotswe did not want to talk about *tokoloshes*. She finished her account of the Sengupta visit and then went on to tell him about Mma Makutsi's telephone call.

"I knew that there was something going on," she said. "After Mr. Sengupta and his sister

had left, she kept looking at her watch. When she went out to fetch some fat cakes for her lunch, she was keen that I should stay and take a message if there was a phone call. She said she was waiting to hear from her lawyer.”

Mr. J.L.B. Matekoni raised an eyebrow. “Her lawyer? Is she in trouble?”

“No, it was nothing like that. And there was no phone call while she was out. It came an hour or so later.”

“And?”

Mma Ramotswe had been looking forward to breaking the news. “You won’t believe it, Rra.”

Mr. J.L.B. Matekoni took another sip of his beer. “She’s going into parliament?”

“No.”

“She’s being sent into space?”

Mma Ramotswe laughed, and for a few moments imagined Mma Makutsi in a space suit with her large glasses perched on the outside of her helmet. “No, she is not going into space, although I am sure she would be good at doing what people who go into space do. Is there anything to be done up there? If there is, then she would do it very well.”

“The papers would float about,” said Mr. J.L.B. Matekoni. “It is not easy to file when there is no gravity. Even Mma Makutsi would find it hard, I think.”

“I have every faith in her,” she said, adding, “now that she is a full partner.”

Mr. J.L.B. Matekoni raised an eyebrow, but said nothing. He had voiced reservations about the over-promotion of Mma Makutsi, but had not pressed his views on Mma Ramotswe—the No. 1 Ladies’ Detective Agency was her business, not his. “Sometimes,” he had said, choosing his words carefully, “sometimes you have to be cautious about promoting people. Once you promote them you can’t really demote them.” He paused. “It is easier to go up a hill than to come down again.”

Mma Ramotswe had looked puzzled. “Are you sure of that, Rra? Isn’t it easier to come down a hill, because it’s downhill? Surely going uphill is more effort.”

Mr. J.L.B. Matekoni gave this some thought. “What I meant to say is that once you cook the meat, you can’t uncook it. That is what I really meant to say, Mma.”

“And that is true, I think,” said Mma Ramotswe.

“Well,” said Mr. J.L.B. Matekoni. “There you are, then.”

It had not been the most satisfactory of discussions, but even taking his warning into account she had still felt that it was the right thing to do to offer Mma Makutsi a partnership. She remembered their discussion now, though, as she told him about Mma Makutsi’s phone call.

“Anyway, Rra, this call of hers came through at last, and it was her lawyer, as she had said it would be. He is a lawyer with a very loud voice ...”

“That is the best sort of lawyer,” said Mr. J.L.B. Matekoni. “A lawyer who speaks so softly that nobody can hear him is no use.”

“Well, his voice was loud enough for me to hear what he said to her. It came over clearly even though he was talking at the other end of a telephone line.”

Mr. J.L.B. Matekoni looked at her expectantly. “And, Mma?”

“And he said: ‘You’ve got it, Mma.’ And she shouted, ‘I’ve got it? Are you sure I’ve got it?’ And he said, ‘One hundred per cent sure—’ ”

“Not ninety-seven per cent?” interrupted Mr. J.L.B. Matekoni.

“No, one hundred per cent sure. And all the time I couldn’t help listening—I don’t like to listen to other people’s conversations, but when one of them is in the room with you and the other has a very loud voice ...” She looked at Mr. J.L.B. Matekoni for support, and he said, “Of course, Mma. You could not help overhearing—you need not feel guilty about that.”

Mma Ramotswe continued with her story. “When she rang off, she leaped up from her chair and did a little dance. It was an unusual dance, Rra—not one I have ever seen before—but you could tell that it was the dance of somebody who was very happy about something.”

“About getting this ... this whatever it was she got?”

“A restaurant,” said Mma Ramotswe. “Mma Makutsi told me after she had finished her dance. She has bought a restaurant. She is going to continue to work in the No. 1 Ladies Detective Agency, of course, but in her spare time she will be running a restaurant. It will be her extra business.”

Mr. J.L.B. Matekoni’s eyes opened wide with surprise. “Ow!” he said.

Mma Ramotswe shrugged. “I don’t know what to think, Rra. I’m not sure if I should be thinking ‘ow’ as well, or whether I should be thinking something else altogether.”

Mr. J.L.B. Matekoni started to smile. “It will be a strange restaurant, Mma, if Mma Makutsi is running it.”

Mma Ramotswe suppressed a grin. He was right, of course, but there were issues of loyalty here. For all her quirks, Mma Makutsi was her colleague and friend; more than that, she was a woman, and there were still those men who looked with condescension on the business aspirations of women. Mr. J.L.B. Matekoni was not like that, naturally, but Mma Ramotswe felt that she should not be too quick to call into doubt the business ambitions of another woman. Even to think “ow” might be going too far, and so she did not grin, but instead said, “I’m sure that Mma Makutsi knows what’s she’s doing, Rra. After all, if you get ninety-seven per cent, then you must have a good head on your shoulders.”

Mr. J.L.B. Matekoni picked up the warning. “Oh, I’m not doubting Mma Makutsi’s general abilities. She is a very clever lady, as we all know. It’s just that she’s a bit ...” He struggled to find the word, and Mma Ramotswe immediately felt sorry for him. Yes, Mma Makutsi was a bit ... a bit ... She too found it difficult to describe exactly what she wanted to say. There were plenty of people who were a bit ... whatever it was.

“Bossy?” she suggested. “Is that what you’re trying to say, Rra?”

Mr. J.L.B. Matekoni frowned. He was not sure if that was exactly what he meant. Mma Potokwane was bossy—the word was exactly right for her, but she, of course, had no option but to be bossy. If you were the matron of an orphan farm, with all those children running around, then you *had* to be bossy. And presumably any advertisement for that job would have to specify the need for bossiness. If Mma Potokwane were to retire and a successor needed to be found, then the wording of the advertisement would have to spell things out quite clearly. *Wanted: an experienced lady for the job of Matron. Only very bossy ladies need apply.*

He smiled at the thought.

“Something funny, Rra?” asked Mma Ramotswe.

He put out of his mind the picture that had been forming of a line of bossy ladies queuing up for an interview for Mma Potokwane’s job. There would be a great deal of pushing and

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