A Song of Comfortable Chairs

By Alexander McCall Smith

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ALEXANDER McCALL SMITH

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This book is for Deirdre Molina

Chapter One

Under Personal Management

Precious Ramotswe was the owner of the No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency, if not the sole private investigation business in Botswana – one or two others claimed to offer such services – then certainly the longest established, most reputable, and definitely the only one run by ladies. This last attribute was important, she believed, and explained why Mma Ramotswe had declined to follow a suggestion made one evening by her husband, Mr J. L. B. Matekoni that the word 'Ladies' might be dropped from the agency's name.

'These days,' he remarked, 'we do not think of this thing being just for men and this thing being just for women. People do not think that way any longer, Mma.'

Mma Ramotswe rarely disagreed with her husband – nor he with her – but on this occasion she felt she had to defend the status quo. 'But we have always been called the No. 1 Ladies' Detective

Agency,' she pointed out. 'That was painted on our sign, right at the beginning, and it is still there.'

'I know that, Mma Ramotswe,' he said. 'I see that sign every day. And, let me tell you, I am very proud of it. I think: this business was started by my wife. And then I feel very proud indeed, Mma.'

She thanked him. 'You are very kind, Mr J. L. B. Matekoni. There are some husbands who do not pay much attention to what their wives are doing. You have never been like that.' She paused. 'But why change a name we're all used to? Why are people always trying to find new names for things that have perfectly good names already?'

He shook his head. 'I am not saying that we should change names all the time, Mma. All I am saying is that these days we are encouraged to share things. People do not like to see things *reserved* just for one sort of person. That is why it might be better to say that this is not just a detective agency for ladies, but one that will help anybody, even men. After all, that is what you do: you help everyone who needs help – not just ladies.'

She was patient. 'But, Rra, the name does not say that our services are only for ladies. We have never said that. What the name tells us is that it is ladies who run the agency. That is something quite different.'

Mr J. L. B. Matekoni considered this. 'It is true that the agency is run by ladies. That is very true, Mma.'

'Well, then, Rra, why should the name be changed – if what it says is true?'

Again he took some time to respond. Then he replied, 'Think about my own business, Mma Ramotswe.'

'Tlokweng Road Speedy Motors?'

'Yes. Tlokweng Road Speedy Motors – my garage. Now, may I ask you, Mma: who runs that business?'

She smiled. 'You do, Mr J. L. B. Matekoni. Everybody knows that Tlokweng Road Speedy Motors is your business. It is one of those things that is well known.'

He raised a finger to emphasise his point. 'That means that it is a business that is run by men – or by one man, I suppose. There is Fanwell, but he is just an assistant. And Charlie, who is part-time. All men, Mma.'

She waited.

'But we do not say "Tlokweng Road Speedy Men's Motors". We do not say that, do we, Mma?'

Mma Ramotswe could not resist the invitation. 'No, Rra, because that name would mean that it was a garage for speedy men. That is not what you would want to say, I think.'

Her point took him by surprise, and he corrected himself. 'Or "Tlokweng Road Speedy Motors for Men". That is what I was thinking of, Mma. So why do you feel you have to say that a business is run by ladies? That is what I cannot understand.'

Mma Ramotswe saw what he was driving at, but she remained unconvinced. For so long men had assumed that everything would be run by them – that was the problem, she felt. And now that women were claiming their rightful place in business, as elsewhere, it seemed reasonable enough for them to stress that a particular enterprise was one under their exclusive management. It might sound like the staking of a claim, but that was justified, she felt, after all those long years of being held back by men.

She could have explained all this to Mr J. L. B. Matekoni, but she felt they had dwelled long enough on the issue, and it was time anyway for her to cook their dinner. The children, Puso and Motholeli, were both away, spending the night at the houses of schoolfriends. They were on the sleepovers that they loved so much and that made them so tired and irritable the next day.

Tomorrow would be a Friday, though, and that was quite a good day on which to be tired and irritable. That was because the school day ended early on a Friday and they could come home and be tired and irritable in their rooms.

She and Mr J. L. B. Matekoni had been sitting out on the veranda of their house on Zebra Drive. Now she left him there, nursing the last few sips of his cold beer, while she made her way into the kitchen. There was a packet of rice on the kitchen table, waiting to be measured out into a cooking pot. There was also a large pile of broad beans that she had harvested that very evening from her vegetable garden and that would need to be podded for their meal. Mma Ramotswe was proud of the vegetables she grew – each crop a victory, she thought, in the face of conditions that made growth challenging. Firstly, there was the soil that was inclined to be too sandy and that had to be dressed with the dried donkey manure that she bought in large sacks from her friend, Mma Potokwani. The Orphan Farm raised donkeys that were then sold on to villagers to use for their carts, and Mma Potokwani, not one to waste anything, sold the manure from the makeshift stables to help pay for the cost of their feed. Mma Ramotswe was happy to buy this fertiliser, as she was strongly of the view that there was a direct connection between the use of donkey manure and the growth of healthy vegetables. And the proof of that was now on the table before her. Her beans, large, pale green and very slightly furry, in the way in which broad beans are furry, would be boiled, salted, and then fried for a short time in butter. There were few things more delicious than fried beans, Mma Ramotswe thought, although pumpkin, also generously enriched with butter and sprinkled with ground black pepper, would be a close contender. They had no pumpkin that evening, though, and so it would be the beans and a small helping of boiled

maize meal that would accompany the stew that she would shortly begin to make. The main ingredient of that, of course, would be Botswana beef, which everybody knew was the tastiest of all meat. That was because of the country on which the cattle grazed – those wide plains, dotted with acacia trees, that went on forever, on which the sweet grass grew and over which the cattle moved, under the watchful eyes of their herd boys. That was what made Botswana beef so special, as her father, the late Obed Ramotswe, had explained to her so many years ago, when he had first started talking to her about cattle. Not a day went past on which she did not think about her late daddy, and the things that he used to say to her, and now she thought of him once more as she sat at the kitchen table and began to pod the beans. She had loved him so much, and he had loved her, and she dreamed that one day she might see him again, when she, too, was late, whenever that would be.

Of course, there were other things to think about – things to do with the No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency and with her assistant – or rather, her colleague – Mma Grace Makutsi, that distinguished graduate (with ninety-seven per cent) of the Botswana Secretarial College. Mma Ramotswe was always careful to leave the worries of the working world where they belonged – in the office – and not to bring them back home. It was important, she felt, to keep your working life separate from your home life; she knew far too many people who allowed the cares of the job to intrude upon their home life, and these were the people who tended to become depressed or suffer from something that she had recently read about in a magazine – something referred to as *burn-out*. She had been intrigued by the description of this condition, which the magazine told her affected a very large proportion of those who were successful in their jobs. 'Success can come at a cost,'

the article warned. 'Those who are ambitious and spend all their time thinking about their work may get to the top of the tree, but what do they find there? They find that they are too exhausted to enjoy the fruits of their labours. They are burned out.'

Mma Ramotswe had given this some thought. She knew many hard-working people, and she felt that what the magazine said about them was probably true. Some of those people seemed to be struggling under the burden of their success. They were probably burned out, she thought. They certainly did not seem to be enjoying their success – if you were burned out, then presumably you could not enjoy it because you felt too . . . well, burned out to do so.

Learning about the dangers of burn-out had stiffened her resolve to keep work firmly in its place, but that did not mean that she could not think, from time to time at least, of what was going on in the office. And now, as she prepared the evening meal, she found herself thinking of Mma Makutsi and of something that had happened in the office the previous Friday. It was a little thing, but she knew only too well that little things had a habit of becoming major things. A single strand of wool protruding from the sleeve of a favourite sweater could, if ignored, lead to the unravelling of the whole garment; a tiny crack in a pane of glass could become a lengthy fault line; an unchecked act of incivility on the part of a child could become a full-scale rebellion. It was true that there were cases when turning a blind eye was the best thing to do, but then there were many other situations where the opposite was the case. Mma Makutsi was not only a valued colleague, she was a friend – perhaps the closest friend she had (after Mma Potokwani, of course). But there were times when Mma Makutsi's ambitions worried Mma Ramotswe. It was all very well to have achieved ninety-seven per cent in the final examinations of the Botswana Secretarial College, but that did not necessarily

entitle you to endless promotions – even to the point of taking control of a business that somebody else had started. Mma Ramotswe was not in the slightest bit selfish, and was prepared to share her agency with Mma Makutsi, but she did not think she should be eclipsed by her colleague. The notepaper they had recently had printed bore both names immediately under the address: *Under the personal management*, it said, *of Mma Precious Ramotswe and Mma Grace Makutsi, Dip. Sec. (BSC).*

There had been some discussion of that wording. The first draft that Mma Ramotswe had intended to send to the printers had read, simply, *Directors: Mma Precious Ramotswe and Mma Grace Makutsi*. She had shown that to Mma Makutsi, who had spent some time gazing at the paper, before she raised her objections.

'I am not sure about this, Mma,' Mma Makutsi said eventually. 'If we call ourselves directors, then people may think we are a limited company. And we are not a company, Mma – we are a firm. We are unincorporated, you see.'

She looked across the office to where Mma Ramotswe was sitting at her desk.

'There is a difference, you see, Mma Ramotswe,' she continued, her tone becoming slightly condescending, as of one delivering a simplified lecture on a complex technical point. 'We were taught all about companies at the Botswana Secretarial College. Not having been there, you may not know about them.'

Mma Ramotswe raised an eyebrow. 'I know what a company is, Mma.'

Mma Makutsi looked as if she might not quite believe that. 'Well then, Mma, we should not use the word *directors*. That is only for people who run limited companies. We are not directing a business – we are managing it. How about *Under the personal management of* . . . and then we put our names. Something like

Under the personal management of Mma Makutsi and Mma Ramotswe? How about that?'

Mma Ramotswe noticed whose name came first. Gently, she voiced an objection. 'But that sounds as if you founded the firm, Mma. I think I did that.'

'No,' said Mma Makutsi. 'It is alphabetical. M comes before R, Mma.'

'That is true, Mma, but I think I would still like my name to go first. I was here first, I think – then you came and joined the firm.' She paused. 'That is how things are usually done, Mma. Look at Adam and Eve. Adam was there first, I think, Mma, and then Eve was made out of one of his ribs. You do not say Eve and Adam, do you? It is always Adam and Eve.'

'I do not believe that rib business,' said Mma Makutsi. 'I think that is just a story.'

'You are probably right, Mma, but the point is that we still talk about Adam and Eve.' She paused. 'So if you give me back the paper I shall take out the bit about directors and write instead *Under the personal management of Mma Precious Ramotswe and Mma Grace Makutsi*.'

Rather reluctantly, Mma Makutsi got up from her desk and handed over the piece of paper. 'I can take it to the printers, if you like, Mma,' she said. 'Their place is near Phuti's store and I shall be going that way this afternoon.'

The draft was delivered as promised, and a few days later the printer delivered a cardboard box containing the printed stationery. Mma Ramotswe took a sheet of notepaper out and examined it with pride. But then she saw the letters after Mma Makutsi's name.

'There is something extra here, Mma,' she said.

Mma Makutsi looked at the new stationery with an affected

nonchalance. 'Oh, yes, Mma,' she said. 'I made a little change before I delivered it to the printer.'

'You have put in your secretarial diploma,' said Mma Ramotswe. 'And you are claiming to have a BSc too. I do not think you are a Bachelor of Science, Mma.'

Mma Makutsi laughed. 'That is not a BSc. Those letters stand for Botswana Secretarial College.'

'But I have not put anything after my name,' said Mma Ramotswe.

Mma Makutsi stared at the floor. 'I am sorry that you do not have anything to put after it,' she said. 'That is a great pity, Mma.' But then she had an idea. 'You could have mentioned your driving licence, Mma. You could have put DL after your name. Maybe you could do that next time we have notepaper printed.'

The memory of that conversation brought it home to Mma Ramotswe that there was always a possibility that Mma Makutsi might stage a coup. That, Mma Ramotswe feared, was a danger that now seemed to be presenting itself, and that was the reason why she found herself thinking of office affairs when she should have been concentrating on the podding of beans in the kitchen of her house on Zebra Drive.

The following day, Mma Ramotswe slept in rather longer than usual. The absence of the children meant that the house was unnaturally quiet, and she barely noticed Mr J. L. B. Matekoni slipping out of bed. Nor did she hear him making his breakfast in the kitchen, or calling out, at the front door, 'That's me off to work now, Mma. Don't forget to go to the office!' It was a well-worn joke between them: he would remind her to go to the office and she would respond by telling him that he should not forget to come home after work. On such small sayings and customs are marriages built – comfortable familiarity; and that,

Mma Ramotswe always felt, made a better basis for a marriage than any amount of novelty.

She experienced a moment of panic when she eventually emerged from drowsiness and looked at the clock on her bedside table. It was already eight-thirty, a recklessly late hour for her, but then she remembered that the children were at their friends' houses and did not have to be got ready for school. The agency was going through a quiet spell – several major inquiries had recently been satisfactorily concluded – and she had no appointments that day. Mma Makutsi would open up the office and together they would tackle some of the administrative tasks that had been piling up and needed to be attended to. She knew that Mma Makutsi would be keen to do some filing and she herself would work on the bills for recently completed investigations. There would be time for several tea breaks, of course, and in this way they could expect to spend a pleasant and not unduly stressful day in the office. It was also possible that a new client might walk in off the street – one never knew when that would happen, and that was often the way in which some of their most interesting clients contacted them. Of course there were factors at work in the background, foremost of which was the word of mouth on which every business ultimately would succeed or fail.

She did not hurry. A leisurely breakfast of a fried egg, toast spread with honey, and a large cup of redbush tea was followed by a walk around her vegetable garden and a quick tidying-up of the living room. After that she was ready to prepare a sandwich for her lunch, have a final cup of tea, and then set off in her tiny white van for the short drive to the office. The traffic was light, as the morning rush was over, and she did not push her van beyond a stately fifteen miles an hour, a speed at which it seemed to be most comfortable and at which the fewest rattles and other worrying noises emerged

from the engine compartment. Mr J. L. B. Matekoni would have replaced the van at the drop of a hat, but Mma Ramotswe was as loyal to machinery as she was to people, and steadfastly refused to countenance the purchase of a new vehicle. One day the white van would finally expire, but that day had not yet come, and until then it did what was asked of it patiently and with dignity.

Parking the van in its accustomed place under an acacia tree, Mma Ramotswe walked past the entrance to the garage. Mr J. L. B. Matekoni was busy performing open-heart surgery on a battered Land Rover, and did not see her, but Fanwell, his face streaked with grease, raised a spanner in salutation. Mma Ramotswe continued to the side of the garage, where a white-painted door constituted the entrance to the agency office.

Habit, more than anything else, made her knock. You did not have to knock on your own door, but she did, so deep was her engrained courtesy.

From within a voice invited her to enter.

'But Mma Ramotswe, it is just you!' exclaimed Mma Makutsi. 'I thought it might be somebody important.'

Mma Makutsi realised how unfortunate that sounded, and quickly apologised. 'I mean, you are very important, Mma – it's just that I thought it might be a client.'

Mma Ramotswe laughed. 'I know what you mean, Mma. Don't worry. Sometimes things come out the wrong way.'

She made her way towards her desk, but before she reached it, she noticed that something was different. It caught her eye from the side – a small name-plate, of engraved brass, mounted upon a wooden base, reading *Mma Grace Makutsi*. It was not a large sign, but at the same time it was not exactly small, and it was positioned on the side of Mma Makutsi's desk so that it could be seen by anybody entering the room.

'My goodness!' exclaimed Mma Ramotswe. 'What is that, Mma?'

At first Mma Makutsi affected not to know what Mma Ramotswe was talking about. 'What is what, Mma?' she asked.

'That,' replied Mma Ramotswe, pointing at the name-plate.

Mma Makutsi allowed her gaze to drift to the sign. 'Oh, that. That's a name-plate, Mma. You see them on desks in offices. They tell the public who it is who's sitting behind the desk. They are very modern things.'

Mma Ramotswe lowered herself into her chair. The sign was still visible, at an angle. 'It's very impressive, Mma Makutsi,' she said.

Mma Makutsi inclined her head. 'Thank you, Mma. I think it will be helpful, too.'

Mma Ramotswe thought about this. 'Yes, you would not want people not to know who you are.'

'Precisely,' said Mma Makutsi.

'And it will be helpful for me too,' Mma Ramotswe went on. 'I might be sitting here at my desk and when I look across the room I might think: who is that lady sitting at the other desk? And then I shall see the sign, and all doubt will be removed. I shall say to myself, "That lady over there is Mma Grace Makutsi." At least, according to the sign it's Grace Makutsi.'

The irony was lost on Mma Makutsi, who simply nodded her agreement.

Then Mma Ramotswe said, 'Is there a sign for me, Mma?'

Mma Makutsi frowned. 'I paid for the sign myself, Mma. I did not expect the office to pay for it.'

Mma Ramotswe thanked her. 'That was most considerate, Mma, but I wondered whether you had one made for me at the same time.'

There was a silence that seemed to last for some time. 'I'm

sorry,' Mma Makutsi said at last. 'I did not think of that, Mma. I am very sorry.'

'That is all right,' said Mma Ramotswe. 'I think that people coming here for an appointment know who I am. I do not think they need to be told.'

If there was reproach in Mma Ramotswe's voice, it was mild; so mild, in fact, that it seemed to go unnoticed. 'I can order one if you would like me to,' said Mma Makutsi. 'Phuti knows the man who makes them. He made mine at a special rate. It was not expensive.'

Mma Ramotswe bit her lip. Her reply was measured. 'I don't think that will be necessary,' she said, then after the shortest of pauses added, 'Thank you, anyway.' She tried not to sound hurt, but Mma Makutsi's thoughtlessness had surprised her. She would never have done something like that – she would never have ordered a sign for herself and forgotten all about Grace, but that was another matter: Mma Makutsi had her little ways and it was always possible that her apparent selfishness had been entirely unintended.

'Are you sure, Mma?' Mma Makutsi pressed. 'It would be helpful, I think, for us both to have these signs on our desks.'

Mma Ramotswe shook her head. 'Don't worry, Mma, there are many more important things to think about.'

They set about their work, Mma Makutsi having already started filing the pile of papers on her desk and Mma Ramotswe having invoices to compile. It was while they were both engaged in these tasks that a knock came on the door and Mma Makutsi leaped up – somewhat guiltily, thought Mma Ramotswe – to admit the unexpected caller; except that he was not unexpected, as Mma Ramotswe was soon to discover.