The Great Hippopotamus Hotel

By Alexander McCall Smith

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ALEXANDER McCALL SMITH

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This book is for Richard Buccleuch

Chapter One

Life Is Like Peri-peri Chicken

Mma Ramotswe had always understood that people who are one thing may at the same time be another. This insight, although not entirely original, is undoubtedly quite true. Embodying more than one identity is part of being human – and one of the things of which we might be justifiably proud. It would be a dull world, indeed, in which we all had only one role to play, and were unable to choose from time to time to be something different. Life, said Mma Ramotswe, is a bit like peri-peri chicken: it is improved with a pinch of spice – but only within reason, of course. Much as she enjoyed hot dishes, she would certainly not want to eat them every day.

And the same was true of Mr J. L. B. Matekoni, for whom a helping of the spicy Portuguese dish was a treat he could take only about once a month or so, given the delicacy of his stomach.

Plain food was what he wanted, and was what Mma Ramotswe provided for him, with her boiled pumpkin, her Botswana beef stew, and the popular fried doughnuts known locally as *fat cakes*. If her friend Mma Potokwani, redoubtable matron of the Orphan Farm, was widely known for her fruit cake, then Mma Ramotswe enjoyed a similar reputation for her fat cakes, once described by Mma Makutsi as the most delicious fat cakes in all Botswana.

Identity, though, was a fascinating subject, once one came to look at the people one knew. Take Mma Makutsi, for instance, currently sitting at her desk in the office of the No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency: she could be described in a number of ways. First and foremost, she was Grace Makutsi from Bobonong, a village up in the north of Botswana, a not-particularly-exciting place from which one might not expect all that many remarkable people to emerge. That is not to be dismissive of Bobonong, which, like everywhere, has its finer points – it is simply to be realistic as to what we might expect from a place quite so off the beaten track. The beaten track, after all, is beaten for a reason, as is made clear in *The Principles of Private Detection*, the book from which both Mma Ramotswe and Mma Makutsi had received so much guidance. *Remember*, wrote Clovis Andersen, *that what's out there is out there for a reason. And if it isn't out there, then once again there's a reason why it isn't.* Mma Ramotswe and Mma Makutsi had discussed that particular observation at some length, and were confident that they had reached an understanding of its meaning, or had at least begun to do so.

Had Mma Makutsi stayed in Bobonong, of course, she might have remained simply Mma Makutsi from Bobonong. In all likelihood she would have married a local man – a schoolteacher, perhaps, or a minor government official – and gone on to live a

worthy even if entirely local life. But greater things were in store, and by dint of hard work and parsimony, she went on to become Grace Makutsi, graduate *summa cum laude* of the Botswana Secretarial College. She was indeed that, but, most importantly, she was also the graduate with the highest mark ever achieved in the final examinations of that distinguished institution – ninety-seven per cent. Of course, there were those who claimed that a more recent candidate had achieved an even higher mark, but no hard evidence had ever been produced to back up that claim. And even if such evidence were to materialise, it would not weaken Mma Makutsi's status as the holder of the highest mark *at the time at which she graduated*. Old records might be broken by subsequent achievements, but they remained records at the time at which they were chalked up, and could still be considered records even after they had fallen. Glories accrued through diligent study or hard work should not be taken away from those who have achieved them – they remained in memory, their glow increasing with the passage of time.

But there was more. Mma Makutsi was also a wife, a mother, a private detective, an authority on fashionable shoes, a non-executive director of the Double Comfort Furniture Store, and a member of a community advisory panel established by their neighbour, Mr Lebogang Motsumi. Lebogang meant in Setswana 'be thankful', a benign name that certainly suited the mild and affable nature of Mr Motsumi, who was generally viewed by his neighbours as a model citizen.

'Every community needs somebody who will take on the jobs that need to be done,' Mma Makutsi observed to her husband, Mr Phuti Radiphuti. 'There has to be somebody who is prepared to step forward.'

'You're right, Grace,' said Phuti. 'Otherwise, things go to the

dogs. That has happened in some places where nobody will take on any of these jobs that have to be done.'

'There are many people who look over their shoulder when they are asked to help out,' said Mma Makutsi. 'They look for somebody who is standing behind them. Then they point to that person and say, "He will be the one to do this thing." That is what happens, I think, Phuti.'

Phuti thought about this and remembered the sign that he had seen by a roadside down near Lobatse. The sign was a large one, the lettering stencilled in black against the light blue that was Botswana's national colour. It proclaimed: 'This improvement project is supported by the Lobatse Improvement Committee.' And underneath that, as a message in smaller letters: 'Look the future in the face with us.'

'There was that sign near Lobatse,' Phuti said. 'I pointed it out to you, Mma. Remember?'

Mma Makutsi did remember.

'We saw it every time we went down there,' she said, smiling at the memory. 'But when we looked for a project, there was nothing to be seen – just empty bush and some goats nibbling at the thorn bushes.'

'Perhaps the goats were the project,' suggested Phuti Radiphuti.

She shook her head. 'No, Rra, I don't think so. I believe that the people who were behind the project forgot about it, or went away and couldn't find anybody to take it over. And then the ants started to eat the sign and it began to look shakier and shakier.'

'It is good that we have Mr Lebogang Motsumi,' mused Phuti. 'He is a real asset to the community.'

Mma Makutsi agreed. She had taken no persuading to be a member of his advisory panel but had never been at all sure what its function was. There had been three meetings so far, each of

them held in the living room of Mr Motsumi's house, and the panel members had all gone away at the end of the meetings feeling replete, even if confused as to why they were there. There is a tradition in Botswana that no function is complete without the consumption of food, and the meeting at the Motsumi house had more than honoured this custom. Mma Motsumi, a cheerful, traditionally built lady, had surpassed herself in her baking efforts for the occasion, and the six members of the panel had all eaten far too many of her savoury scones and cheese straws, along with numerous slices of her double-chocolate cake, to feel comfortable when it came to the business of the meeting. It quickly became apparent to Mr Motsumi, who was occupying the chair, that there was no heart for business, which did not matter too much, as it happened, because there was little of substance on the agenda. Nobody had asked for any advice apart from the university, which had requested the community's views on the possible construction of a residential building for students one block away from a road of large prosperous-looking houses.

'We do not want any students round here,' said one of the members. 'They are always making a noise.'

'And they drink all the time,' said another. 'They have very little time to study, with all the parties they have.'

'They are studying for a Bachelor of Parties degree,' suggested a third member. 'That is a very popular degree these days, I think.'

Even the mild Mr Lebogang Motsumi expressed misgivings about the proposal. 'Students should go away,' he said – a comment that brought a general nodding of heads.

And that was all the discussion there was, although the tenor of the views expressed by the members was treated by Mr Lebogang Motsumi as justification for a stiff letter to the university saying that the community had been widely consulted and was of the

unanimous view that the area was completely unsuitable for student accommodation. When nothing more was heard of the proposal, the panel took it as an indication of the weight that its views might carry in the wider community.

'They listen to committees,' observed Grace, 'even if they will not listen to individual people. They forget that committees are made up of people.'

Phuti smiled. He thought she was quite right. He was usually proud of his wife, but when she made observations like this, he was even prouder. He had made a great choice, marrying a woman with her style, confidence, and ability to get right to the heart of things. He had never regretted that choice – not for one moment.

Those were the various aspects of the woman who was Mma Makutsi. What of Mma Ramotswe herself – who, exactly, was she? If you asked her, she would undoubtedly say that before anything else she was a citizen of Botswana. She was proud of her country, and what it represented in a world that was full of conflict and confrontation. Botswana was a peaceful country, and its people were quiet and unostentatious. To be a citizen of such a country had always meant much to her, and sat proud among the other ways in which she might be described. And there were many of these, just as there were in the case of Mma Makutsi. She was the founder of the No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency; she was the wife of that great mechanic, Mr J. L. B. Matekoni; she was the foster mother of two children, Puso and Motholeli; and, very importantly, she was the daughter of the late Obed Ramotswe, the man whom she spoke of as her 'late Daddy', that fine, kind man who knew so much about cattle and the ways of cattle; who taught her what it was to lead a good life and to do so discreetly.

Not a day went past but that she thought of her father, and of how he had supported and encouraged her in all that she did. If she closed her eyes, she could hear him; she could hear him calling her 'My Precious' as he always did, and the memory brought tears, not so much of sadness – for he had been gone a long time now – but of pride and joy that Obed Ramotswe had been her father. To be the daughter of such a man, she felt, was the greatest possible good fortune, especially when there are so many other, lesser men of whom one might have been the daughter, had things been different.

But perhaps the best known of Mma Ramotswe's roles was that of helper of others. Right from the beginning, the No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency had been about helping people with the problems in their lives. When she had first set up the agency, she had very little idea of what it would be called upon to do. She knew nothing about being a private investigator, and Mma Makutsi knew even less – although strictly speaking it might not be possible to know less than nothing. But word gets round in a place like Gaborone, where people know the business of others, and within a few days she realised that the people who had need of the services of such an agency were those who had very ordinary problems in their lives. There had been some who thought that a detective agency would be involved in solving crimes, but that was far from the case. 'I do not investigate crimes,' she said to a friend. 'I help people with things that are worrying them. And there are many such things, Mma – oh yes, people have many problems, and it is my job to sort them out.'

In doing that, she did not need to resort to complex methods; all she had to do was to use common sense and, if she did not know the answer to something, to ask somebody. Most people, she found, were only too ready to talk to you, particularly if that

gave them the chance to air their personal views. Taking advantage of that readiness usually unearthed facts that otherwise might take a long time to elicit. The best line of all, in initiating such a conversation, was simply to say, 'Tell me about yourself.' That always led to immediate and fulsome disclosures.

Those, then, were the two ladies who were sitting in the office of the No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency on that warm morning in October, when people were looking forward to the first of the rains, and hoping that they would be heavy enough to give the parched ground the soaking for which it yearned. They had dealt with the morning mail, and Mma Makutsi had done a certain amount of filing – the office task at which she excelled, even to the point of wondering whether one day she might write a helpful book on the subject. *The Principles of Filing* was not a title she had ever come across in a bookshop or library, but she was in no doubt that there was a call for such a work. She could just imagine it – a handsomely bound edition with a picture of the author – herself – on the back cover. Underneath her photograph there would be helpful text along these lines: 'The author, Grace Makutsi, was born in Bobonong, an important city in Botswana. She was educated there and in Gaborone, where she attended the Botswana Secretarial College. At college she was awarded the Principal's Prize for Filing prior to graduating with close to one hundred per cent in the final examinations. She is the joint managing director of the No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency, of which she was the co-founder. She is currently working on her second book.'

There were several examples in this brief note of the creative presentation of facts – something that in less sympathetic days used to be called lies. It was true that she had graduated with a

mark that was close to one hundred per cent, but it was possible that the reader might imagine that the actual mark was ninety-eight or ninety-nine per cent, or even ninety-nine-and-a-half per cent, which was as close to one hundred per cent that anybody could realistically get. But authors are not always strictly accurate when it comes to describing themselves on the covers of their books, and a little leeway is surely permissible. Bobonong is not a city, not legally, nor indeed any other way, but the word city may be used in a general sense to describe any collection of houses and other buildings and so it was surely permissible to use it here. The claim to be writing a second book was, of course, without foundation, but she had noticed that it was something that one frequently saw on the dust jackets of books, and therefore must be a form of acceptable aspiration. And it is possible to argue that even if one has not set pen to paper, one might be *thinking* of what would go into a second book, and that, surely, could be described as working on it.

But now the morning's filing tasks were completed, the mail dealt with, and the appointments diary for the day ahead was still completely empty. In the circumstances, although it was not strictly tea-time yet, both Mma Ramotswe and Mma Makutsi thought that it was close enough.

'I think we should call Mr J. L. B. Matekoni in for tea,' said Mma Ramotswe. 'And Fanwell and Charlie too. It will be very hot in the garage on a day like this, and we must not let them get dehydrated.'

Mma Makutsi agreed. 'It is a very bad thing for men to become dehydrated,' she said. 'We women must watch out for that. If we see our husbands, or indeed any other men, getting dehydrated, we should act. Men cannot do these things themselves.'

Mma Ramotswe was not sure that this was entirely true. She

knew men who were clearly well hydrated even although they did not appear to have any woman to ensure adequate ingestion of fluids. But she did not argue the point; what Mma Makutsi said was broadly true – men often did not look after themselves properly, although at long last boys were being instructed at an early age in important domestic and personal tasks. There were now men who used scissors, rather than relying on biting to trim their nails. Boys were now being taught in school how to change a baby, clean a bath and bake bread. It was slow work, as it was often convenient for men to forget how to do such things, but education, at least, was going in the right direction.

Mma Makutsi left her desk to go through to the garage and inform the men that tea would be ready in a few minutes. From underneath an arthritic people carrier, an ancient vehicle of uncertain provenance on which the legend *Reliable Minibus* had been painted, Mr J. L. B. Matekoni replied that they would shortly finish the repair on which they were working, and would come through to the office once they had tidied up.

She returned to the office, switched on the kettle, and had tea ready by the time Fanwell announced their arrival with a polite knock on the door.

'It is very hot today,' said Mr J. L. B. Matekoni, as he sat down on the client's chair that Mma Ramotswe always kept facing her desk. Fanwell and Charlie were young men who preferred to lean against things rather than sit in them, it being, in Charlie's opinion, more interesting for women if men leaned against the furniture rather than sat on it. Fanwell expressed no such view. 'I am not so cool as my friend Charlie,' he was known to say, but his working clothes were a bit greasy, and he did not want to leave his mark on the office chairs.

After remarking on the heat, Mr J. L. B. Matekoni nodded in

the direction of the garage and went on to say, 'We're working on a minibus through there. It's owned by a man who has five of them in his fleet.'

'He overloads them all,' Charlie interjected, 'but he makes a lot of money. He has a lot of cattle now.'

Fanwell whistled. 'That's the way to make your dough: buy a minibus and fill it full of people. Put some on the roof if there isn't room inside. Then you become rich.'

'You cannot put people on the roof,' said Mma Makutsi. 'They will fall off if you hit a bump in the road.'

'I've seen it done,' said Charlie. 'I once saw a minibus with a small child on the roof. It was in a chicken coop – you know those cages they use to transport chickens. The child was in one of those, and it was tied to the roof. He was perfectly safe.'

Mma Ramotswe could see that Charlie was winding Mma Makutsi up. Now she intervened. 'That is very funny, Charlie. I know that you do not expect Mma Makutsi to believe that.'

Mma Makutsi gave a short laugh. 'Hah! Charlie thinks I believe the nonsense he talks. But I never do.'

Catching Mma Ramotswe's eye, Mr J. L. B. Matekoni said something more about the owner of the minibus. 'He's called Mr Mo Mo Molala, that man. He is a very small man.'

Charlie smiled. 'Yes, he is an extremely small man. But he is married to a very big lady. Rra Small-Small and Mma Big-Big – hah!'

Mma Ramotswe failed in her attempt to suppress a smile. Mma Makutsi, unwilling though she was to encourage Charlie, struggled too, but eventually gave up and grinned weakly for a moment. 'There are many cases of that sort of thing, Charlie,' she admonished him. 'When you have lived a bit longer you will know that it does not matter what is on the outside – it is what

is on the inside that counts.' She turned to Mma Ramotswe. 'Is that not true, Mma Ramotswe?'

Mma Ramotswe inclined her head in agreement. Charlie was a well-meaning young man, if a bit headstrong, and in her view he should not be judged too severely. All young men were like that – to an extent – and it was only if they showed no signs of natural improvement that it was necessary to reproach them. But she had to support Mma Makutsi in this sort of thing, and so she went on to say, 'Mma Makutsi is quite right, Charlie. A small person may be big inside – and a big person may be small inside.'

Charlie frowned. 'But are there not big people who are big inside too?'

'That is possible,' said Mma Ramotswe. 'And there are small people, I think, who are small inside too.'

Charlie looked thoughtful. 'So there may be a big person who is small inside married to a small person who is big inside?'

Mr J. L. B. Matekoni joined in. 'There are many different combinations. You never know what sort of combination is going to turn up.' He paused. 'Anything can happen – that is one lesson you learn in this life – anything.'

Fanwell had been silent until now. 'It's best to be careful,' he said. 'If anything can happen, then you should be very careful – all the time.'

'That is the best policy,' said Mr J. L. B. Matekoni.

Mma Makutsi had been busy pouring the tea. Now she handed a cup to Mma Ramotswe and a mug to Mr J. L. B. Matekoni. He blew across the surface of the hot liquid, causing a small cloud to rise up. In the shaft of sunlight falling from the window behind Mma Ramotswe's desk, the tiny droplets of steam danced briefly before they disappeared. 'This Molala,' he said, 'turned sixty last

week. When he brought the minibus in, he said to me, "I had my sixtieth birthday last week, would you believe it?"'

'That is very old,' said Charlie. 'It's amazing that there are people who are sixty and who are still walking about. That is very amazing.'

Mma Makutsi glared at him, but said nothing. Mma Ramotswe felt, though, that she could not let Charlie go unrebuked, even if mildly. 'One day even you will be sixty, Charlie,' she said.

Charlie shook his head and muttered, 'Ow!'

Mr J. L. B. Matekoni had more to say about Mr Malala. 'He mentioned his birthday, and so I asked him whether he had received any presents. He said that his wife had given him a new driver for his set of golf clubs. He said that it would get him closer to the green.'

'He would need very small clubs,' mused Charlie.

Mr J. L. B. Matekoni continued, 'But then he said to me that he was planning to get himself something that he had wanted for a very long time. He asked me to help him.'

There was a short silence, ended when Charlie said, 'A smaller wife?'

'That is very rude,' exploded Mma Makutsi. 'You say some very stupid things, Charlie.'

Charlie defended himself. 'It was a joke, Mma Makutsi. We are allowed to make jokes sometimes.'

Mma Ramotswe turned to Mr J. L. B. Matekoni. 'So he wanted you to help, Rra. That is very interesting. Did he tell you what this present was?'

'He did,' replied Mr J. L. B. Matekoni.

They waited.

Mr J. L. B. Matekoni looked smug. 'You'll never guess,' he said.

'A car?' suggested Mma Makutsi.

Mr J. L. B. Matekoni's disappointment showed. 'As a matter of fact,' he said, 'you're right, Mma.' He rallied. 'But I do not think you will guess what *sort* of car. I think that will come as a big surprise to you.'

Mma Makutsi did not hesitate. 'A sports car?'

Charlie laughed. 'She's right, isn't she, boss?'

Mr J. L. B. Matekoni could not hide his disappointment. 'Yes,' he said, rather lamely. But then he shook his head, to emphasise the unlikelihood of Mr Molala's ambition. 'Can you believe it, everybody? A sports car? When he's sixty-something?'

Charlie made a circular motion at the side of his head. 'Well, Rra, we all know that once you get to forty, things start to go wrong in your head. You forget things. You forget where you live. You . . . '

'Don't be ridiculous, Charlie,' snapped Mma Makutsi. 'You should not joke about these things.'

But Charlie was serious. 'I'm telling you, Mma Ramotswe. I know somebody who started to do very strange things when he was forty-two. He went and bought a saxophone. He had a small general dealer's store – he sold flour, batteries, tea, that sort of thing. He started a rock band. He couldn't play but . . . '

Mma Makutsi sighed loudly. 'That's something quite different, Charlie. That's the mid-life crisis. That's what happens to men on their fortieth birthday. Bang. They do that sort of thing. Every time.'

Mr J. L. B. Matekoni frowned. 'Not all men, Mma,' he protested.

'Well, maybe not one hundred per cent of men,' Mma Makutsi conceded. 'But almost.'

Mma Ramotswe made an effort to bring the conversation back to Mr Molala. 'Are you sure that's the sort of car he wants, Rra?'

Mr J. L. B. Matekoni explained that he had been left in no doubt. 'He showed me a picture from a magazine. It was one of those small Italian sports cars. I know the model. I've never seen one, of course, but I know somebody over the border who can get one. He wants a second-hand model with a low mileage. I know somebody in the trade over in Johannesburg who can get any car you like.'

Fanwell whistled. 'Those South African cars are often stolen, Rra. I wouldn't touch them. South Africans drive round in stolen cars all the time. That is what they do.'

'Not all of them,' said Mma Makutsi. 'I have an aunt over there. She doesn't drive a stolen car.'

'What does she drive?' asked Charlie.

'She doesn't,' answered Mma Makutsi. 'But if she did, it wouldn't be stolen.'

'My friend in the trade over there is honest,' said Mr J. L. B. Matekoni. 'He is a Catholic, and all the cars he sells come from Catholic homes.'

'So, this car will have belonged to a priest?' Charlie challenged. 'Is that what you're saying, boss? Because I don't think priests drive Italian sports cars. The Pope may do – but not ordinary priests.'

Mma Ramotswe looked at Mr J. L. B. Matekoni with concern. 'Are you going to help him, Mr J. L. B. Matekoni? Are you going to help him to do something . . . unwise?'

The question hung in the air for some time before it was answered. 'I feel very uncomfortable about it,' Mr J. L. B. Matekoni said at last. 'You see, I feel responsible for the cars I get for people. I do not like to see people driving the wrong sort of car. I do not like to see them behind the wheel of something they can't manage.'

'Then just say no,' said Mma Makutsi.

Mr J. L. B. Matekoni looked away. 'The problem is, Molala's brother runs the biggest car rental firm in the country. They're very big. And who has the contract to service their cars? We do. Tlokweng Road Speedy Motors.'

Fanwell drew in his breath sharply. 'Those cars, boss? We need those cars. If they take them elsewhere, then we lose twenty-five per cent of our work.'

'Twenty-five per cent less to eat,' remarked Charlie, patting his stomach.

'Exactly,' said Mr J. L. B. Matekoni.

They exchanged glum looks. Mr J. L. B. Matekoni drained the last of his tea. 'Well, it won't help to sit around and talk about it. Time to get back to work.'

He rose to his feet. Charlie and Fanwell finished their tea and put their mugs down on one of the filing cabinets.

'Excuse me,' said Mma Makutsi pointedly. 'Do mugs wash themselves? I don't think they do.'

Mma Ramotswe was first home that evening. While Puso and Motholeli were busy with their homework, she made sure that the stew was simmering gently on the cooker. Then she went out into her garden to check up on her rows of beans and the bed of onions she had planted a month ago, which were developing nicely. They were a variety that produced large bulbs, and there were already signs that this promise would be fulfilled. She inspected the plants, adjusted the drip-watering system, and then stood for a while under the spreading branches of the large jacaranda tree that grew to the side of the house. She looked up at the evening sky, which was pale blue and devoid of cloud. Sometimes she felt dizzy when she looked up at a sky like that. It was so high, so empty, so echoing; the air of which it was composed was so thin.

She closed her eyes, taking a breath that filled her lungs with air. That made her light-headed for a moment. I could faint, she thought, and when Mr J. L. B. Matekoni came home he would find her on the ground, with dust about her, and the ants. That would be such a sad thing, because every married woman – or at least very many of them – fears at some time that she will come home and find her husband collapsed on the ground. Men, for all their strength, were fragile creatures, lent to women by a providence that might at any moment call them back.

When she opened her eyes, it was to see Mr J. L. B. Matekoni's truck nosing its way through the gate and into the yard. A few minutes later, he was at her side, crouching down to take a closer look at the bean plants.

'They are doing very well, I think, Mma,' came his verdict.

'I hope so.'

He scratched the back of his head. 'You know that matter we were discussing this morning? This business of Molala's car?'

'I would like to hear more about that,' she said.

'I didn't tell you,' Mr J. L. B. Matekoni continued, 'about another big, big problem with that car.'

Mma Ramotswe looked anxious. She did not like Mr J. L. B. Matekoni to fret over his work, and it seemed that this Molala business was making him do just that.

'He isn't telling his wife about it,' he said. 'And he made me promise not to let her know in advance about the sort of car he is wanting to buy.'

Mma Ramotswe made a clucking sound. This was her way of communicating disapproval. It was very effective.

'That is very bad,' she said.

'I agree. But I can't break my word to him. I promised him before I thought about it. Then I realised what I'd done.'

'That's often the case,' said Mma Ramotswe. 'We say things and then we come to see what we've said, and we don't always like it.'

'That is very true,' said Mr J. L. B. Matekoni, shaking his head sadly. 'It is very true, Mma.'

They looked at one another. It was clear to Mma Ramotswe that he was relieved at having been able to talk to her about this. It was often the case that the simple act of revealing a problem to another made the problem itself seem so much less serious. Bottling something up within yourself only served to make things worse: she was sure of that. But there was something that puzzled her, and so she asked, 'He may not be proposing to tell his wife that he is planning to buy a sports car, Rra, but won't she find out eventually – when she looks out of the front window and sees the new car parked in the drive? Won't that give the game away, Mr J. L. B. Matekoni?'

It was a good question, he thought, and he had himself asked it of Mr Molala when he had first revealed his plan. It had been quickly answered, though. 'He told me that he would be parking this new car at a friend's place. He would keep it there and in that way his wife would never know about it. Then he would be free to drive around in it whenever he wished.'

It took Mma Ramotswe some time to gather her thoughts after this disclosure. In one sense, this was ridiculous. For a grown man to behave in this way was absurd – it was the sort of subterfuge to which a sixteen-year-old boy might resort, but for a man at Mr Molala's stage of life to be planning to do such a thing was almost unbelievable. But then she reminded herself that there were many men who behaved like young boys, and in some cases such behaviour became more common the older a man became.

She sighed at the thought. Poor men: how sad it was that

something as unimportant as a sports car could turn a man's head in this way. Why, she wondered, would a man like him set such store by driving a sports car? Was it simply the attraction of fast, responsive machinery, or . . . It came to her. Men drove showy cars to attract women. Mr Molala would not be planning to drive around in his sports car by himself – he would be envisioning company. She sighed again. There was nothing unusual here: this was male behaviour of a sort that she had seen time and time again in the course of her work in the No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency.

Clovis Andersen's words came back to her. As usual, Clovis Andersen, in a few well-chosen words in *The Principles of Private Detection*, put his finger on the nub of the matter. *Men do things to attract the attention of women. Once you understand that, you will begin to understand men.*