

The Good Husband of Zebra Drive

Alexander McCall Smith

Published by Polygon

Extract

All text is copyright of the author

[Click here to buy this book and read more](#)

This opening extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

First published in Great Britain in 2007 by
Polygon, an imprint of Birlinn Ltd
West Newington House
10 Newington Road
Edinburgh
EH9 1QS

www.birlinn.co.uk

Copyright © Alexander McCall Smith, 2007

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

The right of Alexander McCall Smith to be identified as the author
of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with
the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may
be reproduced, stored, or transmitted in any form, or
by any means electronic, mechanical or photocopying,
recording or otherwise, without the express written
permission of the publisher.

ISBN 10: 1-904598-98-6
ISBN 13: 978-1-904598-98-5

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available
on request from the British Library

Typeset by Palimpsest Book Production Limited, Grangemouth, Stirlingshire
Printed and bound by Creative Print and Design, Ebbw Vale, Wales

CHAPTER ONE

A Very Rude Person

It is useful, people generally agree, for a wife to wake up before her husband. Mma Ramotswe always rose from her bed an hour or so before Mr J.L.B. Matekoni – a good thing for a wife to do because it affords time to accomplish at least some of the day’s tasks. But it is also a good thing for those wives whose husbands are inclined to be irritable first thing in the morning – and by all accounts there are many of them, rather too many, in fact. If the wives of such men are up and about first, the husbands can be left to be ill-tempered by themselves – not that Mr J.L.B. Matekoni was ever like that; on the contrary, he was the most good-natured and gracious of men, rarely raising his voice, except occasionally when dealing with his two incorrigible apprentices at Tlokweng Road Speedy Motors. And anybody, no matter how even-tempered he might be, would have been inclined to raise his voice with such feckless young men. This had been demonstrated by Mma Makutsi, who tended to shout at the apprentices for very little reason, even when one of them made a simple request, such as asking the time of day.

“You don’t have to shout at me like that,” complained Charlie, the older of the two. “All I asked was what time it was. That was all. And you shout *four o’clock* like that. Do you think I’m deaf?”

Mma Makutsi stood her ground. “It’s because I know you so well,” she retorted. “When you ask the time it’s because

The Good Husband of Zebra Drive

you can't wait to stop working. You want me to say five o'clock, don't you? And then you would drop everything and rush off to see some girl or other, wouldn't you? Don't look so injured. I know what you do."

Mma Ramotswe thought of this encounter as she hauled herself out of bed and stretched. Glancing behind her, she saw the inert form of her husband under the blankets, his head half covered by the pillow, which was how he liked to sleep, as if to block out the world and its noise. She smiled. Mr J.L.B. Matekoni had a tendency to talk in his sleep – not complete sentences, as one of Mma Ramotswe's cousins had done when she was young, but odd words and expressions, clues each of them to the dream he was having at the time. Just after she had woken up and while she was still lying there watching the light grow behind the curtains, he had muttered something about brake drums. So that was what he dreamed about, she thought – such were the dreams of a mechanic; dreams of brakes and clutches and spark plugs. Most wives fondly hoped that their husbands dreamed about them, but they did not. Men dreamed about cars, it would seem.

Mma Ramotswe shivered. There were those who imagined that Botswana was always warm, but they had never experienced the winter months there – those months when the sun seemed to have business elsewhere and shone only weakly on southern Africa. They were just coming to the end of winter now, and there were signs of the return of warmth, but the mornings and the evenings could still be bitterly cold, as this particular morning was. Cold air, great invisible clouds of it, would sweep up from the south-east, from the distant Drakensberg Mountains and from the southern oceans beyond; air that seemed to love rolling over the wide spaces of Botswana, cold air under a high sun.

A Very Rude Person

Once in the kitchen, with a blanket wrapped about her waist, Mma Ramotswe switched on Radio Botswana in time for the opening chorus of the national anthem and the recording of cattle bells with which the radio started the day. This was a constant in her life, something that she remembered from her childhood, listening to the radio from her sleeping mat while the woman who looked after her started the fire that would cook breakfast for Precious and her father, Obed Ramotswe. It was one of the cherished things of her childhood, that memory, as was the mental picture that she had of Mochudi as it then was, of the view from the National School up on the hill; of the paths that wound through the bush this way and that but which had a destination known only to the small, scurrying animals that used them. These were things that would stay with her forever, she thought, and which would always be there, no matter how bustling and thriving Gaborone might become. This was the soul of her country; somewhere there, in that land of red earth, of green acacia, of cattle bells, was the soul of her country.

She put a kettle on the stove and looked out of the window. In mid-winter it would barely be light at seven; now, at the tail end of the cold season, even if the weather could still conjure up chilly mornings like this one, at least there was a little more light. The sky in the east had brightened and the first rays of the sun were beginning to touch the tops of the trees in her yard. A small sun bird – Mma Ramotswe was convinced it was the same one who was always there – darted from a branch of the mopipi tree near the front gate and descended on the stem of a flowering aloe. A lizard, torpid from the cold, struggled wearily up the side of a small rock, searching for the warmth that would enable him to start his day. Just like us, thought Mma Ramotswe.

The Good Husband of Zebra Drive

Once the kettle boiled, she brewed herself a pot of red bush tea and mug in hand went out into the garden. She drew the cold air into her lungs and when she breathed out again her breath hung in the air for a moment in a thin white cloud, quickly gone. The air had a touch of wood smoke in it from somebody's fire, perhaps that of the elderly watchman at the nearby government offices. He kept a brazier fire going, not much more than a few embers, but enough for him to warm his hands on in the cold watches of the night. Mma Ramotswe sometimes spoke to him when he came off duty and began to walk home past her gate. He had a place of sorts over at Old Naledi, she knew, and she imagined him sleeping through the day under a hot tin roof. It was not much of a job, and he would have been paid very little for it, so she had occasionally slipped him a twenty-pula note as a gift. But at least it was a job, and he had a place to lay his head, which was more than some people had.

She walked round the side of the house to inspect the strip of ground where Mr J.L.B. Matekoni would be planting his beans later in the year. She had noticed him working in the garden over the last few days, scraping the soil into ridges where he would plant, constructing the ramshackle structure of poles and string up which the bean stalks would be trained. Everything was dry now, in spite of one or two unexpected winter showers that had laid the dust, but it would be very different if the rains were good. If the rains were good . . .

She sipped at her tea and made her way to the back of the house. There was nothing to see there, just a couple of empty barrels that Mr J.L.B. Matekoni had brought back from the garage for some yet-to-be-explained purpose. He was given to clutter, and the barrels would be tolerated only for a few weeks before Mma Ramotswe would quietly arrange

A Very Rude Person

for their departure. The elderly watchman, Mr Nthata, was useful for that; he was only too willing to take away things that Mr J.L.B. Matekoni left lying about in the yard; Mr J.L.B. Matekoni forgot about these things fairly quickly and rarely noticed that they had gone.

It was the same with his trousers. Mma Ramotswe kept a general watch on the generously cut khaki trousers that her husband wore underneath his work overalls, and eventually, when the trouser legs became scuffed at the bottom, she would discreetly remove them from the washing machine after a final wash and pass them on to the woman at the Anglican Cathedral who would find a good home for them. Mr J.L.B. Matekoni often did not notice that he was putting on a new pair of trousers, particularly if Mma Ramotswe distracted him with some item of news or gossip while he was in the process of getting dressed. This was necessary, she felt, as he had always been unwilling to get rid of his old clothes to which, like many men, he became excessively attached. If men were left to their own devices, Mma Ramotswe believed, they would go about in rags. Her own father had refused to abandon his hat, even when it became so old that the brim was barely attached to the crown. She remembered itching to replace it with one of those smart new hats that she had seen on the top shelf of the Small Upright General Dealer in Mochudi, but had realised that her father would never give up the old one, which had become a talisman, a totem. And they had buried that hat with him, placing it lovingly in the rough board coffin in which he had been lowered into the ground of the land that he had loved so much and of which he had always been so proud. That was long ago, and now she was standing here, a married woman, the owner of a business, a woman of some

The Good Husband of Zebra Drive

status in the community; standing here at the back of her house with a mug that was now drained of tea and a day of responsibilities ahead of her.

She went inside. The two foster children, Puso and Motholeli, were good at getting themselves up and did so without any prompting by Mma Ramotswe. Motholeli was already in the kitchen, sitting at the table in her wheelchair, her breakfast of a thick slice of bread and jam on a plate before her. In the background, she could hear the sound of Puso slamming the door of the bathroom.

“He cannot shut doors quietly,” said Motholeli, putting her hands to her ears.

“He is a boy,” said Mma Ramotswe. “That is how boys behave.”

“Then I am glad that I am not a boy,” said Motholeli.

Mma Ramotswe smiled. “Men and boys think that we would like to be them,” she said. “I don’t think they know how pleased we are to be women.”

Motholeli thought about this. “Would you like to be somebody else, Mma? Is there anybody else you would like to be?”

Mma Ramotswe considered this for a moment. It was the sort of question that she always found rather difficult to answer – just as she found it impossible to reply when people asked when one would like to have lived if one did not live in the present. That question was particularly perplexing. Some said that they would have liked to live before the colonial era, before Europe came and carved Africa up; that, they said, would have been a good time, when Africa ran its own affairs, without humiliation. Yes, it was true that Europe had devoured Africa like a hungry man at a feast – and an uninvited one too – but not everything had been perfect before that. What

A Very Rude Person

if one had lived next door to the Zulus, with their fierce militarism? What if one were a weak person in the house of the strong? The Batswana had always been a peaceful people, but one could not say that about everybody. And what about medicines and hospitals? Would one have wanted to live in a time when a little scratch could turn septic and end one's life? Or in the days before dental anaesthetic? Mma Ramotswe thought not, and yet the pace of life was so much more human then and people made do with so much less. Perhaps it would have been good to live then, when one did not have to worry about money, because money did not exist; or when one did not have to fret about being on time for anything, because clocks were as yet unknown. There was something to be said for that; there was something to be said for a time when all one had to worry about was the cattle and the crops.

And as for the question of who else she would rather be, that was perhaps as unanswerable. Her assistant, Mma Makutsi? What would it be like to be a woman from Bobonong, the wearer of a pair of large round glasses, a graduate – with ninety-seven per cent – of the Botswana Secretarial College, an assistant detective? Would Mma Ramotswe exchange her early forties for Mma Makutsi's early thirties? Would she exchange her marriage to Mr J.L.B. Matekoni for Mma Makutsi's engagement to Phuti Radiphuti, proprietor of the Double Comfort Furniture Store – and of a considerable herd of cattle? No, she thought she would not. Manifold as Phuti Radiphuti's merits might be, they could not possibly match those of Mr J.L.B. Matekoni, and even if it was good to be in one's early thirties there were compensations to being in one's early forties. These were . . . She stopped. What precisely were they?

Motholeli, the cause of this train of thought, now

The Good Husband of Zebra Drive

interrupted it; there was to be no enumeration of the consolations of being forty-ish. "Well, Mma," she said. "Who would you be? The Minister of Health?"

The Minister, the wife of that great man, Professor Thomas Tlou, had recently visited Motholeli's school to present prizes and had delivered a stirring address to the pupils. Motholeli had been particularly impressed and had talked about it at home.

"She is a very fine person," said Mma Ramotswe. "And she wears very beautiful headdresses. I would not mind being Sheila Tlou . . . if I had to be somebody else. But I am quite happy, really, being Mma Ramotswe, you know. There is nothing wrong with that, is there?" She paused. "And you're happy being yourself, aren't you?"

She asked the question without thinking, and immediately regretted it. There were reasons why Motholeli would prefer to be somebody else; it was so obvious, and Mma Ramotswe, flustered, searched for something to say that would change the subject. She looked at her watch. "Oh, the time. It's getting late, Motholeli. We cannot stand here talking about all sorts of things, much as I'd like to . . ."

Motholeli licked the remnants of jam off her fingers. She looked up at Mma Ramotswe. "Yes, I'm happy. I'm very happy. And I don't think that I would like to be anybody else. Not really."

Mma Ramotswe sighed with relief. "Good. Then I think . . ."

"Except maybe you," Motholeli continued. "I would like to be you, Mma Ramotswe."

Mma Ramotswe laughed. "I'm not sure if you would always enjoy that. There are times when I would like to be somebody else myself."

A Very Rude Person

“Or Mr J.L.B. Matekoni,” Motholeli said. “I would like to know as much about cars as he does. That would be good.”

And dream about brake drums and gears? wondered Mma Ramotswe. And have to deal with those apprentices, and be covered in grease and oil half the time?

Once the children had set off for school, Mma Ramotswe and Mr J.L.B. Matekoni found themselves alone in the kitchen. The children always made a noise; now there was an almost unnatural quiet, as at the end of a thunderstorm or a night of high winds. It was a time for the two adults to finish their tea in companionable silence, or perhaps to exchange a few words about what the day ahead held. Then, once the breakfast plates had been cleared up and the porridge pot scrubbed and put away, they would make their separate ways to work, Mr J.L.B. Matekoni in his green truck and Mma Ramotswe in her tiny white van. Their destination was the same – the No. 1 Ladies’ Detective Agency shared premises with Tlokweng Road Speedy Motors – but they invariably arrived at different times. Mr J.L.B. Matekoni liked to drive directly to the top of the Tlokweng Road along the route that went past the flats at the end of the university, while Mma Ramotswe, who had a soft spot for the area of town known as the Village, would meander along Oodi Drive or Hippopotamus Road and approach the Tlokweng Road from that direction.

As they sat at the kitchen table that morning, Mr J.L.B. Matekoni suddenly looked up from his teacup and started to stare at a point on the ceiling. Mma Ramotswe knew that this preceded a disclosure; Mr J.L.B. Matekoni looked at the ceiling when something needed to be said. She said nothing, waiting for him to speak.

The Good Husband of Zebra Drive

“There’s something I meant to mention to you,” he said casually. “I forgot to tell you about it yesterday. You were in Molepolole, you see.”

She nodded. “Yes, I went to Molepolole.”

His eyes were still fixed on the ceiling. “And Molepolole? How was Molepolole?”

She smiled. “You know what Molepolole is like. It gets a bit bigger, but not much else has changed. Not really.”

“I’m not sure that I would want Molepolole to change too much,” he said.

She waited for him to continue. Something important was definitely about to emerge, but with Mr J.L.B. Matekoni these things could take time.

“Somebody came to see you at the office yesterday,” he said. “When Mma Makutsi was out.”

This surprised Mma Ramotswe and, in spite of her equable temperament, irritated her. Mma Makutsi had been meant to be in the office throughout the previous day, in case a client should call. Where had she been?

“So Mma Makutsi was out?” she said. “Did she say where?” It was possible that some urgent matter of business had arisen and this had required Mma Makutsi’s presence elsewhere, but she doubted that. A more likely explanation, thought Mma Ramotswe, was urgent shopping, probably for shoes.

Mr J.L.B. Matekoni lowered his gaze from the ceiling and fixed it on Mma Ramotswe. He knew that his wife was a generous employer, but he did not want to get Mma Makutsi into trouble if she had deliberately disobeyed instructions. And she had been shopping; when she had returned, just before five in the afternoon – a strictly token return, he thought at the time – she had been laden with parcels and

A Very Rude Person

had unpacked one of these to show him the shoes it contained. They were very fashionable shoes, she had assured him, but in Mr J.L.B. Matekoni's view they had been barely recognisable as footwear, so slender and insubstantial had seemed the criss-crossings of red leather which made up the upper part of the shoes.

"So she went shopping," said Mma Ramotswe, tight-lipped.

"Perhaps," said Mr J.L.B. Matekoni. He tended to be defensive about Mma Makutsi, whom he admired greatly. He knew what it was like to come from nowhere, with nothing, or next to nothing, and make a success of one's life. She had done that with her ninety-seven per cent and her part-time typing school, and now, of course, with her well-heeled fiancé. He would defend her. "But there was nothing going on. I'm sure she had done all her work."

"But something did turn up," pointed out Mma Ramotswe. "A client came to see me. You've just said that."

Mr J.L.B. Matekoni fiddled with a button on the front of his shirt. He was clearly embarrassed about something. "Well, I suppose so. But I was there to deal with things. I spoke to this person."

"And?" asked Mma Ramotswe.

Mr J.L.B. Matekoni hesitated. "I was able to deal with the situation," he said. "And I have written it all down to show you." He reached into a pocket and took out a folded sheet of paper, which he handed to Mma Ramotswe.

She unfolded the paper and read the pencil-written note. Mr J.L.B. Matekoni's handwriting was angular, and careful – the script of one who had been taught penmanship, as he had been, at school all those years ago, a skill he had never forgotten. Mma Ramotswe's own handwriting was

The Good Husband of Zebra Drive

less legible and was becoming worse. It was something to do with her wrists, she thought, which had become chubbier over the years and which affected the angle of the hand on the paper. Mma Makutsi had suggested that her employer's handwriting was becoming increasingly like shorthand and that it might eventually become indistinguishable from the system of pencilled dashes and wiggles that covered the pages of her own notebook.

"It will be a first," she remarked, as she squinted at a note which Mma Ramotswe had left her. "It will be the first time that anybody has started to write shorthand without learning it. It may even be in the papers."

Mma Ramotswe had wondered whether she should feel offended by this, but had decided to laugh instead. "Would I get ninety-seven per cent for it?" she asked.

Mma Makutsi became serious. She did not like her result at the Botswana Secretarial College to be taken lightly. "No," she said. "I was only joking about shorthand. You would have to work very hard at the Botswana Secretarial College to get a result like that. Very hard." She gave Mma Ramotswe a look which implied that such a result would be well beyond her.

Now, on the paper before her, were Mr J.L.B. Matekoni's notes. "Time," he had written, "3.20 p.m. Client: woman. Name: Faith Botumile. Complaint: husband having an affair. Request: find out who the husband's girlfriend is. Action proposed: get rid of girlfriend. Get husband back."

Mma Ramotswe read the note and looked at her husband. She was trying to imagine the encounter between Faith Botumile and Mr J.L.B. Matekoni. Had the interview taken place in the garage, while his head was buried in some car's engine compartment? Or had he taken her into the office and

A Very Rude Person

interviewed her from the desk, wiping his hands free of grease as she told her story? And what was Mma Botumile like? What age? Dress? There were so many things that a woman would notice which would provide vital background to the handling of the case which a man simply would not see.

"This woman," she asked, holding up the note. "Tell me about her?"

Mr J.L.B. Matekoni shrugged. "Just an ordinary woman," he said. "Nothing special about her."

Mma Ramotswe smiled. It was as she had imagined, and Mma Botumile would have to be interviewed again from scratch.

"Just a woman?" she mused.

"That's right," he said.

"And you can't tell me anything more about her?" asked Mma Ramotswe. "Nothing about her age? Nothing about her appearance?"

Mr J.L.B. Matekoni seemed surprised. "Do you want me to?"

"It could be useful."

"Thirty-eight," said Mr J.L.B. Matekoni.

Mma Ramotswe raised an eyebrow. "She told you that?"

"Not directly. No. But I was able to work that out. She said that she was the sister of the man who runs that shoe shop near the supermarket. She said that she was the joint owner, with him. She said that he was her older brother – by two years. I know that man. I know that he had a fortieth birthday recently because one of the people who brings in his car for servicing said that he was going to his party. So I knew . . ."

Mma Ramotswe's eyes widened. "And what else do you know about her?"

The Good Husband of Zebra Drive

Mr J.L.B. Matekoni looked up at the ceiling again. "Nothing, really," he said. "Except maybe that she is a diabetic."

Mma Ramotswe was silent.

"I offered her a biscuit," said Mr J.L.B. Matekoni. "You know those iced ones you have on your desk. In that tin marked *Pencils*. I offered her one of those and she looked at her watch and then shook her head. I have seen diabetics do that. They sometimes look at their watch because they have to know how long it is before their next meal." He paused. "I am not sure, of course. I just thought that."

Mma Ramotswe nodded, and glanced at her own watch. It was almost time to go to the office. It was, she felt, going to be an unusual day. Any day on which one's suppositions are so rudely shattered before eight o'clock is bound to be an unusual day, a day for discovering things about the world which are quite different from what you thought they were.

She drove into work slowly, not even trying to keep up with Mr J.L.B. Matekoni's green truck ahead of her. At the top of Zebra Drive she nosed her van out across the road that led north, narrowly avoiding a large car which swerved and sounded its horn; such rudeness, she thought, and so unnecessary. She drove on, past the entrance to the Sun Hotel and beyond it, against the hotel fence, the place where the women sat with their crocheted bedspreads and table-cloths hung out for passers-by to see and, they hoped, to buy. The work was intricate and skilfully done; stitch after stitch, loop after loop, worked slowly and painstakingly out from the core in wide circles of white thread, like spider-webs; the work of women who sat there so patiently under the sun, women of the sort whose work was often forgotten or ignored in its anonymity, but artists really, and providers. Mma

A Very Rude Person

Ramotswe needed a new bedspread and would stop to buy one before too long; but not today, when she had things on her mind. Mma Botumile. Mma Botumile. The name had been tantalising her, because she thought that she had encountered it before and could not recall where. Now she remembered. Somebody had once said to her: *Mma Botumile: rudest woman in the whole of Botswana. True!*