Welcome to the No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency

The story so far . . .

Grace Makutsi's husband, Phuti, is in a bind. An international firm is attempting to undercut his prices in the office furniture market. To make matters worse, they have a slick new advertising campaign that seems hard to beat. Nonetheless, with Mma Ramotswe's help, Phuti comes up with a campaign that may just do the trick. Meanwhile, Mma Makutsi is approached by an old friend who has a troubled son. Grace and Phuti agree to lend a hand, but the boy proves difficult to reach, and the situation is more than they can handle on their own. It requires not only all of their patience and dedication, but also the help of Mma Ramotswe and the formidable Mma Potokwani.

By Alexander McCall Smith

THE NO. 1 LADIES' DETECTIVE AGENCY SERIES

The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency
Tears of the Giraffe
Morality for Beautiful Girls
The Kalahari Typing School for Men
The Full Cupboard of Life
In the Company of Cheerful Ladies
Blue Shoes and Happiness
The Good Husband of Zebra Drive
The Miracle at Speedy Motors
Tea Time for the Traditionally Built
The Double Comfort Safari Club
The Saturday Big Tent Wedding Party
The Limpopo Academy of Private Detection
The Minor Adjustment Beauty Salon
The Handsome Man's De Luxe Café
The Woman Who Walked in Sunshine
Precious and Grace
The House of Unexpected Sisters
The Colours of all the Cattle
To the Land of Long Lost Friends
How to Raise an Elephant
The Joy and Light Bus Company
A Song of Comfortable Chairs
From a Far and Lovely Country

THE ISABEL DALHOUSIE NOVELS

The Sunday Philosophy Club
Friends, Lovers, Chocolate
The Right Attitude to Rain
The Careful Use of Compliments
The Comfort of Saturdays
The Lost Art of Gratitude
The Charming Quirks of Others
The Forgotten Affairs of Youth
The Uncommon Appeal of Clouds
The Novel Habits of Happiness
A Distant View of Everything
The Quiet Side of Passion
The Geometry of Holding Hands
The Sweet Remnants of Summer
The Conditions of Unconditional Love

THE 44 SCOTLAND STREET SERIES

44 Scotland Street
Espresso Tales
Love Over Scotland
The World According to Bertie
The Unbearable Lightness of Scones
The Importance of Being Seven
Bertie Plays the Blues
Sunshine on Scotland Street
Bertie's Guide to Life and Mothers
The Revolving Door of Life
The Bertie Project
A Time of Love and Tartan
The Peppermint Tea Chronicles
A Promise of Ankles
Love in the Time of Bertie
The Enigma of Garlic
The Stellar Debut of Galactica MacFee

THE CORDUROY MANSIONS SERIES

Corduroy Mansions
The Dog Who Came in from the Cold
A Conspiracy of Friends

THE VON IGELFELD ENTERTAINMENTS

The 2½ Pillars of Wisdom
Unusual Uses for Olive Oil
Your Inner Hedgehog

THE DETECTIVE VARG NOVELS

The Department of Sensitive Crimes
The Talented Mr Varg
The Man with the Silver Saab
The Discreet Charm of the Big Bad Wolf

La's Orchestra Saves the World
The Forever Girl
My Italian Bulldozer
The Private Life of Spies

From a Far and Lovely Country

ALEXANDER MCCALL SMITH

abacus
books

ABACUS

First published in Great Britain in 2023 by Abacus
This paperback edition published in 2024 by Abacus

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Copyright © Alexander McCall Smith 2023

The moral right of the author has been asserted.

All characters and events in this publication, other than those clearly in the public domain, are fictitious and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

All rights reserved.
No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the prior permission in writing of the publisher, nor be otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-0-349-14594-5

Typeset in Galliard by M Rules
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

Papers used by Abacus are from well-managed forests
and other responsible sources.

Abacus
An imprint of
Little, Brown Book Group
Carmelite House
50 Victoria Embankment
London EC4Y 0DZ

An Hachette UK Company
www.hachette.co.uk

www.littlebrown.co.uk

This book is for Mandy and Ashok Ferrey

Chapter One

Carbolic Soap and Birthday Cake

Precious Ramotswe, daughter of the late Obed Ramotswe of Mochudi, near Gaborone, in Botswana, near Heaven, wife of Mr J. L. B. Matekoni, *garagiste*; friend to so many, but particularly to Mma Silvia Potokwani, and of course Grace Makutsi, formerly of Bobonong, who was, in turn, wife of Mr Phuti Radiphuti and a graduate of the Botswana Secretarial College – with ninety-seven per cent in the final examinations; *that* Precious Ramotswe lay in her bed, opening first one eye, then another, and subsequently, after only a few short seconds, closing both once more.

Waking up in the morning, as she had now done, was never too difficult; the hard part, she always thought, was what happened afterwards. To begin with, you had to remind yourself where you were. Those first few seconds of consciousness could

be quite detached from everything else. You knew *who* you were, of course, and you knew you were in your bed, but you did not necessarily remember where you had just been: there might still be drifting around a few fragments of a dream, the remnants of some curious and unreal events in which the sleeping you had just been participating, and you had to put those out of your mind as the real day began. The mind was good at that – it remembered not to remember, so to speak, because it knew that dreams could not be allowed to clog up memory, which had far more important things to do. And so, the strange conversations of the night, the odd transports back to childhood, the unlikely dramas and surprises – all these were swept away as the light of day signalled the beginning of your real life, as yourself, facing another day of being you.

Now, on that particular morning, Mma Ramotswe was fully awake, and conscious of the fact that she was alone in her bed, and that her husband was no longer there. You could always tell when there was somebody else in bed with you, and, equally, when there was not. There was the silence, of course – there was the absence of the breathing noises that husbands tended to make – and then there was something about the way the mattress sloped when there was nobody to counteract the weight on one's own side. And then, if you turned in your bed, as she now did, you saw that there was nobody there, and you began to listen for sounds from deeper within the house. For the sound of your husband in the kitchen, for example, preparing breakfast in bed for you as a treat, because today, you suddenly remembered, was a somewhat special day, being your birthday, when breakfast in bed – or even a simple cup of redbush tea placed steaming on the bedside table – would be so welcome. Not that you expected it as your right, but it would still be a nice touch.

She listened hard, holding her breath for a few moments so as to hear better, but there was no sound coming from the direction of the kitchen. And there was nothing to be heard from the other two bedrooms, because it was that odd, quiet time of the year, the school holidays, when the children were away for three weeks. They were staying in Lobatse with the families of schoolfriends, helping with the planting and the cattle, and learning to love the land, which is something we all should learn to do when we are young. No, the house was quite silent, and that meant that Mr J. L. B. Matekoni had already gone off to the garage, as he sometimes did when there was a lot to do and rather too many cars waiting for attention, like a line of patients nursing their complaints in a hospital waiting room.

Mma Ramotswe sighed. You should not begin your birthday with a sigh, though, and she quickly turned the sigh into a deep breath, the sort of breath you take when you are deciding to be positive about the day ahead. She then put on her housecoat and slippers, and made her way into the kitchen to fill the kettle. As she entered the room, her eye fell on a note displayed prominently on the table, and she smiled. That would be the message he had left for her, saying something like, *Happy birthday, my dearest wife – I am so sorry that I have had to go to work early on this special day, but I'll make up for it later. Your loving husband, Mr J. L. B. Matekoni.* Something like that.

She picked up the note and read it. *Gone to work*, it said, rather tersely. *See you at tea time. Don't forget to buy soap for the garage, please.* The please was underlined – not out of politeness, but to emphasise the importance of the request. And that was all. There was nothing about her birthday – just that reminder about the soap that he needed for the washbasin in the garage so that he and his assistant, Fanwell, could get the grease off their hands

after attending to engines and before handling the upholstered steering wheels of the cars in their care. Soap was important, she thought, but so were birthdays – and if one had to rank the two things in order of importance, she would say that from the point of view of the person whose birthday it was, birthdays outranked soap.

She made a conscious effort not to feel upset. Mr J. L. B. Matekoni stood out for his politeness, even in a country like Botswana, where people were naturally courteous towards one another. He was not one to use cross words, nor did he ever forget the traditional decencies – the formal greetings and enquiries about whether you have slept well, and whether your family have slept well, that sort of thing, which had always been observed in Botswana but were under threat, as such things were under threat everywhere, throughout the world. And there was another thing: he never raised his voice and not once had she heard him swear. Nowadays people swore with very little provocation, using language that, when she had been at school in Mochudi, would have brought the wrath of the authorities down upon one's head. She vividly remembered the day when a boy in her class at school – a boy of eleven or twelve, who had a reputation for being short-tempered – had used bad language within the hearing of one of the teachers. He had imagined that nobody could hear him, or at least no adult, but he had been wrong, and he had been picked up by the scruff of his neck and taken to the boys' washroom, where his mouth had been washed out with Lifebuoy red carbolic soap. He had howled in protest, as that soap was known for its sting, but he had not sworn again, in the schoolyard, at least.

She had told Mma Makutsi about that incident, and Mma Makutsi had nodded and said, 'Quite right, Mma. That's the way to do these things.'

Mma Ramotswe had expressed reservations. 'That was the way they *used* to do things, Mma. I'm not sure you can do that sort of thing these days.'

Mma Makutsi looked at her incredulously. 'That's ridiculous, Mma. Why not?'

'I think it's to do with rights,' Mma Ramotswe explained. 'People have more rights these days, Mma.'

Mma Makutsi's look of incredulity turned to one of dismissal. 'Rights, Mma? Even children? Even boys like that foul-mouthed boy you mentioned?'

'I think everybody has rights now,' said Mma Ramotswe.

Mma Makutsi shook her head. 'Children need to be told what to do, Mma. You cannot let them run round without being told what they can do and what they can't do.'

'Oh, that's true, Mma,' Mma Ramotswe conceded. 'Children have to be disciplined.'

'Well then,' snorted Mma Makutsi. 'How do you discipline a child who's using rude language? You tell me, Mma. You tell me. How do you discipline a boy like that? You wash his mouth out with carbolic soap – that's what you do. And if he starts shouting about his rights, you say, "And we have a right not to listen to you speaking like that, young man!" That's what you say.'

Mma Ramotswe said nothing. She thought that Mma Makutsi had probably not taken her point about how the climate of opinion had changed, and the old ways of punishing children for their transgressions had been discredited. You were not meant to slap children these days, and you certainly weren't meant to beat them in the way in which children used to be beaten, even in living memory. You spoke to them sharply; you told them of the consequences of their actions for others; you reasoned with them. And she was pleased with these changes, because violence

merely begat violence, as everybody knew now – or should know, even if they had yet to learn that.

But Mma Makutsi, who, in spite of her more modern clothes, was still rather more old-fashioned than Mma Ramotswe in these matters, now had more to say on the subject.

'In fact, Mma Ramotswe,' she continued, 'I can think of quite a few people who would benefit from having their mouths washed out with carbolic soap. Adults, this time – people who use very bad language in front of other people. They don't seem to care. They use these words as if they don't mean anything.' She paused. 'That man who works in the supermarket – you know the one? He's always shouting at his staff and using very rude language. They're too frightened of him to tell him not to shout so much – or to call them the names he calls them, which he certainly should not do. They should do that – they should stand up to him – but they don't. That's one man who would benefit from a bit of carbolic soap, Mma.'

Mma Ramotswe inclined her head. She knew the man Mma Makutsi was referring to, and she smiled as she thought of how outraged he would look if somebody were to manage to wash his mouth out with soap. It was a lovely thought – a bully dealt with by the very people he had bullied, which was always something nice to contemplate. And, Mma Makutsi was right about the carelessness of some people, about the lack of respect for the feelings of others, and for decency, but once again she did not imagine that a programme of washing people's mouths out with soap would help very much. And so, she said nothing, and Mma Makutsi, feeling that she had won the argument – if it had been an argument – looked satisfied, as people who have made their point forcibly may look.

Now, standing in her house in Zebra Drive, Mma Ramotswe

thought of Mr J. L. B. Matekoni's mildness and how he would never intentionally upset anybody, particularly her. He loved her with all his heart – he had once told her as much, in a rare moment of self-reference – and she, of course, reciprocated. He was proud of her – she knew that because Mma Potokwani had once told her about what he had said about his good fortune at being married to her. So, if now he appeared to be ignoring her birthday and had written a note that seemed a bit curt, that was probably because he had a lot on his mind.

She was in no doubt that he had simply forgotten her birthday. Now that she cast her mind back over the previous few days, she realised that she herself seemed to have forgotten that her birthday was coming up. She had not thought about it at all earlier on in the week, and it was only yesterday that she had reminded herself that the following day was the day in question. Had she said something to Mr J. L. B. Matekoni at that point, then he would undoubtedly have remembered – but she had not, and this was the result. So, she could hardly blame him for the omission: forgetting to do something did not involve any intention to harm – it was something that happened to you, rather than something you decided to do. And there was a difference between those two things, she thought.

And there was something else to bear in mind: Mr J. L. B. Matekoni was a man, and men, by and large, did not remember birthdays as well as women did. That was not to run men down unfairly – Mma Ramotswe would never do that – but you had to admit that men had their drawbacks, just as women did, and one of the failings of men was a lack of inclination to remember birthdays. Women, by contrast, remembered the birthdays of their friends, and often of their friends' parents or children. Mma Ramotswe remembered Mma Potokwani's birthday, because it

was the day after the birthday of the late Seretse Khama. But she also remembered the birthdays of at least two of the house-mothers at the Orphan Farm, and those had no important dates attached to them.

The first of July, 1921: that had been when Sir Seretse Goitsebeng Maphiri Khama had been born – a day of the utmost importance for Botswana. He was the grandson of Khama III the Good, and had become, in his time, the Paramount Chief of the Bamangwato people; and then, on that windy night in 1966, when the Bechuanaland Protectorate was laid to rest, first president of a brand-new country. Mma Ramotswe's father, Obed Ramotswe, had admired him greatly, and had even met him once – something of which he had been so proud. And she, in turn, was so proud of her father, so proud; and not a day went past that she didn't think of him and of what he had stood for. And her mother, too, who had died when she was so young, but who must have been a fine woman, because that was how her father described his wife, and he was never wrong about that sort of thing. Mma Ramotswe was proud of her, too, and wished that she had known her. Not to know your mother left a big hole in your life, but then . . . She stopped herself. Everybody had holes of one sort or another in their lives, and you should not spend too much time thinking about what you lacked. You should think, rather, of what you had, and she had so much – this house, this wonderful, if occasionally forgetful, husband; these kind friends, even if Mma Makutsi could occasionally be a bit sharp and Mma Potokwani was sometimes a bit pushy; the children, whom they had fostered, but who were like their own children now; her business; her country, that great beautiful stretch of Africa – there was so much to be grateful for.

She made herself a cup of redbush tea, extra strong, because it was her birthday, and prepared herself two pieces of toast that she spread thickly with butter and jam, and then made a third piece, once again because it was her birthday, and if you can't eat three slices of thickly buttered toast on your birthday, then when can you treat yourself to such a thing? Then, her breakfast finished, and feeling in a rather better mood, she dressed in one of the brightest, most positive dresses in her wardrobe, and set off in her van for the office. She would park under her usual acacia tree and resist any temptation to call in at Tlokweng Road Speedy Motors next door. She would see Mr J. L. B. Matekoni when he and his assistant, Fanwell, came to join her and Mma Makutsi for morning tea at ten – unless, of course, he remembered her birthday before then, and, dropping his tools, came running through to the office to beg her forgiveness. But that, she thought, was improbable, and she put it out of her mind. It was far more likely that she would have to say something like, 'You haven't forgotten what day it is today, Rra?' And he would hit his forehead with the palm of his hand and say, 'Oh, my goodness, Precious, how could I possibly forget?' That was possible, she supposed, just possible; but, as Mma Makutsi would say, nobody should hold their breath.

She parked the van and made her way to the front door of the office. Looking up, she saw the sign that they had erected, a few years ago now, that announced in large letters, 'The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency', with, underneath it, in much smaller lettering, 'Under personal management'. Mma Ramotswe had put that in on the suggestion of the signwriter, who had said that, in his experience, wording like that reassured clients and was, in general, good for business.

'Your sign is your mission statement,' he said. 'Your sign

not only says what sort of business you have, but what sort of person you are.'

Mma Ramotswe looked doubtful. 'I don't see how it can do that, Rra. Just a few words outside a building – how can they say very much about the people inside?'

The signwriter smiled – a knowing smile, from one who had painted signs for many of those who had yet to learn how important signs were.

'A sign says many things, Mma. Forgive me for pointing it out, but people do not always understand signs. You read what a sign says – you take that in – and then you read what it *doesn't* say. That can be important.'

He looked at her for conformation that she was following his line of argument. Then he continued, 'Let me give you an example, Mma. There are many signs that say "So-and-so and Sons, Butchers", or whatever. What does that sign tell us?'

'That it's a butchery?' offered Mma Ramotswe.

The signwriter raised an admonitory finger. 'Yes, Mma, but . . . but . . . What about the sons, Mma? What does that tell you?' He smiled. 'You're the No. 1 detective lady, I think, Mma. What would a No. 1 detective say about that?'

'That he has sons?'

'Ah!' said the signwriter. 'You are very observant, Mma. And you are not only observant, you are right, too. The butcher has sons, and these boys are in the business. So that means he is thinking long term, Mma. That is the important thing. People who think long term, about who is going to take over the business when they are late – and we all become late, Mma, sooner or later; there's no denying that, I think – those people are going to be careful about their reputation. They are not going to go after the quick profit; they are going to think of long-term

relationships with their clients. And that leads to a different style of business, you see.'

It was a long speech for a signwriter, or indeed anybody, to make, and now that it was finished Mma Ramotswe felt she had nothing to add. So, she simply said, 'Thank you, Rra. That is very interesting.'

'So, with these words "Under personal management",' he continued, 'you are sending a very powerful message, Mma. You are saying, "If you come to this business, you will get personal attention."'

Mma Ramotswe said that she thought that was important. She did not like the anonymity of the telephone, when you could not see the person you were talking to, and indeed you might even be talking to a machine. That was an appalling thought – that you would go to all the trouble of saying good day to a machine and asking it whether it had slept well, and the machine would simply say, in that strange voice that machines have, 'Please press 1 to make your enquiry', or something like that. How could you possibly say to a machine, 'Have you had much rain up at your place?' or 'How are your cattle doing?' There were things we needed to say to one another, but that did not interest machines in the slightest.

'Personal attention is very important,' said the signwriter. 'As is the fact that a business has been going for some time. You can say something like "Established . . ." and then you put the date, which should be at least ten or twenty years ago. That is very good for business. It means that you know what you're doing.'

'Or that people have yet to catch up with you,' joked Mma Ramotswe.

The signwriter smiled weakly. 'But it is not very funny, Mma. There are some people who should not be in business

at all. They start a business and then, one month later, where is that business? It has gone, Mma, because these people are no-good people, that is why.' He waved a hand vaguely in an easterly direction. 'There are many no-good people out there. Too many.'

Mma Ramotswe's gaze followed the direction in which he was pointing. It was towards the scrub bush beyond her tiny white van and its sheltering acacia tree. Were they there, these no-good people to whom he was alluding? Were they skulking amongst the stunted thorn trees and the dusty shrubs, waiting for the opportunity to set up a shaky business somewhere and then close it down a month or so later? She saw a movement in the bush, but it was only a goat, standing on its hind legs to nibble at a scrap of low foliage; it was not a no-good person at all.

And now she stood beneath that sign, looking up at the lettering, where the paint of the word *personal* had begun to peel away – eroded, perhaps, by the dry winds that could spring up from the Kalahari; or blistered by the unforgiving sun of a succession of hot seasons. Fanwell could get up on a ladder and renew it, she thought; he had some artistic ability, and had once painted a watercolour portrait of Mma Makutsi. Grace had not approved of it, and although she had accepted it with congeniality, she had been dismayed at the prominence that Fanwell had given to her large round glasses. Mma Ramotswe had sensed this, and had overheard her muttering sniffily, after Fanwell had left, 'Artists should not try to fix cars, and mechanics should not paint pictures of other people, I think.'

Fanwell was rather better at touching up scratches on cars, using the small pots of special paint he kept for the purpose. That paint would do for the rejuvenation of the sign if a suitable

colour match could be found. She would have to make that match, though, because men were often a little bit colour blind and could not always be relied upon to get colour co-ordination right. In fact, most men would not even be able to say what colour co-ordination was – apart from Phuti Radiphuti, of course, who, being in the furniture trade, was used to selecting covers for sofas and chairs.

She let herself into the office. It was stuffy, and she opened a window to allow air to circulate. She had a desk-top fan, a new acquisition, perilously placed on an old telephone directory, and she switched this on. Paper ruffled in the current of air, and she felt immediately cooler. They were going through a spell of hot weather, but there was rain in the offing and that would lower the temperature when it came. It would settle the dust, too, and bring immediate relief to the parched earth.

The electric kettle was filled with water, and she now switched this on. Mma Makutsi would arrive shortly, she imagined, and they would have a cup of tea together before they started work. At least Mma Makutsi would have remembered her birthday and would probably even have a present for her. The previous year, she had bought her a box of lace handkerchiefs and a tin of Turkish delight. And Mma Ramotswe, in turn, had bought Mma Makutsi a cookery book and an apron with a pizza motif for her birthday – both had been well received.

The kettle had barely had time to boil before Mma Ramotswe heard Mma Makutsi drive up outside. Phuti had bought her a small red car, and now she often drove this in to work, sometimes taking Mma Ramotswe's parking place under the acacia tree. Mma Ramotswe never said anything about that, although she was sure that Mma Makutsi knew that it was her place. The problem with things like that was that one could not really

reserve them. Theoretically, anybody was allowed to park there, as the ground belonged to the government and not to any individual proprietor, but that was not the point. A parking place under an acacia tree was a moral, as opposed to a legal issue. Those who had parked there for years – as Mma Ramotswe had – had a right that sprang from long usage, and other people should take account of that, but they did not always do so. At least today, on my birthday, thought Mma Ramotswe, my van is in its time-honoured place.

The door opened, and Mma Makutsi appeared.

'It's going to be hot again today,' she said as she crossed the room to her desk. 'I said that to Phuti when we got up this morning. I said, "It's going to be hot, Phuti," and he agreed with me. He said it might even be hotter than yesterday, unless it rains, which he didn't think it would. And I think that—'

She stopped. She had hardly glanced at Mma Ramotswe, but now she had noticed her dress.

'Well, Mma,' she continued, 'that is a very attractive dress, that one. It looks very good on you, I must say.'

Mma Ramotswe inclined her head. 'You are very kind, Mma. It is one of my favourites. I don't wear it very often.'

Mma Makutsi sat down at her desk. 'Very wise. Perhaps you should keep it for special occasions – and only wear it then.'

Like my birthday, thought Mma Ramotswe. Like today.

'But even when it isn't a special day,' Mma Makutsi went on, 'it may be nice to dress up a bit. Wearing something nice – like that dress – makes you feel a bit better, I always say.'

She busied herself with a letter that had been lying on her desk. As she opened the envelope, she frowned. 'These people, you know, Mma – these people who were worried because their staff were stealing from them. Remember that case? They had

that outfitters' shop and they said that their sales assistants were stealing the clothes . . .'

'And you discovered how they were doing it, Mma. Yes, I remember that case, Mma Makutsi.'

As Mma Makutsi continued to read the letter, her frown deepened. She continued to speak about the case, if in a slightly distracted way. 'Yes . . . yes. And they were going into the shop in their old clothes and then changing into some of the shops' clothes during the tea break, and throwing their old clothes out of the window. It was very cunning . . .' She drifted off before she exclaimed, 'Really, Mma, they are the end! Those people are the end.'

'The people stealing the clothes?'

'No, the owners of the store. That very tall man and his extremely short wife. Them. What does she see in him, I wonder. Maybe she doesn't even see him at all, because he's up in the clouds and she's down there on the floor. Silly people. They're the end, Mma.'

Mma Ramotswe smiled at the image. 'People see different things in others,' she pointed out. 'You never can tell when people are going to be suitable for one another.'

Mma Makutsi did not consider this. Now she tossed the letter aside in a gesture of contempt. 'They're refusing to pay our bill.'

This was unusual, but it was an issue that every business faced. Mma Ramotswe asked why the clients were disputing their fee.

'They said that we didn't arrest the staff members who were doing this. They're saying that we should have arrested them.'

Mma Ramotswe burst out laughing. 'But who do they think we are? Police? Is that what they think?'

Mma Makutsi shook her head in disbelief. 'There are some people who don't understand what a *private* detective is.'

'We shall have to send another bill,' said Mma Ramotswe. 'We can explain it to them tactfully.'

'I shall write them a letter,' Mma Makutsi said. 'I shall write them a letter and tell them that if they don't pay the bill, I shall arrest *them*.'

They both laughed, although, in Mma Ramotswe's case, it was with some effort. My birthday, she thought. My birthday.

Mma Makutsi now got up to make the tea, and as she did so, the telephone rang. It was Mma Potokwani.

Mma Ramotswe responded to her friend's greeting, and then waited. She imagined that the phone call would be made to convey birthday wishes, and that as she acknowledged these, Mma Makutsi would realise her omission and make suitable amends. But no such sentiments came through from the other end of the line; Mma Potokwani had called to see whether Mma Ramotswe would care to come out to the Orphan Farm that morning.

'There is something I'd like to discuss with you, Mma,' the matron said. 'It's easier to do some things in person, I find.'

Mma Ramotswe felt her spirits lift. Such as wish somebody a happy birthday, she thought. Such as give them a birthday present.

'Of course, Mma,' she said. 'I think so too.'

She hoped that Mma Potokwani might say something more, but she did not, and so Mma Ramotswe offered to make the short journey out to the Orphan Farm later that morning.

'And we can have lunch,' offered Mma Potokwani.

Mma Ramotswe smiled knowingly. A birthday lunch would make up for a lot of the morning's disappointments.

'Nothing special,' added Mma Potokwani.

Mma Ramotswe's smile broadened. 'Of course not. Nothing special.'

Mma Makutsi had been listening. Now, as she placed Mma Ramotswe's cup of redbush tea before her on her desk, she asked what Mma Potokwani's business might be.

'I suspect that something has cropped up in one of the children's lives,' said Mma Ramotswe. 'Sometimes there are issues with relatives. In some cases they try to get the children back, even if there is nowhere for them to go. Mma Potokwani has to resist things like that.'

'They want to get them to work,' said Mma Makutsi. 'I've seen that sort of thing, Mma.'

Mma Ramotswe nodded sadly. 'You're right. They hear that there is some nephew or niece whose parents are late, and they think that this is their chance for an unpaid maid or herd boy.'

'And that's the end of their schooling,' added Mma Makutsi.

Mma Ramotswe sighed. It was occasionally the case that Mma Potokwani was the only defence against a grim future for some innocent child. It was an unfortunate fact of life that there was no shortage of people who were prepared to exploit others, and had no compunction in using every trick or device in their grasp to achieve their ends. It was possible that Mma Potokwani had stumbled across such a case, and that her invitation to Mma Ramotswe to visit the Orphan Farm was nothing to do with birthdays or the presents that went with birthdays. And as she thought this, Mma Ramotswe gently upbraided herself for construing the invitation in such a way. It was not in her nature, not really, to think of herself, and she realised that what she should do was forget about this birthday of hers and think about other things.

And that was what she did as she drove out along the road to Tlokweng. 'I do not need to celebrate my birthday, she said to herself. 'Having a birthday is in no sense grounds for

congratulations. All you have done is become a year older, and all of us, even the weaker brethren, manage that with very little trouble at all.

The weaker brethren . . . The phrase came to her mind because a few days earlier, as she had sat in her usual pew in the Anglican cathedral opposite the hospital, she had heard a visiting clergyman, a man from Malawi, talk about the weaker brethren and their struggles. 'We should not be too quick to censure the weaker brethren,' he had said, 'because it is not necessarily their fault that they are weak. We must support them. We must offer them our hand. We must allow them to lean upon our shoulder as we make our way through life. If the hand on your shoulder is that of one of the weaker brethren, then do not brush it away, but allow it to remain there until you reach the other side.'

Mma Ramotswe had reflected on this, as she sat there, and had wondered whether she would be as supportive as she should be if one of the weaker brethren were to come up to her and put his hand on her shoulder. And even more difficult might be the walk thereafter, with the member of the weaker brethren impeding one's step. She looked about her. Were the weaker brethren in the cathedral even as this homily was being delivered? Were they embarrassed if they thought that people resented their hands upon their shoulders? The weaker brethren, she imagined, were more or less everywhere, and although many of them deserved support, she suspected that some might perhaps be encouraged not to be so weak and to do something about their condition. But that sounded a bit unsympathetic, and so she stopped herself thinking along those lines. She would put up with the hands of the weaker brethren on her shoulders, should it come to that, because she would never turn away anybody in need. How could one? she asked herself. How could one say no

to somebody in their desperation? One had to do something. One had to do what one could to help.

She drove past a small store on the open veranda of which two men were sitting in the sun, drinking beer. The weaker brethren, she thought. The weaker brethren enjoying themselves. They looked happy enough, untroubled by their weakness. Perhaps, thought, Mma Ramotswe, the weaker brethren do not really know that they are weak. And, if that were the case, should one *tell* them?