Tea Time for the Traditionally Built

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Extract

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Chapter One

Mr Molofololo

Traditionally built people may not look as if they are great walkers, but there was a time when Precious Ramotswe walked four miles a day. As a girl in Mochudi, all those years ago, a pupil at the school that looked down over the sprawling village below, she went to her lessons every morning on foot, joining the trickle of children that made its way up the hill, the girls in blue tunics, the boys in khaki shirts and shorts, like little soldiers. The journey from the house where she lived with her father and the older cousin who looked after her took all of an hour, except, of course, when she was lucky and managed to ride on the mule-drawn water cart that occasionally passed that

way. The driver of this cart, with whom her father had worked in the gold mines as a young man, knew who she was and always slowed down to allow her to clamber up on the driver's seat beside him.

Other children would watch enviously, and try to wave down the water cart. 'I cannot carry all Botswana,' said the driver. 'If I gave all you children a ride on my cart, then my poor mules would die. Their hearts would burst. I cannot allow that.'

'But you have Precious up there!' called out the boys. 'Why is she so special?'

The driver looked at Precious and winked. 'Tell them why you are special, Precious. Explain it to them.'

The young Mma Ramotswe, barely eight, was overwhelmed by embarrassment.

'But I am not special. I am just a girl.'

'You are the daughter of Obed Ramotswe,' said the driver. 'He is a great man. That is why you are riding up here.'

He was right, of course – at least in what he said about Obed Ramotswe, who was, by any standards, a fine man. At that age, Precious had only a faint inkling of what her father stood for; later on, as a young woman, she would come to understand what it was to be the daughter of Obed Ramotswe. But in those days, on the way to school, whether riding in state on the water cart or walking along the side of that dusty road with her friends, she had school to think about, with its lessons on so many subjects – the history of Botswana, from the beginning, when it was known as Khama's country, across the plains of which great lions

walked, to the emergence of the new Botswana, then still a chrysalis in a dangerous world; writing lessons, with the letters of the alphabet being described in white chalk on an ancient blackboard, all whirls and loops; arithmetic, with its puzzling multiplication tables that needed to be learned by heart – when there was so much else that the heart had to learn.

The water cart, of course, did not pass very often, and so on most days there was a long trudge to school and a long walk back. Some children had an even greater journey; in one class there was a boy who walked seven miles there and seven miles back, even in the hottest of months, when the sun came down upon Botswana like a pounding fist, when the cattle huddled together under the umbrella shade of the acacia trees, not daring to wander off in search of what scraps of grass remained. This boy thought nothing of his daily journey; this is what you did if you wanted to go to school to learn the things that your parents had never had the chance to learn. And you did not complain, even if during the rainy season you might narrowly escape being struck by lightning or being washed away by the torrents that rose in the previously dry watercourses. You did not complain in that Botswana.

Now, of course, it was different, and it was the contemplation of these differences that made Mma Ramotswe think about walking again.

'We are becoming lazy, Mma Ramotswe,' said Mma Makutsi one afternoon, as they sipped their afternoon cup of redbush tea in the offices of the No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency. 'Have you noticed? We are becoming lazy.'

Mma Ramotswe frowned. There were times when Mma Makutsi made statements that suffered from that classic flaw of all generalisations – they were just too general. This observation, it seemed to her, could be such a remark.

'Do you mean that you and I are becoming lazy?' she asked her assistant. 'If you do, then I do not think that's right, Mma Makutsi. Take this morning, for instance. We finished that report on security at the loan office. And we wrote a lot of letters. Six, seven, I think. That is not being lazy.'

Mma Makutsi raised a hand in protest. 'No, Mma, I did not mean that. I did not mean to say that you and I are becoming lazy. Or not specially lazy. I am talking about everybody.'

Mma Ramotswe raised an eyebrow. 'The whole of Botswana?'

Mma Makutsi nodded. 'Yes, the whole country. And it's not just Botswana, Mma. We are no worse than anybody else. In fact, I am sure that there are many much lazier countries elsewhere. What I really meant was that people in general are becoming lazy.'

Mma Ramotswe, who had been prepared to defend Botswana against Mma Makutsi's accusations, relaxed. If the remark was about people in general, and not just about the residents of Gaborone, then Mma Makutsi's theory could at least be heard out. 'Why do you say that people are becoming lazy, Mma?' she asked.

Mma Makutsi glanced through the half-open door that led from the agency into the garage. On the other side of the workshop, Mr J. L. B. Matekoni was showing his two apprentices an

engine part. 'You see those two boys out there?' she said. 'Charlie and . . .'

'Fanwell,' supplied Mma Ramotswe. 'We must start using his name. It is not kind to be forgetting it all the time.'

'Yes, Charlie and . . . Fanwell,' said Mma Makutsi. 'It is a stupid name, though, don't you think, Mma? Why would anybody be called Fanwell?'

Mma Ramotswe could not let this pass. Mma Makutsi was too hard on the two apprentices, particularly on the older one, Charlie. Words had passed between them more than once, including on the occasion when Charlie had called Mma Makutsi a warthog and made disparaging references to her large glasses. It had been quite wrong of him, and Mma Ramotswe had made that plain, but she had also acknowledged that he had been provoked. 'They are young men,' she had said to Mma Makutsi. 'That is what young men are like, Mma. Their heads are full of loud music and thoughts of girls. Imagine walking around with all that nonsense in your head.'

That had been said in defence of Charlie; now it was necessary to say something for Fanwell. It was wrong of Mma Makutsi, she thought, to poke fun at Fanwell's name. 'Why is anybody called anything, Mma Makutsi? That boy cannot help it. It is the parents who give children stupid names. It is the fault of the parents.'

'But Fanwell, Mma Ramotswe? What a silly name. Why did they not call him Fanbelt? That would be a good name for an apprentice mechanic, wouldn't it? Hah! Fanbelt. That would be very funny.'

'No, Mma Makutsi,' said Mma Ramotswe. 'We must not make fun of people's names. There are some who think that your own name, Grace, is a strange name. I do not think that, of course. But there are probably people like that.'

Mma Makutsi was dismissive. 'Then they are very foolish,' she said. 'They should know better.'

'And that is what Fanwell himself would probably say about anybody who laughed at his name,' Mma Ramotswe pointed out.

Mma Makutsi had to agree with this, even if reluctantly. She and Mma Ramotswe were fortunate, with their reasonably straightforward names of Grace and Precious respectively; she had contemporaries who were not so fortunate and had been saddled by their parents with names that were frankly ridiculous. One boy she had known at school had borne a Setswana name which meant *Look out, the police have arrived*. The poor boy had been the object of derision amongst his classmates and had tried, unsuccessfully, to change the name by which he was known. But names, like false allegations, stick, and he had gone through life with this unfortunate burden, reminded of it every time he had to give details for an official form; looking away so that the person examining the form could be given the opportunity to smile, which they all did.

'Even if their names are not their fault,' said Mma Makutsi, 'the way those boys behave *is* their fault, Mma. There can be no doubt about that. And those boys are very lazy, Mma. They are examples of what I am talking about.'

She looked sternly at Mma Ramotswe, as if challenging her

employer to contradict her. Mma Ramotswe did not rise to the bait; Mma Makutsi was rather assertive – and she admired the younger woman for that – but it did not help, she had decided, to engage with her too much when she was in mid-theory. It was best to let people have their say, she always felt; then, when they had finished, and had possibly run out of breath, one could always lodge a mild objection to what had been said before.

Mma Makutsi peered in the direction of the garage, and lowered her voice. 'Have you ever seen those two young men walking?' she asked.

Mma Ramotswe frowned. Of course she had seen the apprentices walking; they walked about the garage, they came into the office to collect their tea, they walked to the tree under which Mr J. L. B. Matekoni's truck was parked. She pointed this out to Mma Makutsi, gently enough, but not so mildly as to prevent a firm refutation from the other side of the room.

'Not that sort of walking, Mma,' said Mma Makutsi. 'Anybody can walk across a room or round a garage. Anybody, Mma. Even those two lazy young men. The sort of walking I'm talking about is walking from one place to another. Walking to work. Walking from the middle of town to the National Stadium. Walking from Kgale Siding to Gaborone. That sort of walking.'

'Those are not short walks,' said Mma Ramotswe. 'Although it would not take too long, I think, to get from the middle of town to the Stadium. Perhaps twenty-five minutes if it was not too hot.'

Mma Makutsi sniffed. 'How can we tell?' she asked. 'These days nobody would know how long it takes to walk anywhere because we have all stopped walking, Mma. We know how long it takes to drive. We know how long a minibus takes. But we do not know how long it takes to walk.'

Mma Ramotswe was silent as she thought about this. She had long understood that one of the features of Mma Makutsi's speeches was that there was often a grain of truth in them, and sometimes even more than that.

'And here's another thing, Mma Ramotswe,' Mma Makutsi continued. 'Have you heard of evolution? Well, what will happen if we all carry on being lazy like this and drive everywhere? I can tell you, Mma. We shall start to grow wheels. That is what evolution is all about.'

Mma Ramotswe laughed. 'Surely not, Mma!'

But Mma Makutsi was serious. 'Oh yes, Mma Ramotswe. Our fingers have evolved so that we can do things like typing. That is well known. Why should our legs not evolve in the same way? They will become circular, I think, and they will turn round and round. That is what will happen, Mma, if we are not careful.'

Mma Ramotswe could not keep herself from smiling. 'I do not think that will happen, Mma.'

Mma Makutsi pursed her lips. 'We shall see, Mma.'

Mma Ramotswe almost said: *But we shall not, Mma Makutsi, because evolution takes a long time, and you and I shall not be around to see the results.* But she did not, because Mma Makutsi's remarks had struck a chord within her and she

wanted to think about them a bit more. When had she herself last walked any distance at all? It was sobering to realise that she could not remember. She usually went for a walk around her garden shortly after dawn – and sometimes in the evenings as well – but that was not very far, and she often spent more time looking at plants, or standing and thinking, than walking. And for the rest, she used her tiny white van, driving in it each morning to the No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency and then driving home again at the end of the day. And if she went to the shops at River Walk, to the supermarket where there had been that dramatic chase with shopping carts, she drove there too, parking as close to the entrance as she could, so that she did not have a long walk across the car park. No, she was as good an example as anybody of what Mma Makutsi had been talking about. And so was Mma Potokwani, the matron of the orphan farm, who drove everywhere in that old van that they used to transport the children; and Mr J. L. B. Matekoni, too, who was even more implicated in this epidemic of laziness, given that he fixed cars and vans and thereby enabled people to avoid walking.

No, Mma Makutsi was right, or, even if she was not entirely right, was a bit right. Cars had changed Botswana; cars had changed everywhere, and Mma Ramotswe was not at all sure that this change was entirely for the better.

I shall start walking a bit more, she resolved. It is not enough just to identify a problem; there were plenty of people who were very skilled at pointing out what was wrong with the world, but they were not always so adept at working out how

these things could be righted. Mma Ramotswe did not wish to be one of these armchair critics; she would do something. She would start walking to work on . . . she almost decided on three days of each week, but then thought that two days would be quite enough. And she would start tomorrow.

On the way home that evening, the idea of walking came back to Mma Ramotswe. The idea returned, though, not because she remembered what Mma Makutsi had said about laziness, but because the tiny white van, which in the past few months had intermittently been making a strange noise, was now making that noise again, but louder than before. It happened as she made her way into Zebra Drive; turning a corner always put a strain on the tiny white van, which was something do with the suspension and what Mr J. L. B. Matekoni referred to politely as the 'distribution of load'. Mma Ramotswe had pondered this expression and then asked, perhaps rather bluntly, 'And the load, I take it, Mr J. L. B. Matekoni, is me?'

He had looked away to cover his embarrassment. 'You could say that, Mma Ramotswe. But then all of us are loads when it comes to vehicles. Even one of these very thin model ladies will be a load . . .' He trailed off. He was not making it any better, he thought, and Mma Ramotswe was looking at him in an expectant way.

When it became apparent that he had nothing further to add, Mma Ramotswe had continued, 'Yes, Mr J. L. B. Matekoni, there are such ladies. And unfortunately they are becoming more common. There are now many of them.' She paused. 'But perhaps they will begin to disappear. They will get

thinner and thinner, and more and more fashionable, and then . . . pouf . . . they will be blown away by the wind.'

This remark reduced the tension that had built, and they both laughed. 'That will teach them,' he said. 'They will be blown away while the other ladies will still be here because the wind will not be strong enough to lift . . .' He stopped once more; Mma Ramotswe was again looking at him expectantly.

The distribution of load, that evidently led to difficulties, but now, as the van started to make an alarming sound again, she realised that this had nothing to do with suspension and traditionally built drivers. This had to do with some fundamental sickness deep in the engine itself; the tiny white van was sick at heart.

She lifted her foot off the accelerator to see if that would help, but all that it did was to reduce the volume of the knocking sound. And when she put her foot down on the pedal again, the noise resumed. Only at a very slow speed, barely above walking pace, did the sound disappear altogether. It was as if the van was saying to her: *I am old now; I can still move, but I must move at the pace of a very old van.*

She continued her progress down Zebra Drive, steering the van carefully through her gateway with all the care of a nurse wheeling a very sick patient down the corridor of a hospital. Then she parked the van under its habitual tree at the side of the house and climbed out of the driving seat. As she went inside, she debated with herself what to do. She was married to a mechanic, a situation in which any woman would revel, especially when her car broke down. Mechanics made good

husbands, as did carpenters and plumbers – that was well known – and any woman proposed to by such a man would do well to accept. But for every advantage that attended any particular man, it always seemed as if there was a compensating disadvantage lurking somewhere. The mechanic as husband could be counted on to get a car going again, but he could just as surely be counted upon to be eager to change the car. Mechanics were very rarely satisfied with what they had, in mechanical terms, that is, and often wanted their customers – or indeed their wives – to change one car for another. If Mma Ramotswe told Mr J. L. B. Matekoni that the tiny white van was making a strange noise, she knew exactly what he would say, as he had said it all before.

'It's time to replace the van, Mma Ramotswe,' he had said, only a few months earlier. And then he had added, 'No vehicle lasts for ever, you know.'

'I know that, Mr J. L. B. Matekoni,' she said. 'But surely it's wrong to replace a vehicle that still has a lot of life left in it. That's not very responsible, I think.'

'Your van is over twenty,' he said. 'Twenty-two years old, I believe. That is about half the age of Botswana itself.'

It had not been a wise comparison and Mma Ramotswe seized on it. 'So you would replace Botswana?' she said. 'When a country gets old, you say, *That's enough*, *let's get a new country*. I'm surprised at you, Mr J. L. B. Matekoni.'

This unsatisfactory conversation had ended there, but Mma Ramotswe knew that if she reported the van to him it would be tantamount to signing its death warrant. She thought

about that this evening, as she prepared the potatoes for the family dinner. The house was quiet: Mr J. L. B. Matekoni was not going to be in until later, as he had delivered one car to Lobatse and was coming back in another. The two foster-children, Puso and Motholeli, were in their rooms, tackling their homework, or so Mma Ramotswe thought, until she heard the sound of laughter drifting down the corridor. She imagined that they were sharing a joke, or the memory of something amusing that had happened at school that day, a remark made by a friend, a humiliation suffered by an unpopular teacher.

The laughter suddenly broke out again, and this time it was followed by giggles. Homework had to be finished by dinner-time; that was the rule, and too much laughing at jokes would not help that. Putting down her potato peeler, Mma Ramotswe went to investigate.

'Motholeli?' she asked outside the girl's closed door.

The giggling that had been going on inside the room stopped abruptly. Tapping lightly – Mma Ramotswe always respected the children's privacy – she pushed the door open.

Motholeli was in her wheelchair near her small work-table, facing another girl of similar age, who was sitting in the chair beside the bed. The two had been giggling uncontrollably, as their eyes, Mma Ramotswe noticed, had tears of laughter in the corners.

'Your homework must be very funny today,' Mma Ramotswe said.

Motholeli glanced conspiratorially at her friend, and then

looked back at Mma Ramotswe. 'This is my friend,' she said. 'She is called Alice.'

Mma Ramotswe looked at the other girl, who rose to her feet politely and lowered her head. The greetings exchanged, the visitor sat down.

'Have you done your homework, Motholeli?' Mma Ramotswe asked.

The girl replied that it was completely finished; it had been easy, she said; so simple that even Puso could have done it, and he was several years younger.

'The reason why our homework is so simple today,' Alice explained, 'is that the teacher who gave it to us is not very intelligent. She can only mark simple homework.'

This observation set the two girls giggling again, and Mma Ramotswe had to bite her lip to prevent herself from giggling too. But she could not join in the girls' mirth at the expense of a teacher. Teachers had to be respected – as they always had been in Botswana – and if children thought them stupid, then that would hardly encourage respect.

'I do not think that this teacher can be like that,' said Mma Ramotswe. 'Teachers have to pass examinations. They are very well-educated.'

'Not this one,' said Motholeli, setting the two children off in paroxysms of laughter.

Mma Ramotswe gave up. There was no point in trying to stop teenage girls from giggling; that was the way they were. One might as well try to stop men liking football. The analogy made her stop and think. Football. Tomorrow morning, if she

remembered correctly, Mr Leungo Molofololo had arranged to come to see her at ten o'clock. Mma Ramotswe was used to receiving well-known people, but Mr Molofololo, by any standards, would be an important client. Not only did he have a large house up at Phulukane – a house which must have cost many millions of pula to build – but he had the ear of virtually every influential person in the country. Mr Molofololo controlled the country's best football team, and that, in the world of men, counted for more than anything else.

'He is just a man,' Mma Makutsi had said, after Mr Molofololo's secretary had called to make the appointment. 'The fact that he has a football team is neither here nor there, Mma. He is the same as any man.'

But Mma Ramotswe thought differently. Mr Molofololo was not just any man; he was Mr Football.