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# Miracle at Speedy Motors

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*Chapter One*

# We Are All Care of One Another

The correct address of Precious Ramotswe, Botswana's foremost solver of problems – in the sense that this was where she could be found between eight in the morning and five in the afternoon, except when she was not there – was The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency, c/o Tlokweng Road Speedy Motors, Gaborone, Botswana. The 'care of' was a matter of some disagreement between Mma Ramotswe and Grace Makutsi, her assistant and 'right-hand lady', as she put it. Mma Makutsi, with all the dignity of one who had received ninety-seven per cent in the final examinations of the Botswana Secretarial College, took the view that to say that the agency

was *care of* Speedy Motors was to diminish its importance, even if it was true that the agency occupied a small office at the side of the garage. Those who really counted in this life, she maintained, were usually not *care of* anybody.

'We are the ones they come looking for,' she argued, with perhaps less than perfect logic. 'When people come to this place, Mma, they look for us, not for the garage. The garage customers all know where the garage is. So our name should be first in the address, not the other way round, Mma. If anything, *Speedy Motors* should be care of us.'

She looked at Mma Ramotswe as she said this, and then quickly added: 'That is not to say that Mr J. L. B. Matekoni and his garage are not important, Mma. That is not to say such a thing. It is just a question of . . .'

Mma Ramotswe waited for her assistant to complete the sentence, but nothing further came. That was the trouble with Mma Makutsi, she thought; she left things hanging in the air, often the most important things. What was it a question of? It must be a question of status, she decided; Mma Makutsi could be very prickly about that. There had been that business about her being described as 'senior secretary' when she had only been in the job for a couple of months and when there was nobody junior to her in the firm; in fact, when there was nobody else at all in the firm. Then, once she had been promoted to assistant detective, it had not been long before she had asked when she could expect to be an 'associate detective'. That promotion had come, as had her earlier advancement, at a time when Mma Ramotswe had been feeling guilty about

something or other and had felt the need to smooth ruffled feathers. But now that she was an associate detective it was difficult to see what the next step could be. She had a suspicion that Mma Makutsi hankered after the title of 'chief detective' – a suspicion which was founded on Mma Ramotswe's having found in the waste-paper basket a crumpled piece of paper on which Mma Makutsi had been trying out new signatures. Not only were there several attempts at *Mma Grace Radiphuti*, Radiphuti being the surname of her fiancé, Phuti, but there was also a scrawled signature, *Grace Makutsi*, under which she had written *Chief Detective*.

Mma Ramotswe had re-crumpled the paper and tossed it back into the basket. She felt bad about having read it in the first place; one should not look uninvited at the papers of another, even if they had been discarded. And it was entirely understandable, normal even, that an engaged woman should practise the signature she will use after her marriage. Indeed, Mma Ramotswe suspected that most women secretly experimented with a new signature shortly after meeting a man they looked upon with favour – even if that man had not expressed any interest in them. A handsome and eligible man might expect to have his name tried out in this way by many women who fancied themselves on his arm, and there was no harm in this, she thought, unless one believed that women should not prepare quite so willingly for their hearts to be broken. Women, thought Mma Ramotswe, are sometimes like plump chickens in the yard, while outside, circling the fence, were the hyenas, the men. It was not a happy way of envisaging the

relation between the sexes, but time and time again she had seen this particular drama played out in exactly that way. And hyenas, one had to admit, were surely destined to break the hearts of chickens; they could do nothing else.

Mma Ramotswe saw nothing undignified in being in the care of anybody. In fact, she thought it was rather reassuring to be in another's care and, more than that, it was a very convenient way of describing how to find somebody, a way which we used in our everyday lives when talking about those we knew. There were people who were always to be found in the company of one particular friend, and to say, 'Oh, you'll always find him walking around with that other man, you know, the one who lives next to the store,' was surely the same as saying that one was care of the other. Yes, we were all care of one another in the final analysis, at least in Botswana, where people looked for and valued those invisible links that connected people, that made for belonging. We were all cousins, even if remote ones, of somebody; we were all friends of friends, joined together by bonds that you might never see, but that were there, sometimes every bit as strong as hoops of steel.

But, Mma Ramotswe thought that morning as she drank her first cup of red bush tea during her walk about her garden, perhaps this did not apply to everybody; perhaps there were some who were lonely in the middle of all this profusion of friends and relatives, who had lost their people. And that very morning, she would be seeing a woman who had written to her with exactly that problem, a woman who wanted to trace

her relatives. Tracing people was bread and butter to somebody in Mma Ramotswe's profession; at least once a month someone would come into the office and ask her to find somebody – an errant husband, a lover, a child who had drifted away from the family and stopped writing home. Sometimes it was lawyers who contacted her and asked her to find those who stood to inherit cattle, or land, and did not know of the good fortune that awaited them. That was the sort of case that Mma Ramotswe most enjoyed, and when she succeeded in finding such people, as she usually did, she relished the moment when she disclosed to them what was in store. Earlier that week she had found a young man who did not know that his uncle in the north had died and left him three trucks and a taxi. She had forgiven him the speed with which his expression of sorrow at the news of the uncle's demise was replaced by one of incredulity and then joy when he heard of the vehicles awaiting him under a shade-netting awning somewhere up in Maun. Young men were human, after all, and this young man, she learned, had been saving to build a small house for himself and his bride-to-be. He needed to save no more.

'Three trucks, did you say, Mma? What make?'

Mma Ramotswe had no idea. Trucks were Mr J. L. B. Matekoni's concern, not hers. She was not even sure she could identify the manufacturer of her tiny white van; there had been a name painted on the back at one stage but over the years it had been obliterated by the wind and clouds of dust and the scratching of thorn bushes. Now there was nothing, just ridges in the metal where there had been letters. Not that it mattered,

of course: the tiny white van was too old to remember its maker, too ancient to be taken back.

Missing names, missing persons – how remarkable it was, she thought, that we managed to anchor ourselves at all in this world, and that we did so by giving ourselves names and linking those names with places and other people. But there were people, she imagined, whose names said nothing about them and who had only the haziest idea of who they were, people who might never even have known their parents. Mma Ramotswe could not remember her mother, who died when she was a baby, but at least she had known her father, the late Obed Ramotswe, whose memory seemed undimmed by the passage of the years. She thought of him every day, every day, and believed that in due course – but not too soon, she hoped – she would see him again in that place that was Botswana but not Botswana, that place of gentle rain and contented cattle. And perhaps on that day those people who had nobody here would find that there were indeed people for them. Perhaps.

Mma Ramotswe arrived in the office slightly before Mma Makutsi that morning. In the next-door premises of Tlokweng Road Speedy Motors, her husband, Mr J. L. B. Matekoni, was already hard at work with his two apprentices. Or rather, Mr J. L. B. Matekoni was hard at work; the apprentices gave the appearance of busying themselves with the servicing of a car but were more concerned with chatting about their activities of the previous evening. Charlie, the older of the two, and the

ringleader, as Mr J. L. B. Matekoni thought of him, had recently moved into a room in a shared house in Old Naledi and was regaling his younger colleague with tales of how suitable this room was for the entertaining of girlfriends.

'It's a great place to take them,' he said. 'It's tops. A1. They come in and see how nice it is and they say, "Wow! Is this where you live, Charlie?"' This last was uttered in a voice intended to sound like a girl's, a high-pitched, silly voice going up at the end and culminating in a squeak.

The younger apprentice laughed, but Mr J. L. B. Matekoni, glancing over from his task of cleaning an air filter, grimaced. 'Not all girls speak like that, you know,' he muttered. 'And it's a good thing that Mma Makutsi isn't around to hear you making fun of young women. I wouldn't like to be in your shoes if she heard you.'

'I'm not frightened of her, Boss,' Charlie sneered. 'She's just a woman. I'm not frightened of any woman.'

Mr J. L. B. Matekoni felt himself getting hot around the back of his neck; the encountering of such silliness always had that effect on him. I know I should not pay any attention to this nonsense, he told himself. Charlie is just a young man who knows nothing yet. I shouldn't allow myself . . . But it was not easy to listen to such a complete travesty of the truth and register no protest. Of course Charlie was afraid of Mma Makutsi – who wasn't? Even Mma Ramotswe had confessed to Mr J. L. B. Matekoni that there were times when she trod very carefully in the face of her assistant's disapproval.

'So you're not afraid of her?' he said. 'That's very interesting. And you say that she's just a woman. What does that mean? That you're better than any woman?'

Charlie laughed. 'I didn't say that, Boss. It may be true, of course, but I didn't say it. I know better than to say things like that when there are all these women around these days. Hundreds of them – all ready to chop your head off if you say something they don't like. Chop! One time! Off! Even here in Botswana.'

Mr J. L. B. Matekoni turned back to his work. There was no point in engaging these young men in debate, and he had to admit that there was an element of truth in Charlie's final remark. Botswana was known for its tolerance of debate and criticism; anybody could criticise anybody, even at weddings and funerals, where there would often be long speeches in which old, controversial business was dragged up. And women loved that sort of thing and were often ready to launch into an attack on some unfortunate man who had spoken out of turn. Why, he wondered, could people not disagree in a courteous way, rather than resorting to unkind criticism?

Inside the office, Mma Ramotswe heard nothing of this exchange; all she heard was the mumble of the men talking amongst themselves, about, she imagined, the sort of thing that men liked to talk about – spare parts, hydraulic systems, suspension. She looked at her watch, which she always kept ten minutes fast for the reassurance of knowing that one always had ten minutes in hand. The appointment with the client –

the one who had written the letter asking her to find her family – was in half an hour's time. If Mma Makutsi were to be late this morning, they would not have time to deal with the mail that she would pick up from the post box on her way in to the office. This would not matter a great deal, as they would have plenty of time to deal with it later. But Mma Ramotswe liked to have her letters written early so that she could concentrate on her clients without thinking of tasks that lay ahead.

When she arrived several minutes later, Mma Makutsi had four or five letters in her hand. She placed these, almost reverentially, on her employer's desk before she hung up her scarf and the over-the-shoulder handbag she had recently taken to carrying. Mma Ramotswe did not see the point of either of these accessories, but was too polite to mention it to her assistant. To begin with, the scarf was the wrong colour for Mma Makutsi – or was it the wrong design? Mma Makutsi had problematic skin – slightly blotchy – and the difficulty with this scarf was that it was spotted. Those with spots, thought Mma Ramotswe, should not *wear* spots; that, surely, was fairly obvious. But how did one convey this fashion truth to one who appeared to enjoy wearing spotted items, like this ill-chosen scarf? There were some who believed that one should be direct in such cases and say exactly what one was thinking. So one might say, 'A traditionally built person, like you, should not wear stripes that run across the way. Your stripes should go up and down.' That, at least, was direct, and unambiguous, but it could give offence, especially in these days when fewer people wished to be considered traditionally built.

Mma Ramotswe had never been able to understand that, and considered it one of the very worst features of modern society that people should be ashamed to be of traditional build, cultivating instead a look that was bony and positively uncomfortable. Everybody knows, she thought, that we have a skeleton underneath our skin; there's no reason to show it.

'We'll have to hurry, Mma,' said Mma Ramotswe, pointing at her watch. 'That lady is coming to see us in half an hour.'

'Forty minutes,' said Mma Makutsi. 'Half an hour plus ten minutes. Your watch, Mma—'

'No, I've already taken ten minutes off what my watch says. It's half an hour, Mma.'

Mma Makutsi shrugged. 'Well, it would be far better if they started to deliver mail in this country rather than simply throwing it into a post box. It takes me at least fifteen minutes to walk to the box and get the letters. Every day. That's over one hour every week spent in just picking up letters. That is a big waste of time.' She drew in her breath; she was warming to her theme. 'At the Botswana Secretarial College they said that we should work out how much time it takes to perform small tasks and then multiply it by five to see how much of the week it takes. Then multiply by four to see what it takes over the whole month.'

Mma Ramotswe nodded. 'Sometimes I think of the time it takes to make tea and then to drink it. It's four minutes to boil the water and then there is all the business of putting the tea in the pot—'

The issue of tea breaks took them onto dangerous ground,

and she was quickly interrupted by Mma Makutsi. 'That is quite different, Mma,' she said. 'I was talking about the mail. Why can't they deliver it? They do that in other countries, you know. If your house has a number, they bring the letter to you.'

Mma Ramotswe thought about this for a moment. Mma Makutsi certainly had a point; Tlokweng Road Speedy Motors had a plot number and provided the agency used this in its address, then the post office should be able to find them. But not everybody was in that position. Out in the villages, or even in some parts of Gaborone, things became higgledy-piggledy as people built their houses wherever they pleased. How would the post office deal with that? She raised this difficulty with Mma Makutsi who listened attentively, but then shook her head in disagreement.

'All they have to do is to get somebody who knows the district,' she said. 'That would be easy enough, especially in the villages. Everybody knows who's who in the villages. You don't need a plot number there.' She paused. 'And there's another thing – if you forgot somebody's name, all you would need to do would be to write a description of what they look like on the envelope. That would do.'

Mma Ramotswe glanced up at the ceiling. One of the plasterboards was discoloured at the edges, where rain had made its way in during the previous rainy season, and would have to be replaced. Mma Makutsi was right about villages, even the bigger ones, like Mochudi, where Mma Ramotswe had been born. Those places were still intimate enough for a rough

description to suffice. If somebody had written a letter addressed to 'That man who wears the hat, the one who was a miner and knows a lot about cattle, Mochudi, Botswana', it would undoubtedly have been correctly delivered to her father.

'Yes,' said Mma Ramotswe. 'I think you're right. But I don't think that they will ever do it. You know how governments are – always wanting to save money . . .'

She stopped. Her eye had caught the envelope on the top of the small pile of letters brought in by Mma Makutsi. It was addressed: To the lady detective, Tlokweng Road, Gaborone. That was all, but somewhere in the post office an obliging clerk had scrawled her box number in red ink. It was an extraordinary coincidence, and Mma Makutsi burst out laughing when she saw the envelope.

'Well, there you are, Mma,' she said. 'They can find people if they want to.'

They looked at the envelope. The address was written in capital letters, as if by a child, or one who found writing difficult. Anybody can contact us, Mma Ramotswe thought, even those who have little education, or are frightened; people at the bottom of the heap. We will turn nobody away, nobody.

She reached for the letter opener and slid its blade under the flap of the envelope. Inside was a flimsy piece of paper torn, it seemed, from a cheap notebook. She unfolded it and held it up to the light.

*Fat lady: you watch out! And you too, the one with the big glasses. You watch out too!*

She let the paper drop to the floor. Sensing that something was wrong, Mma Makutsi stepped forward and picked up the letter and read it out loud.

'There's no signature,' she said simply. 'Where can I file it if there is no signature?'