The Double Comfort Safari Club

Alexander McCall Smith

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ALEXANDER McCALL SMITH



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Chapter One

You Do Not Change People by Shouting at Them

'No car,' thought Mr J. L. B. Matekoni, that great mechanic, and good man. 'No car . . .'

He paused. It was necessary, he felt, to order the mind when one was about to think something profound. And Mr J. L. B. Matekoni was at that moment on the verge of an exceptionally important thought, even though its final shape had yet to reveal itself. How much easier it was for Mma Ramotswe – she put things so well, so succinctly, so profoundly, and appeared to do this with such little effort. It was very different if one was a mechanic, and therefore not used to telling people – in the nicest possible way, of course – how to run their lives. Then

one had to think quite hard to find just the right words that would make people sit up and say, 'But that is very true, Rra!' Or, especially if you were Mma Ramotswe, 'But surely that is well known!'

He had very few criticisms to make of Precious Ramotswe, his wife and founder of the No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency, but *if* one were to make a list of her faults – which would be a minuscule document, barely visible, indeed, to the naked eye – one would perhaps have to include a tendency – only a slight tendency, of course – to claim that things that she happened to believe were *well known*. This phrase gave these beliefs a sort of unassailable authority, the status that went with facts that all right-thinking people would readily acknowledge – such as the fact that the sun rose in the east, over the undulating canopy of acacia that stretched along Botswana's border, over the waters of the great Limpopo River itself that now, at the height of the rainy season, flowed deep and fast towards the ocean half a continent away. Or the fact that Seretse Khama had been the first President of Botswana; or even the truism that Botswana was one of the finest and most peaceful countries in the world. All of these facts were indeed both incontestable and well known; whereas Mma Ramotswe's pronouncements, to which she attributed the special status of being well known, were often, rather, statements of opinion. There was a difference, thought Mr J. L. B. Matekoni, but it was not one he was planning to point out; there were some things, after all, that it was not *helpful* for a husband to say to his wife and that, he thought, was probably one of them.

Now, his thoughts having been properly marshalled, the right words came to him in a neat, economical expression: *No car is entirely perfect.* That was what he wanted to say, and these words were all that was needed to say it. So he said it once more. *No car is entirely perfect.*

In his experience, which was considerable – as the proprietor of Tlokweng Road Speedy Motors and attending physician, therefore, to a whole fleet of middle-ranking cars – every vehicle had its bad points, its foibles, its rattles, its complaints; and this, he thought, was the language of machinery, those idiosyncratic engine sounds by which a car would strive to communicate with those with ears to listen – usually mechanics. Every car had its good points, too: a comfortable driving seat, perhaps, moulded over the years to the shape of the car's owner, or an engine that started first time without hesitation or complaint, even on the coldest winter morning, when the air above Botswana was dry and crisp and sharp in the lungs. Each car, then, was an individual, and if only he could get his apprentices to grasp that fact, their work might be a little bit more reliable and less prone to require redoing by him. *Push, shove, twist*: these were no mantras for a good mechanic. *Listen, coax, soothe*: that should be the motto inscribed above the entrance to every garage; that, or the words which he had once seen printed on the advertisement for a garage in Francistown: *Your car is ours.*

That slogan, persuasive though it might have sounded, had given him pause. It was a little ambiguous, he decided: on the one hand, it might be taken to suggest that the garage was in

the business of taking people's cars away from them – an unfortunate choice of words if read that way. On the other, it could mean that the garage staff treated clients' cars with the same care that they treated their own. That, he thought, is what they meant, and it would have been preferable if they had said it. *It is always better to say what you mean* – it was his wife, Mma Ramotswe, who said that, and he had always assumed that she meant it.

No, he mused: there is no such thing as a perfect car, and if every car had its good and bad points, it was the same with people. Just as every person had his or her little ways – habits that niggled or irritated others, annoying mannerisms, vices and failings, moments of selfishness – so too did they have their good points: a winning smile, an infectious sense of humour, the ability to cook a favourite dish just the way you wanted it.

That was the way the world was; it was composed of a few almost perfect people (ourselves); then there were a good many people who generally did their best but were not all that perfect (our friends and colleagues); and finally, there were a few rather nasty ones (our enemies and opponents). Most people fell into that middle group – those who did their best – and the last group was, thankfully, very small and not much in evidence in places like Botswana, where he was fortunate enough to live.

These reflections came to Mr J. L. B. Matekoni while he was driving his tow-truck down the Lobatse Road. He was on what Mma Ramotswe described as one of his errands of mercy. In this case he was setting out to rescue the car of one Mma Constance

Mateleke, a senior and highly regarded midwife and, as it happened, a long-standing friend of Mma Ramotswe. She had called him from the roadside. 'Quite dead,' said Mma Mateleke through the faint, crackling line of her mobile phone. 'Stopped. Plenty of petrol. Just stopped like that, Mr Matekoni. Dead.'

Mr J. L. B. Matekoni smiled to himself. 'No car dies for ever,' he consoled her. 'When a car *seems* to die, it is sometimes just sleeping. Like Lazarus, you know.' He was not quite sure of the analogy. As a boy he had heard the story of Lazarus at Sunday School in Molepolole, but his recollection was now hazy. It was many years ago, and the stories of that time, the real, the made-up, the long-winded tales of the old people – all of these had a tendency to get mixed up and become one. There were seven lean cows in somebody's dream, or was it five lean cows and seven fat ones?

'So you are calling yourself Jesus Christ now, are you, Mr Matekoni? No more Tlokweng Road Speedy Motors, is it? Jesus Christ Motors now?' retorted Mma Mateleke. 'You say that you can raise cars from the dead. Is that what you're saying?'

Mr J. L. B. Matekoni chuckled. 'Certainly not. No, I am just a mechanic, but I know how to wake cars up. That is not a special thing. Any mechanic can wake a car.' Not apprentices, though, he thought.

'We'll see,' she said. 'I have great faith in you, Mr Matekoni, but this car seems very sick now. And time is running away. Perhaps we should stop talking on the phone and you should be getting into your truck to come and help me.'

So it was that he came to be travelling down the Lobatse Road, on a pleasantly fresh morning, allowing his thoughts to wander on the broad subject of perfection and flaws. On either side of the road the country rolled out in a grey-green carpet of thorn bush, stretching off into the distance, to where the rocky outcrops of the hills marked the end of the land and the beginning of the sky. The rains had brought thick new grass sprouting up between the trees; this was good, as the cattle would soon become fat on the abundant sweet forage it provided. And it was good for Botswana too, as fat cattle meant fat people – not too fat, of course, but well-fed and prosperous-looking; people who were happy to be who they were and where they were.

Yes, thought Mr J. L. B. Matekoni, even if no country was absolutely perfect, Botswana, surely, came as close as one could get. He closed his eyes in contentment, and then quickly remembered that he was driving, and opened them again. A car behind him – not a car that he recognised – had driven to within a few feet of the rear of his tow-truck, and was aggressively looking for an opportunity to pass. The problem, though, was that the Lobatse Road was busy with traffic coming the other way, and there was a vehicle in front of Mr J. L. B. Matekoni that was in no hurry to get anywhere; it was a driver like Mma Potokwani, he imagined, who ambled along and frequently knocked the gear-stick out of gear as she waved her hand to emphasise some point she was making to a passenger. Yet Mma Potokwani, and this slow driver ahead of him, he reminded himself, had a right to take things gently if

they wished. Lobatse would not go away, and whether one reached it at eleven in the morning or half past eleven would surely matter very little.

He looked in his rear-view mirror. He could not make out the face of the driver, who was sitting well back in his seat, and he could not therefore engage in eye contact with him. He should calm down, thought Mr J. L. B. Matekoni, rather than . . . His line of thought was interrupted by the sudden swerving of the other vehicle as it pulled over sharply to the left. Mr J. L. B. Matekoni, well versed as he was in the ways of every sort of driver, gripped his steering wheel hard and muttered under his breath. What was being attempted was that most dangerous of manoeuvres – overtaking on the wrong side.

He steered a steady course, carefully applying his brakes so as to allow the other driver ample opportunity to effect his passing as quickly as possible. Not that he deserved the consideration, of course, but Mr J. L. B. Matekoni knew that when another driver did something dangerous it was best to allow him to finish what he was doing and get out of the way.

In a cloud of dust and gravel chips thrown up off the unpaved verge of the road, the impatient car shot past, before swerving again to get back on to the tarmac. Mr J. L. B. Matekoni felt the urge to lean on his horn and flash his lights in anger, but he did neither of these things. The other driver knew that what he had done was wrong; there was no need to engage in an abusive exchange which would lead nowhere, and would certainly not change that driver's ways. 'You do not

change people by shouting at them,' Mma Ramotswe had once observed. And she was right: sounding one's horn, shouting – these were much the same things, and achieved equally little.

And then an extraordinary thing happened. The impatient driver, his illegal manoeuvre over, and now clear of the tow-truck, looked in his mirror and gave a scrupulously polite thank-you wave to Mr J. L. B. Matekoni. And Mr J. L. B. Matekoni, taken by surprise, responded with an equally polite wave of acknowledgement, as one would reply to any roadside courtesy or show of good driving manners. That was the curious thing about Botswana; even when people were rude – and some degree of human rudeness was inevitable – they were rude in a fairly polite way.

The road was climbing at this point, and the other car soon disappeared over the brow of the hill. Mr J. L. B. Matekoni wondered why the driver had been in such a rush. He could be late for an appointment, perhaps; or he could be a lawyer due to make an appearance in the High Court down there. That could be awkward, of course, and might just explain a certain amount of speeding. He had heard from a lawyer whose car he fixed that it was a serious matter to be late in court, not only from the lawyer's point of view, but from that of the client as well, as the judge would hardly be sympathetic to somebody who had kept him waiting. But even if that driver was a lawyer, and even if he was running late, it would not excuse passing on the wrong side, which put the lives of others in danger. Nothing excused that sort of thing.

Mr J. L. B. Matekoni found himself wondering what Mma Ramotswe would have said about this. When he had first got to know her, he had been surprised at her ability to watch the doings of others and then come up with a completely credible explanation of their motives. Now, however, he took that for granted, and merely nodded in agreement when she explained to him even the most opaque acts of others. Of course that was why this or that was done; of course that was why somebody said what they did, or did not say it, depending on the circumstances. Mma Ramotswe simply *understood*.

He imagined himself telling her that evening: 'I saw a very bad bit of driving on the Lobatse Road this morning. Really bad.'

She would nod. 'Nothing new there, Mr J. L. B. Matekoni.'

'A man shot past me on the wrong side. Whoosh! He was in a very big hurry to get to Lobatse.' He would pause, and then would come the casual query, 'Why do you think somebody would risk his neck – and mine too – to get down to Lobatse so quickly?'

Mma Ramotswe would look thoughtful. 'A new car?' she asked. 'A big one?'

'A very big one,' said Mr J. L. B. Matekoni. 'Three-point-six-litre engine with continuous variable-valve timing . . .'

'Yes, yes.' Mma Ramotswe did not need these mechanical details. 'And the colour of the car?'

'Red. Bright red.'

Mma Ramotswe smiled. 'And the driver? Did you see anything of the driver?'

'Not really. Just the back of his head. But he was a very polite bad driver. He thanked me after he had passed me on the wrong side. He actually thanked me.'

Mma Ramotswe nodded. 'He must be having an affair, that man. He must be rushing off to see a lady. I suspect he was late, and did not want to keep her waiting.'

'Come on now, Mma! How can you tell that just from the colour of the car?'

'There is that. But there is also the politeness. He is a man who is feeling pleased with the world and grateful for something. So he thanked you.'

He went over this imaginary conversation in his head. He could just hear her, and her explanation, and he thought how she would probably be right, even if he could not see how she could reach a conclusion on the basis of such slender evidence. But that was the difference between Mma Ramotswe, a detective, and him, a mere mechanic. That was a very significant difference, and . . .

He paused. On the road before him, still some way in the distance, but unmistakable, he could see a car pulled up at the side of the road, a car that he recognised as belonging to Mma Mateleke. And just beyond it, also pulled up at the side of the road, was the large red car that had shot past him a few minutes previously. The driver had got out of the red car and was standing beside Mma Mateleke's window, looking for all the world as if he had stopped to chat with an old friend encountered along the road. He had been in such a terrible rush, and yet here he was, stopping to talk. What would Mma Ramotswe

make of this, Mr J. L. B. Matekoni wondered, as he began to apply the brakes of his truck.

Mma Mateleke had got out of her car by the time Mr J. L. B. Matekoni had parked safely on the verge. She greeted him warmly as he approached.

'Well, well, I am a very lucky lady today,' she said. 'Here you are, Mr Matekoni, with that truck of yours. And here is another man, too, who happened to be passing. It is very nice for a lady in distress to have two strong men at her side.'

As she spoke she looked in the direction of the driver of the red car. He smiled, acknowledging the compliment, and then turned to Mr J. L. B. Matekoni.

'This is Mr Ntirang,' said Mma Mateleke. 'He was travelling down to Lobatse and he saw me by the side of the road.'

Mr Ntirang nodded gravely, as if to confirm a long and complicated story. 'Her car had clearly broken down,' he said to Mr J. L. B. Matekoni. 'And this is miles from anywhere.' He paused before adding, 'As you can see.'

Mr J. L. B. Matekoni took a piece of cloth from his pocket and wiped his hands. It was a habit he had, as a mechanic, stemming from the days when he had used lint in the garage and was always removing grease. Now it had become a nervous gesture, almost, like straightening one's cuffs or wiping one's brow.

'Yes,' he said, meeting the other man's gaze. 'This is far from everywhere, although . . .' He hesitated. He did not want to be rude, but he could not let the bad driving he had witnessed go unremarked upon. 'Although this is a busy road,

isn't it? And quite a dangerous one, too, with all the bad driving one sees.'

There was silence, but only a brief one. There was birdsong, from an acacia tree behind the fence that ran along the edge of the road; the sound of the bush. There was always birdsong.

Mr Ntirang did not drop his eyes when he spoke, nor did he look away. 'Oh, yes, Rra. Bad driving! There are some very bad drivers around. People who cannot drive straight. People who go from one side of the road to the other. People who drink *while* they drive – not driving after you've been drinking, but driving *while* you're drinking. There are all of these things.' He turned to Mma Mateleke. 'Aren't there, Mma?'

Mma Mateleke glanced at her watch. She did not seem particularly interested in this conversation. 'Maybe,' she said. 'There are many instances of bad behaviour, but I do not think that we have time to talk about them right now.' She turned to Mr J. L. B. Matekoni. 'Could you take a look, Rra, and see what is wrong with this car of mine?'

Mr J. L. B. Matekoni moved towards the car and opened the driver's door. He would never mention the fact to Mma Mateleke, but he did not like her car. He found it difficult to put his finger on it, but there was something about it that he distrusted. Now, sitting in the driver's seat and turning the key in the ignition, he had a very strong sense that he was up against electronics. In the old days – as Mr J. L. B. Matekoni called everything that took place more than ten years ago – you would never have had to bother very much about electronics, but now, with so many cars concealing computer chips in their

engines, it was a different matter. 'You should take this car to a computer shop,' he had been tempted to say on a number of occasions. 'It is really a computer, you know.'

The ignition was, as Mma Mateleke had reported, quite unresponsive. Sighing, he leaned under the dashboard to find the lever that would open the bonnet, but there was no lever. He turned to unwind the window so that he could ask Mma Mateleke where the lever was, but the windows, being electric, would not work. He opened the door.

'How do you get at the engine on this car?' he asked. 'I can't see the lever.'

'That is because there is no lever,' she replied. 'There is a button. There in the middle. Look.'

He saw the button, with its small graphic portrayal of a car bonnet upraised. He pressed it; nothing happened.

'It is dead too,' said Mma Mateleke, in a matter-of-fact voice. 'The whole car has died.'

Mr J. L. B. Matekoni climbed out of the car. 'I will get it open somehow,' he said. 'There is always some way round these things.' He was not sure that there was.

Mr Ntirang now spoke. 'I think that it is time for me to get on with my journey,' he said. 'You are in very good hands now, Mma. The best hands in Gaborone, people say.'

Mr J. L. B. Matekoni was a modest man, but was clearly pleased with the compliment. He smiled at Mr Ntirang, almost, if not completely, ready to forgive him his earlier display of bad driving. He noticed, though, an exchange of glances between Mma Mateleke and Mr Ntirang, glances that

were difficult to read. Was there reproach – just a hint of reproach – on Mma Mateleke's part? But why should she have anything over which to reproach this man who had stopped to see that she was all right?

Mr Ntirang took a step back towards his car. 'Goodbye, Rra,' he said. 'And I hope that you get to the bottom of this problem. I'm sure you will.'

Mr J. L. B. Matekoni watched as the other man got into his car and drove off. He was interested in the car, which was an expensive model, of a sort that one saw only rarely. He wondered what the engine would look like, mentally undressing the car. Mechanics did that sometimes: as some men will imagine a woman without her clothes, so they will picture a car engine without its surrounding metal; guilty pleasures both. He was so engaged in this that Mr Ntirang was well on his way before Mr J. L. B. Matekoni realised that the red car was being driven back to Gaborone. Mma Mateleke had said, quite unambiguously, that Mr Ntirang had been on his way to Lobatse, and Mr Ntirang had nodded – equally unambiguously – to confirm that this was indeed true. Yet here he was, driving back in the direction from which he had come. Had he forgotten where he was going? Could anybody be so forgetful as to fail to remember that they were driving from Gaborone to Lobatse, and not the other way round? The answer was that of course they could: Mr J. L. B. Matekoni himself had an aunt who had set out to drive to Serowe but who had turned back halfway because she had forgotten why it was that she wanted to go to Serowe in the first place. But he did not think

it likely that Mr Ntirang was liable to such absent-mindedness. It was his driving style that pointed to this conclusion – he was a man who very clearly knew where he was going.