



The Limpopo Academy of Private Detection

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Alexander McCall Smith

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272 pages

Extrait

In Botswana, home to the No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency for the problems of ladies, and others, it is customary—one might say *very customary*—to enquire of the people whom you meet whether they have slept well. The answer to that question is almost inevitably that they have indeed slept well, even if they have not, and have spent the night tossing and turning as a result of the nocturnal barking of dogs, the activity of mosquitoes or the prickings of a bad conscience. Of course, mosquitoes may be defeated by nets or sprays, just as dogs may be roundly scolded; a bad conscience, though, is not so easily stifled. If somebody were to invent a spray capable of dealing with an uncomfortable conscience, that person would undoubtedly do rather well—but perhaps might not sleep as soundly as before, were he to reflect on the consequences of his invention. Bad consciences, it would appear, are there for a purpose: to make us feel regret over our failings. Should they be silenced, then our entirely human weaknesses, our manifold omissions, would become all the greater—and that, as Mma Ramotswe would certainly say, is not a good thing.

Mma Ramotswe was fortunate in having an untroubled conscience, and therefore generally enjoyed undisturbed sleep. It was her habit to take to her bed after a final cup of red bush tea at around ten o'clock at night. Mr. J.L.B. Matekoni, her husband and by common consent the finest mechanic in all Botswana, would often retire before her, particularly if he had had a tiring day at work. Mechanics in general sleep well, as do many others whose day is taken up with physically demanding labour. So by the time that Mma Ramotswe went to bed, he might already be lost to this world, his breathing deep and regular, his eyes firmly closed to the bedside light that he would leave for his wife to extinguish.

She would not take long to go to sleep, drifting off to thoughts of what had happened that day; to images of herself drinking tea in the office or driving her van on an errand; to the picture of Mma Makutsi sitting upright at her desk, her large glasses catching the light as she held forth on some issue or other. Or to some memory of a long time ago, of her father walking down a dusty road, holding her hand and explaining to her about the ways of cattle—a subject that he knew so well. When a wise man dies, there is so much history that is lost: that is what they said, and Mma Ramotswe knew it to be true. Her own father, the late Obed Ramotswe, had taken so much with him, but had also left much behind, so many memories and sayings and observations, that she, his daughter, could now call up and cherish as she waited for the soft arms of sleep to embrace her.

Mma Ramotswe did not remember her dreams for very long once she had woken up. Occasionally, though, an egregiously vivid dream might make such an impression that it lodged in her memory, and that is what happened that morning. It was not in any way a bad dream; nor was it a particularly good dream, the sort of dream that makes one feel as if one has been vouchsafed some great mystical insight; it was, rather, one of those dreams that seems to be a clear warning that something special is about to happen. If a dream involves lottery tickets and numbers, then its meaning is clear enough. This dream was not like that, and yet it left Mma Ramotswe feeling that she had somehow been given advance notice of something out of the ordinary, something important.

In this dream she was walking along a path in the stretch of bush immediately behind Tlokweng Road Speedy Motors, the building that the No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency shared with Mr. J.L.B. Matekoni's garage. She was not sure where she was going, but this did not seem to matter as Mma Ramotswe felt happy just to be walking along it with no great sense of having to reach a destination. And why should one not walk along a path, particularly a comfortable path, without any idea of getting anywhere?

She turned a corner and found herself faced with a large acacia tree, its foliage extending out like the canopy of a commodious umbrella. To dream of trees is to . . . to long for trees, and finding herself under the shade of this tree would have been enough to make the dream a satisfactory one. But there was more to it. Underneath the tree, standing in such a position that the mottled shade of the leaves all but obscured his face, was a tall, well-built man. He now stepped forward, held out a hand and said, "I have come at last, Mma Ramotswe."

And that was the point at which Mma Ramotswe awoke. The encounter with this stranger had not been threatening in any way; there had been nothing in his demeanour that was suggestive of hostility, and she had not felt in the slightest bit anxious. As for what he said, she had simply thought, even if she had not had the time to say it, *Yes, it has been a long time.*

For a few minutes after waking, she had lain still in bed, mulling over the dream. Had the man been her father, then the dream would have been easy to understand. She knew that she dreamed of her father from time to time, which was only to be expected, given that not a day went past, not one day, when she did not think of that great and good man, the late Obed Ramotswe. If you think of somebody every day, then you can be sure you will dream of him at night; but it was not him whom she encountered under that acacia tree—that was very clear. It was somebody quite different, somebody she sensed was from a long way away. But who could that be? Mma Ramotswe did not really know anybody from a long way away, unless one counted Francistown or Maun, where she knew a number of people. But those towns, although several hundred miles from Gaborone, are both in Botswana, and nowhere in Botswana was the abode of strangers. That was because Botswana, to those who lived there, was home, and familiar, and comfortable, and no place in such a country will seem far away. No, this man under the tree was from somewhere outside the country, and that was unusual and puzzling and would have to be thought about at some length.

"I had a very unusual dream," she said to Mma Makutsi as they attended to the morning's mail in the office.

Mma Makutsi looked up from the envelope that she was in the process of slitting open. "Dreams are always unusual," she said. "In fact, it is unusual to have a usual dream."

Mma Ramotswe frowned. She thought that she understood what Mma Makutsi meant but was not quite sure. Her assistant had a habit of making enigmatic remarks, and this, she suspected, was one such remark.

"Phuti," Mma Makutsi continued, referring to her new husband, Phuti Radiphuti, "Phuti has many dreams, every night. He tells me about them and I explain what they mean." She paused. "He often dreams about furniture."

"That is because he has a furniture shop," Mma Ramotswe said. "So perhaps it is not surprising."

"That is so, Mma," agreed Mma Makutsi. "But he can dream about different pieces of furniture." She paused, fixing Mma Ramotswe on the other side of the room with the cautious look of one about to reveal sensitive information. She lowered her voice. "Some nights he dreams about beds; other nights he dreams about dining room tables. It is very strange."

Mma Ramotswe looked down at her desk. She did not like to discuss the intimate side of anybody's marriage—particularly when the marriage was as recent as Mma Makutsi's. She thought of new marriages as being rather like those shy, delicate flowers one sees on the edge of the Kalahari; so small that one might miss them altogether, so vulnerable that a careless step might crush their beauty. Of course, people talked about their dreams without too much embarrassment—most dreams, after all, sound inconsequential and silly

in the cold light of day—but it was different when a wife talked about a husband’s dreams, or a husband about a wife’s. Dreams occurred in beds, and what occurred in marital beds was not a subject for debate in the office—especially if the dream *related to* beds, as it appeared that some of Phuti Radiphuti’s dreams did.

But if Mma Ramotswe was reluctant to probe Phuti’s dreams too closely, the same was not true of her assistant. The topic had now been broached, and Mma Makutsi pursued it enthusiastically.

“There is no doubt about a dream about beds,” she continued. “The meaning of that dream is very clear, Mma. It should be very obvious, even to a person who does not know much about dreams, or other things, for that matter.”

Mma Ramotswe said nothing.

“Yes,” said Mma Makutsi, “if a person says *I have been dreaming about beds*, then you know straight away what the dream means. You can say to them, *I know what that dream means. It is very clear.*”

Mma Ramotswe looked out of the window, which was high, and gave a view from that angle only of a slice of blue; empty blue; blue with no white of cloud; nothingness. “Is the meaning of dreams clear, Mma? Do any dreams make sense, or are they just like . . . like clouds in the sky, composed of nothing very much? Maybe they are clouds in our mind, Mma; maybe that is what they are.”

Mma Makutsi was having none of this. “The meaning is often clear,” she retorted. “I have no difficulty, Mma, in understanding a dream about beds.”

Mma Ramotswe sighed. “Well, they do say, don’t they, Mma, that men have such things on their minds most of the time. They say that men think only of that, all day. Listen to the way Charlie speaks when he thinks you can’t hear him. That shows you what men think about—or at least, young men. I do not think that Mr. J.L.B. Matekoni has thoughts like that in his head all day. I do not think that, Mma.”

It was as if Mma Makutsi had not heard her. “Yes, Mma. The meaning of a dream about beds is very simple. It means that you are tired. It means that you need more sleep.”

Mma Ramotswe stared at her assistant for a few moments. Then, with some degree of relief, she smiled. “Well, there you have it, Mma. That must be what such a dream means.”

“On the other hand,” went on Mma Makutsi, “a dream about a dining-room table is different. That does not mean that you are tired.”

“No.”

“No, it does not mean that, Mma. A dream about a dining-room table means that you are hungry. I think that is very obvious.”

Mma Ramotswe looked first at the teapot, and then at the clock. She would wait, she decided; if one kept bringing forward the time at which one had tea, then the period after teatime would become far too long. Tea had to be taken at the right time; if anything was clear, it was that.

She decided to steer the conversation back to her own dream. But just as she was about to do so, Mma Makutsi came up with a further observation on Phuti’s dreams. “When he said to me one morning that he

had dreamed of dining-room tables, I was worried. Was I giving him enough to eat, I wondered?"

"And what did you decide, Mma?"

"I think I'm giving him enough food. I believe in demand feeding. I think that is what it's called. I always leave some food out in the kitchen so that Phuti can pick up a snack if he feels hungry. There are other women who believe that you should only feed your husband at set times, so that he gets used to it. But I am not one of those women, Mma. I leave food out."

Mma Ramotswe suppressed a grin at the thought of demand feeding for husbands. The conversation, although potentially sensitive, had proved to be more amusing than anything else, and she knew that it could drift on indefinitely. It was her own dream that had started it, and it was to her dream that she now returned.

"I had a very strange dream last night, Mma," she said. "As I was saying."

"Please tell me what it was, Mma," said Mma Makutsi. "I cannot guarantee that I will be able to tell you what it means, but we shall see."

"I dreamed that I was walking along a path," Mma Ramotswe began. "And—"

Mma Makutsi interrupted her. "That means you are going on a journey, Mma. There can be no doubt about that."

Mma Ramotswe acknowledged this. "Possibly. But then the path came to a place—"

"That is your destination," announced Mma Makutsi. "That place that you saw in your dream was your destination in life. That is very clear indeed. What was it like, Mma? Was it a very good place?"

"There was an acacia tree—"

Again there was an interjection. "Then that means you are going to end up under a tree, Mma. That is where you will find yourself, under a tree." She looked at Mma Ramotswe sympathetically.

"That is not too bad, Mma. There are many worse places to end up."

"But the tree was not all that important," said Mma Ramotswe, raising her voice slightly to prevent further interruption. "There was a man standing under the tree. It was as if he was waiting for me."

"That will be Mr. J.L.B. Matekoni."

Mma Ramotswe shook her head. "It was not him. It was a man I had never seen before. And he did not come from here. He was a stranger."

Mma Makutsi's glasses flashed in a slanting band of sunlight. "Not from Gaborone?" she asked. "Not from Botswana?"

"No. He was from somewhere else. He was not an African at all."

Mma Makutsi was silent. Then she delivered her judgement. "You are going to meet a stranger," she said,

with an air of gravity. "You are going to meet a stranger under an acacia tree."

"I thought it might mean something like that," said Mma Ramotswe. "But then I thought that it probably didn't mean anything at all. That it was just a dream, and I would forget about it by this afternoon."

Mma Makutsi looked doubtful. "I don't think you should forget it, Mma Ramotswe. I think that you should remember it, so that when it happens, when you meet that stranger under the acacia tree, you will be prepared."

She said nothing more, but gave Mma Ramotswe an oblique look; a look that Mma Ramotswe interpreted as a warning. But she had not understood—for all her claims to understanding dreams, Mma Makutsi had missed the point. This stranger was not threatening; this stranger, for whom Mma Makutsi said she should be prepared, was not somebody to be dreaded or guarded against. On the contrary, this stranger was a good man, a kind man, and his arrival—if he were ever to come, which was highly unlikely—was something to be welcomed, something to be celebrated. And there was something else—something that was hard to put into words. The man in the dream might have been a stranger in that she had never seen him before, but somehow she felt that she knew him. *She knew him but did not know him.*

She glanced at her watch again. Resolve can be weakened by time, and by talk about dreams and by heat.

"I know it's a bit early, but I think that we should have tea now," she said to Mma Makutsi. And Mma Makutsi, who had removed her glasses to clean them, looked up, finished her task of polishing the lenses and said that she completely agreed.

"On a hot day," she said, "we dream of tea." *Revue de presse*

Praise for *The Limpopo Academy of Private Detection* and Alexander McCall Smith:

"Fans of the series will find much to enjoy.... It is all but impossible to criticise this novel." *The Guardian*

"To say McCall Smith is a literary phenomenon doesn't quite describe what has happened. He has become more of a movement, a worldwide club for the dissemination of gentle wisdom and good cheer." *The Telegraph*

"McCall Smith has few peers in capturing the quiet moments of people's lives, and his empathetic lead has one of the biggest hearts in modern literature." *Publishers Weekly*

"The gentle and telling portrait of the human condition lingers [after reading]." *Star Tribune* (Minneapolis)
Présentation de l'éditeur

Precious Ramotswe is called in to tackle a disciplinary problem at a local school. Mysteries involving children are always rather difficult, and in this case, making this more complicated is the fact that it's her adopted daughter's school. Meanwhile, her trusted assistant, Grace Makutsi, is having trouble adjusting to wedded bliss, a problem that may test even Precious Ramotswe's formidable talents. Finally, Mma Ramotswe and Mma Makutsi meet an old mentor for the first time, when the estimable Clovis Andersen, author of their personal manual, *Principles of Private Investigation*, arrives in Botswana on a case. All this and bush tea too—life is indeed rich in Botswana.

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