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Opening extract from
**Precious and the Mystery of
Meerkat Hill**

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HIS IS THE STORY of a girl called Precious. It is also the story of a boy whose name was Pontsho, and of another girl who had a very long name. Sometimes people who have a very long name find it easier to shorten it. So this other girl was called Teb. There is no room here, I'm afraid, to give her full name, as that would take up quite a few lines. So, like everybody else, we'll call her Teb.

Precious's family name was Ramotswa, which sounds like this – RAM – OT – SWEE. There: try it yourself – it's not hard to say. She lived in a country called Botswana,

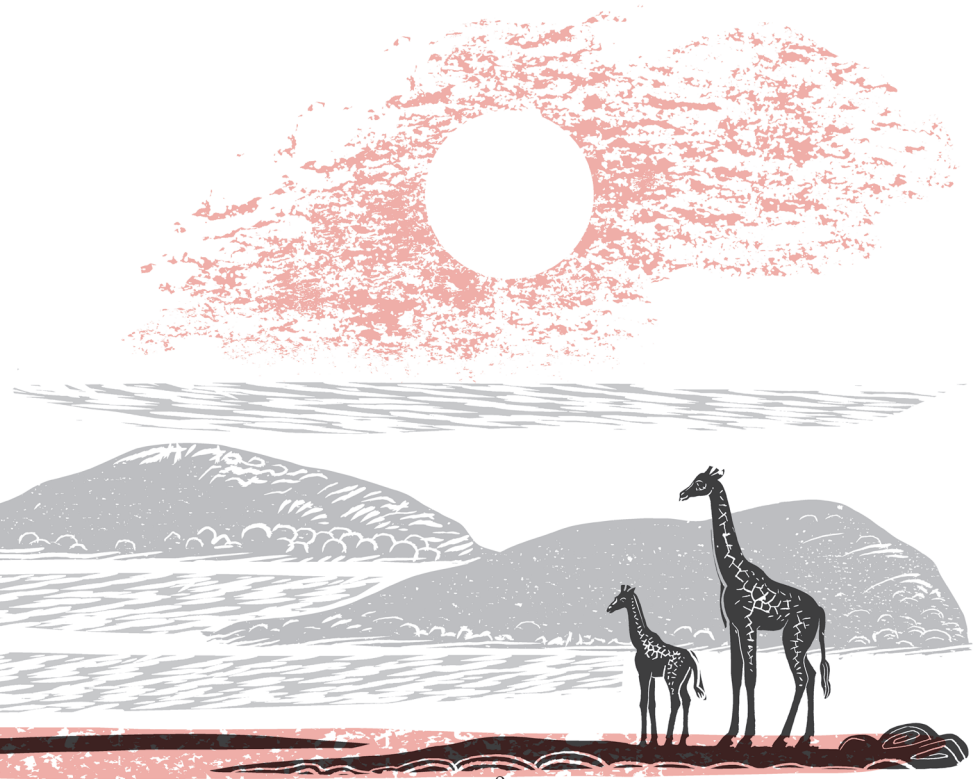
which is in Africa. Botswana is very beautiful – it has wide plains that seem to go on and on as far as the eye can see, until they join the sky, which is high and empty. Sometimes, you know, when you look up at an empty sky, it seems as if it's singing. It is very odd, but that is how it seems.

There are hills that pop up on these plains. The hills look rather like islands, and the plains look a bit like the sea. Here is a picture of what that is like.



Precious lived with her father, Obed, in a small house outside a village. Obed was a good, kind man who wore a rather battered old hat. That hat was well-known in the village and even further afield.

“Here he comes!” people would say when they saw his hat in the distance. “Here comes Obed!”

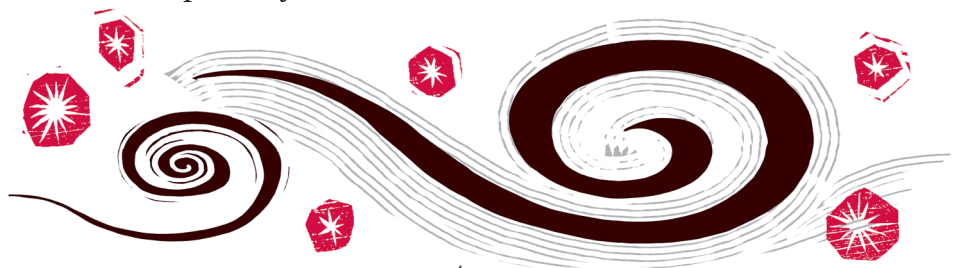


On one occasion Obed lost his hat while walking home in the dark. A wind blew up and lifted it right off his head, and because there was no light he was unable to find it. The next day, when he went back to the place where he had lost the hat, there was still no sign of it. He searched and searched, but without success.

“You could buy a new one, Daddy,” Precious suggested.

Obed shook his head. “A new hat is never as comfortable as an old one,” he said. “And I loved that hat.” He paused, looking up at his daughter. “It saved my life, you know.”

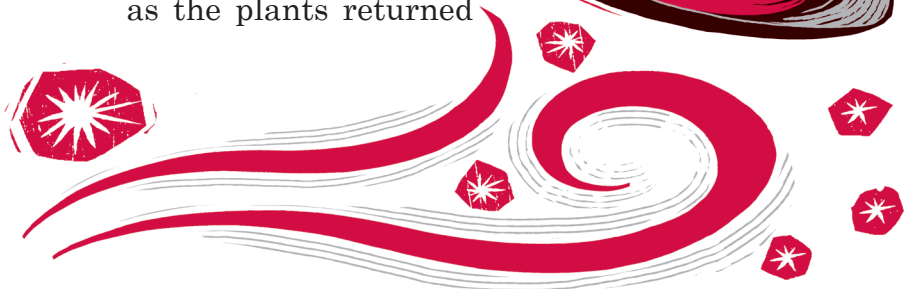
Precious wondered how a hat could save your life. “Please tell me about that,” she said. She loved her father’s stories, especially when he told them at bedtime.



There is something very exciting about a bedtime story, and it is even better if the story is told after the lights have been turned out. The words sound different, I think – as if they are being whispered just for you and for nobody else. The words are all about you, like a warm blanket.

So Obed told her about the hat that evening, when it was already dark outside and the African sky was filling with stars.

“Quite a few years ago,” he began, “before you were even born, I worked for a while on a farm. It was a very dry place, as there was not much rain in that part of the country. But each year the rains came, and the land would turn green as the plants returned



to life. That could happen so quickly – sometimes overnight.

“My job was to see that the cattle were getting water to drink. We had boreholes to pump the water up from deep wells. Then the cattle could slake their thirst from drinking troughs. I had to go and check that everything was working properly and fix it if it was not.

“Now, it was rather remote and empty down there, and although there were no lions, there were other wild animals – and birds. And this is all about one of those birds – a very dangerous bird.”

Precious interrupted him. “Birds can’t be dangerous,” she said, laughing at the thought. “Birds are far too small.”

Obed shook his head. “That’s where you’re wrong, my darling. There are some birds that are very big.”

“An eagle?” asked Precious.

“Bigger than that. Much bigger.”