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Opening extract from
Precious and the Monkeys

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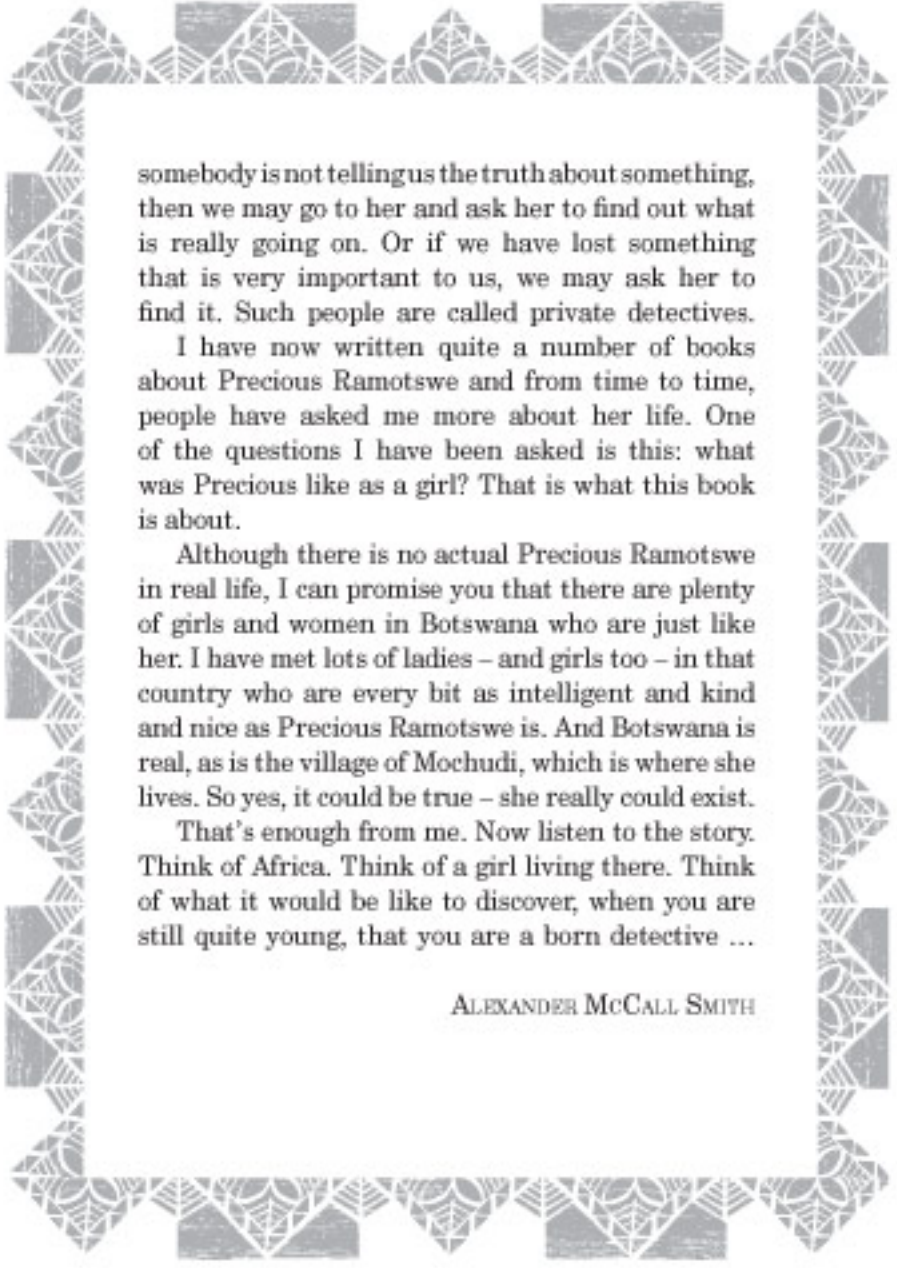
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A number of years ago I went to live for a short time in a country called Botswana. This is a very beautiful country in Africa – a place famous for its great wild places and the animals that live in them. When I lived there, I remember thinking: it would be fun to write about this place some day.

And I did. A long time afterwards, I sat down one day and wrote a story about a lady called Precious Ramotswa, who lives in Botswana, and who starts a little business. People thought that she might start a small store or something like that, but instead she sets up a detective agency. A detective agency! What does she know about being a detective? The answer to that is nothing, but – and this is an important but – she has just the right talents for it. She is a born detective – which means that she is somebody who is naturally good at the work involved in being a detective.

She is not one of those police detectives who solve major crimes. No, she is a person who deals with the mysteries that ordinary people – just like you and me – may have in their lives. So if we think that



somebody is not telling us the truth about something, then we may go to her and ask her to find out what is really going on. Or if we have lost something that is very important to us, we may ask her to find it. Such people are called private detectives.

I have now written quite a number of books about Precious Ramotswe and from time to time, people have asked me more about her life. One of the questions I have been asked is this: what was Precious like as a girl? That is what this book is about.

Although there is no actual Precious Ramotswe in real life, I can promise you that there are plenty of girls and women in Botswana who are just like her. I have met lots of ladies – and girls too – in that country who are every bit as intelligent and kind and nice as Precious Ramotswe is. And Botswana is real, as is the village of Mochudi, which is where she lives. So yes, it could be true – she really could exist.

That's enough from me. Now listen to the story. Think of Africa. Think of a girl living there. Think of what it would be like to discover, when you are still quite young, that you are a born detective ...

ALEXANDER MCCALL SMITH

A MAP OF BOTSWANA







HAVE YOU EVER SAID TO YOURSELF – not out loud, of course, but silently, just in your head: *Wouldn't it be nice to be a detective?* I have, and so have a lot of other people, although most of us will never have the chance to make our dream come true. Detectives, you see, are born that way. Right from the beginning, they just *know* that this is what they want to be. And right from the beginning, even when they are very young – a lot younger than you – they show that solving mysteries is something they can do rather well.

This is the story of a girl who became a detective. Her first name was Precious, and her second name was Ramotswe.

RAM ♦ OTS ♦ WE

That is an African name, and it is not as hard to say it as it looks. You just say RAM and then you say OTS (like *lots* without the l) and then you finish it off by saying WE. That's it.

This is a picture of Precious when she was about seven. She is smiling because she was thinking at the time of something funny, although she often smiled even when she was not thinking about anything in particular. Nice people smile a lot, and Precious Ramotswe was one of the nicest girls in Botswana. Everyone said that.

Botswana was the country she lived in. It was down towards the bottom of Africa, right in the middle. This meant that it was very far from the sea. Precious had never seen the sea, although she had heard people talk about it.

“The sound of the waves is like the sound of a high wind in the branches of the trees,” people said. “It’s like that sound, but it never stops.”

She would have loved to stand beside the sea, and to let the waves wash over her toes, but it was too far away for her wish to be granted. So she had to content herself with the wide dry land that she lived in, which had a lot of amazing things to see anyway.

There was the Kalahari Desert, a great stretch of dry grass and thorn trees that went on and on into the distance, further than any eye can see. Then there was the great river in the north, which flowed the



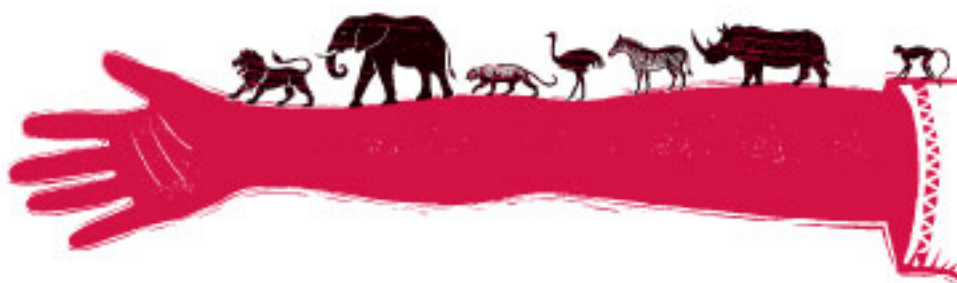
wrong way, not into the ocean, as rivers usually do, but back into the heart of Africa. When it reached the sands of the Kalahari, it drained away, just like water disappears down the plughole of a bath.

But most exciting, of course, were the wild animals. There were many of these in Botswana: lions, elephants, leopards, ostriches, monkeys – the list goes on and on. Precious had not seen all of these animals, but she had heard about most of them. Her father, a kind man whose name was Obed, had often spoken about them, and she loved the tales he told.

“Tell me about the time you were nearly eaten by a lion,” she would ask. And Obed, who had told her that story perhaps a hundred times before, would tell her again. And it was every bit as exciting each time he told it.

“I was quite young then,” he began.

“How young?” asked Precious.



“About eighteen, I think,” he said. “It was just before I went off to work in the gold mines. I went up north to see my uncle, who lived way out in the bush, very far from everywhere.”

“Did anybody else live there?” asked Precious. She was always asking questions, which was a sign that she might become a detective later on. Many people who ask lots of questions become detectives, because that is what detectives have to do.

“It was a very small village,” said Obed. “It was just a few huts, really, and a fenced place where they kept the cattle. They had this fence, you see, which protected the cattle from the lions at night.”