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Opening extract from

Precious and the Mystery of the Missing Lion

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Published by

Polygon an Imprint of Birlinn Limited

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This edition published in Great Britain in 2014 by
Polygon, an imprint of
Birlinn Ltd
West Newington House
10 Newington Road
Edinburgh EH9 1QS

www.polygonbooks.co.uk

ISBN 978 1 84697 318 5
First published in 2012

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Printed in Latvia

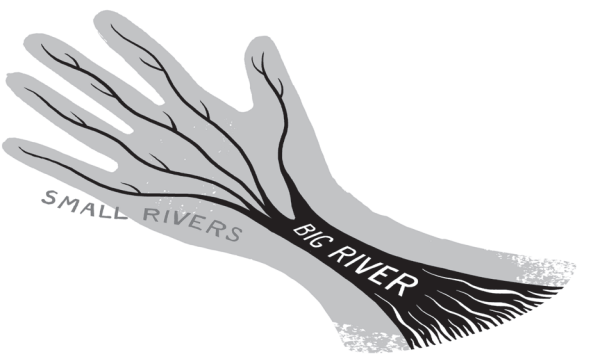


THE GIRL IN THIS PICTURE is called Precious. That was her first name, and her second name was Ramotswe, and when all this happened she was nine. Nine is a good age to be. Some people like being nine so much that they really want to stay that age forever. They usually turn ten, however, and then they find out that being ten is not all that bad either. Precious, of course, was very happy being nine.

Like many of us, Precious had a number of aunts – three in fact. One of these aunts lived in the village in Botswana where

Precious was born, while another lived on an ostrich farm almost one hundred miles away. And a third, who was probably her favourite aunt of all, lived right up at the top of the country, in a place called the Okavango Delta. That's a lovely name, isn't it? Try saying it. OKA-VANGO.

A delta, of course, is made up of small rivers spreading out from a bigger river, a little bit like a human hand and its fingers. Here's a picture of one.



Usually deltas are on the edge of the sea – this one was not. The great Okavango River flowed *backwards* – away from the sea, to spread out into smaller streams that simply sank into the sands of



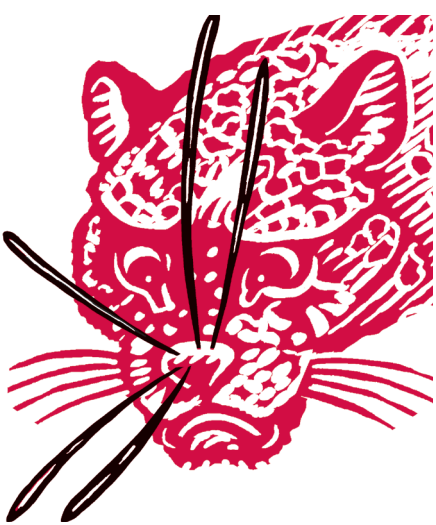
a desert. And where this happened, there were wide plains of golden grass dotted with trees. On the bank of the river itself, the trees towered high. That was a bit like a proper jungle, and you had to be very careful when making your way through it. It was all very wild, and was home to just about every sort of wild animal to be found in Africa.

The aunt who lived up there was called Aunty Bee. Precious had been told her real name, but had forgotten it. Nobody ever called Aunty Bee anything but Bee. It was just the way it was.

Aunty Bee was not one of those aunts who scold you or tell you what to do. She

was fun. She was also very generous and never forgot to send Precious a present on her birthday. And what presents these were! They were all made by Aunty Bee herself, from things that she could pick up in the bush around her.

One year there was a hat made entirely out of porcupine quills. As you know, porcupines are very prickly animals that have coats made of extraordinary black-and-white quills. These are sharp, and if anything tries to attack the porcupine all that he has to do is shoot out these quills. The animal attacking him then learns a very painful lesson: do not try to eat a porcupine! Indeed, some say that this is the very first lesson that a mother lion or leopard teaches her children: *do not try to eat a porcupine!* Unfortunately, some of them do not listen, and this is what happens:



The porcupine hat was made of quills that Aunty Bee had found lying around on a path. She picked these up and took them to make into a hat. This was the result.



Precious was very proud of it.

"What a beautiful hat," people remarked. "May we touch it?"

"Yes," said Precious. "But I wouldn't, if I were you!"

Another present Aunty Bee sent one year was a bracelet made of twisted elephant hair. This was very special, as people said that elephant hair was lucky.