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Opening extract from

Precious and the Mystery of Meerkat Hill

Written by

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Alexander McCall Smith

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Illustrated by Iain McIntosh

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AFRICA AFRICA AFRICA AFRICA AFRICA AFRICA
Botswana
AFRICA AFRICA AFRICA AFRICA AFRICA AFRICA


Botswana
Francistown
KALAHARI
DESERT
GABORONE



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

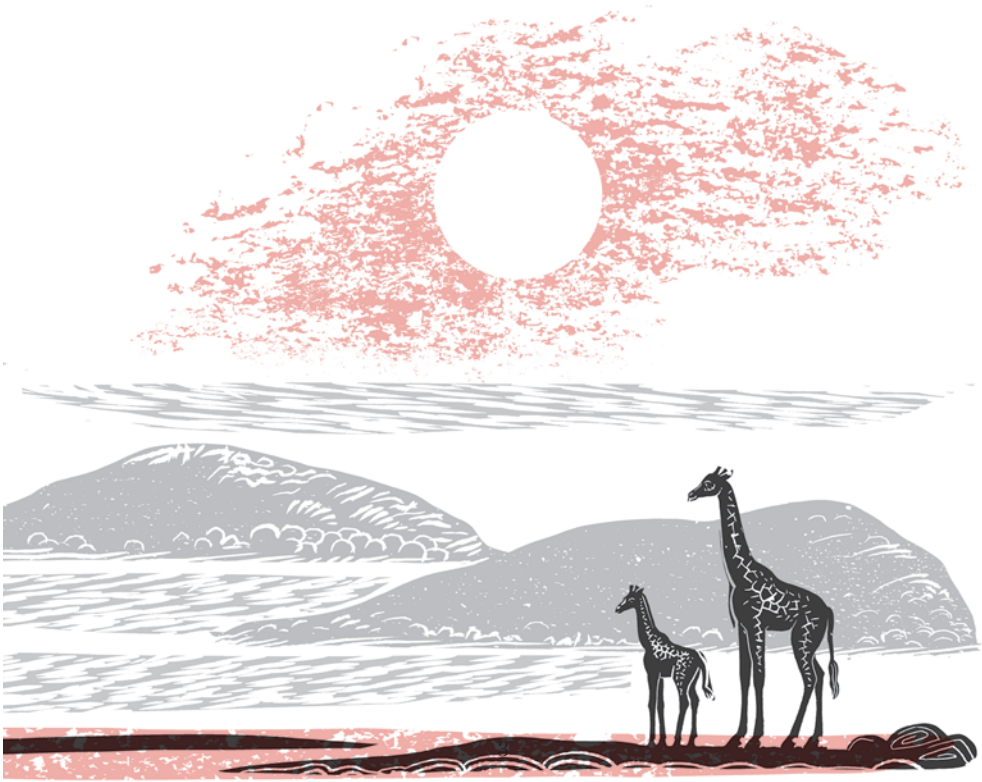
which is in Africa. Botswana is very beautiful – it has wide plains that seem to go on and on as far as the eye can see, until they join the sky, which is high and empty. Sometimes, you know, when you look up at an empty sky, it seems as if it's singing. It is very odd, but that is how it seems.

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!"

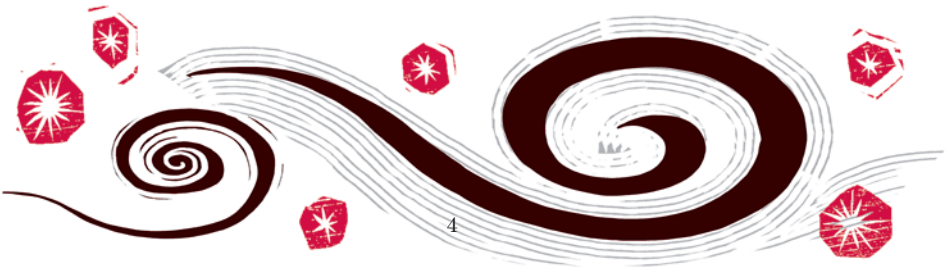


On one occasion Obed lost his hat while walking home in the dark. A wind blew up and lifted it right off his head, and because there was no light he was unable to find it. The next day, when he went back to the place where he had lost the hat, there was still no sign of it. He searched and searched, 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."

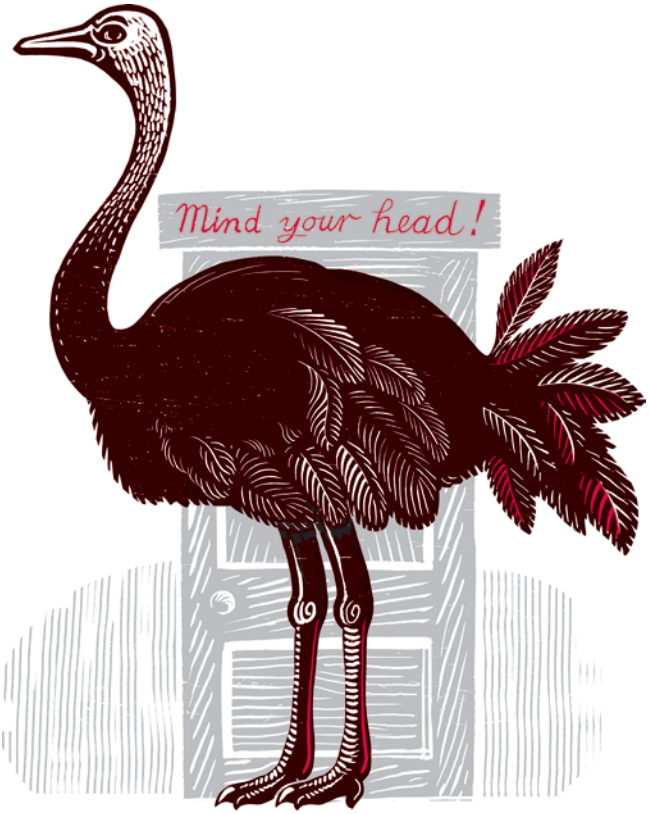
Precious interrupted him. "Birds can't be dangerous," she said, laughing at the thought. "Birds are far too small."

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."

She thought and thought, and was still thinking when Obed said: “An ostrich!



“An ostrich,” her father went on, “is much bigger than a man, and yes, it can be very dangerous. You have to be very careful

if you get too close to an ostrich because they can kick. They have these very strong legs you see, and at the end of one of them there is a claw. You can be very badly hurt by an ostrich kick – very, very badly hurt."

Precious shivered. Sometimes her father's stories were a little bit frightening, even if they usually ended well.

"Now," Obed continued, "I was walking through the bush one day, looking for some stray cattle, and suddenly I heard a noise. It was a very strange noise, and I stopped in my tracks wondering what it was. Then I saw it. Not far away from me, looking at me with those big angry eyes that they have, was an ostrich. And I knew right away that I had disturbed this creature and that it was about to attack me. The reason why it was so angry was that I had come too close to its nest. These birds make large nests on the ground in which they lay massive eggs. Think of a hen's



egg. Then think of an egg twenty times bigger than that – that's an ostrich egg.

"Suddenly I remembered something I had been told, and it was just as well it came back to me. Looking down on the ground, I saw a long stick that had fallen from a nearby tree. I picked this up and put my hat on the end of this stick. Then I held it up high in the air – like this.



"Ostriches may be strong, but they are not very bright. I had remembered being told that if you put your hat on a stick and then held it up high, an ostrich would think that the hat

was your head. They would also think that you were much taller than they were, and so they would leave you well alone. And, do you know, it worked! The ostrich saw my hat and thought I must be a very tall and strong creature – more than a match for her. So she backed off and I was able to continue on my way unkicked."

Precious breathed a sigh of relief. She did not want her father to be kicked by an ostrich – who does?

"I'm glad it worked out well for you," she said, as she drifted off to sleep.

"Thank you," said her father. "And now you go off to sleep, Precious, as you must be ready for school tomorrow morning."

Precious closed her eyes and thought of school. She had heard that there was a new family coming to the school the next day – a boy and a girl – and she wondered what they would be like. New people are always interesting, and she thought that

perhaps they might be her friends. It was good, she thought, to have old friends, but it was also good to have new ones.

But what about the hat? Did Obed get it back after it had blown away? Yes, he did. It landed a long way away but when people picked it up they knew immediately whose it was, and it was returned to him a few days later none the worse for its adventure. Of course he was very pleased, and from that day onwards whenever there was a high wind, he held onto his hat very firmly. Which is what all of us should do, don't you think?

