

Over Coffee

Written by Christine Pistorius

As Charlene drove through the gates of the Bellevue Lodge at her mother's side, she wondered idly how old the building was. The old age home had taken the place of the original hospital in Fort Victoria, so the building dated back a good hundred years or more. And the Bellevue Trust had been looking after the senior citizens of the community for over 50 years.

"Hello, Charlene, hello, Connie, how nice to see you again! What would we do without you?" came the chorus from the old ladies sunning themselves on the veranda.

Connie and her daughter, Charlene, visited the Old Age home twice a week to do the old people's hair, help in the kitchen and chat to those who needed a bit of company.

The residents were a colourful cast of characters, each with a story more captivating than the last. There were so many interesting stories, and anecdotes the old people loved to tell, so many laughs to be shared, not to mention the latest bit of gossip over a steaming cup of tea or coffee.

There was Iris, who had been an early woman-member of the British South African Police. Iris was fair skinned and had been a blonde, so the African sun had taken its toll, leaving her with skin cancer. Her tales of chasing criminals through the bush were interspersed with amusing recollections.

And then there was Annatjie, the 92-year-old farmer's wife, who was a living archive of bush life in Rhodesia, and had amazing recollection at her age. She came up to Rhodesia as a small girl in 1925, often running next to the ox wagon to lighten the load through the mountains. She told how they used to send cans of fresh cream to Salisbury, unattended. Their farm at Rocklands was about 200 kilometres from the capital, but they always received payment, and the cans were religiously returned.

During the Second World War, she and her grandfather used to take the horse and cart to deliver milk and buy mealie meal from the local store. The mode of transport helped to save their precious fuel coupons. It was on one of these trips that they met the Ghost Rider, who was known to patrol the area. The old man warned her, "Don't greet him, because he surely won't be greeting you!"

Then there was old Mrs. Christie, who had been the wife of a big game hunter. She told how plentiful the wild game had been in the early days and how, as a young bride camping in the Rhodesian bush, her husband had warned her that a wounded Guinea fowl was the most dangerous of all. Being a city girl, she had hung on his every word. She had many tales to share about lion and elephant. Her husband returned to Salisbury with a motley crew of captured baboons, which were sold to the University Medical School for a tidy sum of five dollars each. However, the true spectacle was when they'd park their Land Rovers in Jamison Avenue and enjoy a beer, turning their

vehicle into an impromptu zoo, with gawking crowds thronging the pavements to see the wildlife in town!

Then there was the story of Oom Jannie, who had set out to find a certain Man Eater. But being short sighted, he could not see the lion which the two trackers were breathlessly pointing out to him. When the lion roared, everyone turned and ran for their lives!

Oom Jannie was a character. He owned his own pet lion that he had raised from birth as an orphaned rescued cub. One late afternoon, coming home on the dirt road to his farm, he saw what he thought was his pet lion. Thinking it had jumped the fence, he got out of his pickup, shouting at it to go home, and giving it a few swipes with his whip after which it ran off. He then arrived home, only to find his own pet lion fast asleep on the verandah!

Beryl was the midwife, had stories to tell as well. She always had handy advice and home remedies to share. Beryl's room at the home was, as luck would have it, in the old Maternity wing. There, and at the hospital, she had delivered many babies down the generations. One of her stories was about a pair of twins she had delivered. The twins were tiny, and the mother had no milk. Anna, who had just given birth to a son, and who had milk to spare, had volunteered to feed the babies. Years later, the twin girls travelled down on the train to Cape Town to attend university along with Anna's daughter. Beryl was a great knitter, and always won the knitting bee contest. She also attended the sewing circle held in the lounge every Wednesday. This gathering was dubbed "Stitch and Snitch" by the unenlightened, as just as much gossip as sewing and knitting was shared! Whether knitting or sewing, the ladies ensured that each stitch came with a dose of good-natured chatter.

Thelma's husband had been a sniper during the Second World War – she was well into her 90s - and her husband having served four years in Italy, was fluent in Italian. She told how the wives from Africa used to send biltong to their servicemen overseas, but none of this sought after delicacy had ever reached its destination.

Janet, the retired schoolteacher with a commanding presence, known for her authoritative voice and sharp wit, at 96 still maintained loudly that the children of today were unable to read or spell correctly. She had regularly thrown her blackboard duster at pupils who weren't paying attention and had rather good aim. Her sense of humour, however, had allowed her to collect a hilarious scrapbook of classroom blunders, compiled from years of correcting misspelled words. This was a hit among those who enjoyed a hearty laugh at the expense of the hapless students of yesteryears.

As Connie and Charlene wrapped up their visit and waved goodbye, leaving the Old Age Home behind, they couldn't help but smile. They had shared some happy memories, lent a sympathetic ear, and enjoyed some quality time over a cup of coffee with the old people at the Bellevue Lodge.