

Ouma and Miena

Ouma Hattingh was born in Cradock in the nineteenth century, in a different time. Oupa came from Tarkastad, to where his forefathers had trekked from the Cape of Good Hope. They were married early in the twentieth century and set up house in Cradock.

Setting up house was a serious business in those days. There were no supermarkets around the corner with frozen chickens and such like conveniences. No, you had to slaughter the livestock, gut them and skin them yourself. This was hard work and a servant in a household was not a luxury but a necessity. So it was, that soon after their betrothal, young Miena Visage joined the household beginning a liaison that would outlive Oupa and nearly outlive Ouma. Both of whom would eventually be buried from that house.

In those halcyon days necessary victuals were bought from the local shops by sending Miena with a note. Later on the luxury of a telephone would ease Miena's burden somewhat. Even in the days of the note the required goods were not always immediately available and frequently had to be sent later, by bicycle.

When it came to cooking Ouma was a past master. She used to make pancakes on a primus stove. She would sprinkle them with sugar and cinnamon and get the sugar to melt. And koeksisters! What a treat! I used to watch her plait the dough into the traditional shape. This would then be plonked into a four-gallon paraffin tin, full of oil, on the primus stove. Next to the primus stood another four-gallon paraffin tin with ice cold syrup made from sugar and water. Once the koeksisters were cooked, they were immediately plopped into the syrup and left there till the syrup had permeated the whole koeksister. While this cooking was going on, dear Miena was washing dishes as though her life depended on it. Hot water had to be boiled for this, there were no electric geysers. I remember sitting at the eight seater table that held pride of place in the kitchen while Ouma cooked and Miena cleaned. On cold mornings I was given the warm tea cosy to put my cold hands in after the tea was poured. A tin of samp was mine to make patterns with on the table while I watched. Occasionally Ouma would cut some of the fat off the mutton and fry it to a crisp into 'kaaings', delicious bits of crispy fat. Which reminds me that the mutton fat from a roast leg would be collected and put in the fridge. Used, with salt and pepper, in place of butter on fresh bread it made a most delicious treat.

Sunday lunches were something else. I always wondered where the army was that Ouma was going to feed but she steadfastly maintained that you never know when visitors might arrive and they must be fed. I remember one night when this happened and unusually Miena was asked to stay and help with the washing up. She finished late so my father's brother and I drove her home to the location. I remember well how impressed I was with her humble shack, it was spotless inside and incredibly ordered. I wondered if this was Ouma's influence. But I digress. There were no such things as starters or even wine. The main fare was usually a leg of lamb and a fowl - the size of which make supermarket fare look like day old chickens, Then came the 'bykos' which consisted of rice, roast potatoes, boere beans, cabbage, pumpkin, squash, a beetroot salad, a carrot salad and my favourite, peaches and dumplings. These were boiled dried peaches on top of which dumplings were done. With lamb and potatoes this was an absolute delight of mine. Then there was desert. Ideal milk, canned peaches, canned pears, blancmange or jelly, and on special days my favourite, 'nationale' pudding. I cannot quite remember the ingredients but there were raisons and apricot jam, a chewy crust and lots of lovely sauce. Miena, and her neighbours, lived well off the plentiful leftovers.

In later years Ouma had acquired a cat which was called Optel, a name which gave a clue as to its manner of arrival at Cawood Street. Occasionally Optel's meals would get out of sync with the family's and this would necessitate a call to the local butcher for a penny's cat meat. Now let me tell you that the stuff they call goulash that you buy in a modern supermarket is rubbish compared with a penny's cat meat from a Cradock butcher in those days. The unfortunate delivery boy would have to stand and wait while Ouma unwrapped the rather substantial parcel of meat and inspected each bit for sinew or fat. Miena sniggered quietly in the background, hand over mouth. Woe betide the poor wretch if there were traces of either on the cat's meat. She would wrap up the parcel in a huff, throw it into the holder on the delivery bicycle and tell the delivery boy to tell his boss that, "My kat eet nie kak nie!" I remember the sad day when after nineteen good years poor old Miena set off to the local pharmacist with the cat in a grain sack. There was no vet and the pharmacist was the angel of death, or is that mercy, for a cat whose body no longer wanted to cooperate with the life force.

Miena was naturally around when all three children were born. In fact all four - but 'oorele boetie' died in the 'flu epidemic of 1918. My father was the eldest. Cleaning the house, which included sweeping the pavement in front of the house and making sure that the gutter was clear of pine needles, was a daily task. Once the house had been cleaned, the front door was out of bounds for all but the dominee. Woe betide any of the children, or grandchildren who dared to try and violate this law. Miena would chastise them and tell them to go around the back and the grown men and women would acquiesce meekly. I seemed to be the only one exempt from this rule but then I was the eldest grandchild, something quite special. I was unashamedly the favourite; after all I was the prime carrier of the bloodline. I never did find out what Ouma thought of the fact that my name broke with tradition.

Miena's life was one of order and routine. Monday was washing day. In the back yard there was a huge stone slab mounted on two short concrete walls, this was the 'wastafel'. With the aid of an enormous tin bath and this slab of stone, Miena brought the washing to a whiteness every Monday morning that would make Omo blush. The rule was that all washing must be done and hanging on the line before the sun peeped over the horizon for the first time. If any of you have ever experienced a Karoo winter's morning, you will appreciate the sacrifice involved in keeping up this routine. On Tuesday morning the washing would be dampened which meant Miena sprinkling every article with water, rolling it tightly and placing it in the tin bath. Once the water had more or less evenly dampened the various articles of washing Ouma would set about ironing them. Everything was ironed to perfection, underpants, sheets, hankies - everything. I suppose that the act of ironing was also a sort of disinfectant and the hot iron would kill any goggas that might have sneaked into the washing.

I cannot remember Oupa's parents and I think they must have died, and been buried in, Tarkastad. But Ouma's parents were buried in Cradock and the Sunday routine included a visit to the graveyard to put fresh flowers on their graves. I was sent to the English Sunday School. My father had taken English higher (as well as Afrikaans higher) and English literature at school. I think he decided that English is the universal language - after all when he was born a quarter of the world's surface was ruled by Britannia. Oupa had an Oldsmobile which he had bought just before the war. This car was taken out on Sundays to charge the battery. After Sunday school I would be fetched in the Olds and we would go for a short drive on one of the roads that led into the interior. Ouma would have one of her

cupcakes for me. These were huge and liberally covered in hundreds and thousands. I remember them well.

The car was garaged at someone else's house, very few people owned cars. Ouma's garage had been turned into a storeroom and a bathroom. Hot water for bathing was provided by a wood burning geyser. You placed the bits of wood in the geyser which had double walls containing the water. The bits of wood were chopped into kindling by faithful old Miena. Once lit the water heated very quickly. When your ablutions were complete Ouma passed you on the way out and went into that bathroom and wiped up every solitary bit of water. Within five minutes of your leaving it looked as though that bathroom had never, ever been touched by a human hand. The sitting room appeared to be the domain of the dominee and the photographer. I once remember being assembled around the couch for a family portrait but cannot recall another time that I was in the lounge. Miena, courtesy of her cleaning duties spent more time in the lounge than anyone else. Serves the Dominee right for not visiting more frequently.

Ouma was careful with money and a stickler for meeting commitments. I remember an entry in her diary on the 1st of a month, 'Jo -account rendered - 3d', when her daughter had neglected to meet a debt on the last day of the previous month. Ouma carefully guarded her possessions. Money was not easily come by and things had to last. There were treasures which were seldom used. Genuine Irish linen sheets, I can still remember their feel - what quality. Sheets for daily use eventually began to wear in the middle. Once this happened they were cut in half and the original edges sewn together, the frayed edges turned and sewn and you had a serviceable sheet, albeit with a slight ridge down the middle. Blankets were also subject to wear. Once they began to show signs of wear they were covered with material to hide the worn bits. These covered blankets were delightfully warm and one of them remained a treasured possession of mine until it literally fell apart with use.

My father's only sister used to walk around the house saying that she wanted to 'erf' this and 'erf' that when Ouma died. When Oupa died my father and I met Miena on her way to work to apprise her of the situation. Never before, nor since, have I seen tears like that - she loved those two old people. Dear old Miena also died before Ouma.

Ouma was fond of saying that possessions were just 'wêreld's goed' but nevertheless she looked after and treasured hers'. Tragically, when Ouma died they literally just threw away as 'useless' all the treasures that she had so carefully garnered. I think Ouma would have preferred Miena to have them, for like Ouma, Miena knew all about appreciating the little you have.