

Oom Daniel from Prince Albert

The Karoo, Prince Albert, "leiwat" in the furrows along the streets, warm shade under some of the leafier trees, everywhere else dust, sand, karoo bushes for as far as the eye can see. Olives; grapes; tangy biltong; creamy cheese, milk, yoghurt from the local dairy, natural and nourishing. Oh how delicious this all is, and then mohair knitting yarn from the local shop. Soft, colourful, just beautiful.

They drive a fair distance to spend holidays and weekends there. The holiday house, small but well-designed with its flat roof is where they keep watch over the mountains and plains, and even enjoy a braai. They relax in the overwhelming silence, and natural sounds of nightlife in the Karoo.

This weekend rings in the changes. They will be holding a large party to celebrate Ansie's 30th birthday. There is enough space for tents to be erected, people to sleep outside, and even sleeping space on the flat roof for those who want to brave the miggies, mosquitoes and insects that abound. Every invited guest will bring their favourite side-dish either to be prepared on site, or something prepared beforehand like Tant Sannie's potato salad. Mmmmm hers is the best ever. One of the secrets of its success is that it should not be eaten immediately but stand for a few days so that all the flavours fuse into the soft potatoes. Tant Sannie has not been invited, but then she would not want to go anyway. She is in her 70's and what would she do amongst all those youngsters with their strange music and habits. No, she is happy to make enough of her speciality salad to feed a boarding-school filled with children. The salad is made and waiting to be collected.

Tant San is a strange person. At one time she was married. It seems her husband left her without a trace. After 20 years he was finally declared dead. Tant San continued as usual, a smile, laugh or joke for everyone.

The festivities are well underway. The spitbraai is ready, the salads and other side-dishes are set out on tables decorated with veld flowers and Karoo grasses, the empty wine bottles are knee high in the outside store room, the music is of the kind loved by younger people (if one could call it music) and the laughter and happiness is almost tangible. Another warm loaf of bread is taken hot from the oven, closely followed by a cheesy pizza. Both disappear in record time, always accompanied by a hefty glass of wine.

No one notices that the old man who lives in town has joined the party. Ansie knows him well. He was once an architect and exchanged many views with them

when their flat-roofed sanctuary was being built against the mountain side. Oom Daniel, as he is called, is very knowledgeable on a number of subjects and before long he is heavily involved in discussions about various building and designing problems he had encountered in his long career.

The party becomes more subdued as the night ages. Here and there a zol is being smoked. A sense of languid pleasure hangs over everyone. Excesses of food, wine, dancing and talking have brought about a sense of mellow relaxation.

Suddenly there is a piercing scream from the roof. The men, instantly wide awake, jostle up the outside stairs to reach the roof. There are two couples on the roof, but the reed fence that once was there now has a gaping hole in the centre, and peering over they see Oom Daniel lying in a ragdoll heap muttering about wine. A rush for the stairs, and further stumbling to reach the prostrate figure. He is almost lifeless from all the alcohol and he occasionally groans in pain.

Everyone in the village knows that Oom Daniel has a problem with drugs. He is also more than a little partial to wine, and never knows when to stop. It was often quite normal for the Oom to finish one bottle of wine after another until, senseless, he passed out wherever he happened to be. All these thoughts swarm like bees in Ansie's head as she shouts: call the ambulance. As it happens the only P.A. ambulance is out on another emergency call. On hearing this one of the men starts on the task of removing the outer door of the store-room. Eventually Oom Daniel is gently placed on this make-shift stretcher, before being carried to the largest bakkie. Carefully they drive to the hospital in Oudtshoorn, Ansie holding and stroking his hand all the way, and promising him his glass of wine once he had been attended to.

The prognosis from the on-duty doctor is not good. Shaking his head he asks Ansie "Are you related to the Oom?"

"No," she answers, "but everyone in Prince Albert knows him well. He is a drug addict and wine is his life-line."

"Yes, this is clearly the reason why his liver and kidneys are malfunctioning. This is a difficult decision to make but we cannot start treatment until he has sobered up and can appreciate how serious the situation is."

Ansie and the friends who had driven to Oudtshoorn decided to leave Oom Daniel there. The hospital has all her details and they plan on visiting him the next afternoon.

Arriving at the hospital the next day, they discover that Oom Daniel has died. Ansie distressed at this news, offers to advise everyone in Prince Albert and to ask if anyone knows of friends or family connections he may have. She then calls her Tant San.

"Tant San. This is Ansie. I will only be home in a day or two. A terrible thing happened. Oom Daniel fell off our flat roof, and died this morning in the Oudtshoorn Hospital."

"Yes?" there is questioning tone in her voice, "you said Oom Daniel? Wat is his surname?"

"Don't know, why?"

"No, my girl, just wondering. If you do find out, please let me know."

Tant San arrives at the Oudtshoorn hospital and asks for the person who treated Oom Daniel. She explains to the doctor that she has a gut-feeling about the deceased, Oom Daniel. They chat and the doctor agrees to take her to the mortuary section of the hospital. He gives an instruction to the on-duty clerk, and a short while later a gurney is wheeled into the viewing area. He gently folds the sheet back from the deceased's head. Tant San looks, knits her brows, looks again and then gently strokes his cold forehead a few times. Finally she bends over and kisses his cheek, then turning around, tears streaming, she leaves the room.

"What's the matter, can I help?"

"Oooh Doctor," she cries, "that man left me 40 years ago. He disappeared without a word. Just left, disappeared, abandoned, vanished, gone! He was my husband. His name was Jakobus Daniel Van Rensburg. Everyone called him Jako. But I wondered when I heard about this Daniel person and the Karoo. He was passionate about the Karoo and always wanted to live in one of the Karoo towns. Now see there, that is my husband."

Turning back to the room she says, "Never mind old man, although you deserted me, I will arrange a lovely funeral for you."

Permission was granted for Ansie to have her uncle buried in the open ground next to their house. The next celebration in the house was to bid farewell to the noteworthy Oom Daniel of Prince Albert. Tant San insisted: no alcohol, no drugs not even a zol and so his wake was a sensible affair. Heaving a great sigh of sorrow for what might have been, and relief for what was now done, Tant San bid a final farewell to her husband, firm in the knowledge that she now knew where he was and that she had finally got him walking the straight and narrow.

Julie Hattingh