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“Is it about a bicycle?”

by Lesley Dawson

That is the question Dorothy asked as she woke up that morning. It took her carer by surprise as she had just been asked if she would like a cup of tea.

Dolores was used to dealing with such unusual questions by now as she had worked in this care home for two years. When she had arrived from Jamaica with her brand new nursing diploma this was one of the only jobs open to her. She had been told “Sorry. Your qualification is below the level of a nursing qualification in the UK. The only thing we can offer you is a Health Care Assistant’s post in this hospital”. However her experience and maturity was warmly welcomed in this private residential care home and she quickly felt at home with her Polish, African and Spanish colleagues.

What was more difficult was to learn how to deal with old ladies like Dorothy who seemed perfectly sensible one moment and you could hold a normal conversation with them. Then something, anything, would set them off and they would become aggressive and shout at staff members and other residents or throw their lunch at whoever served it to them. Even when they stayed calm, you could be discussing the news about the British royal family and the next moment, they would tell you that they were the Queen of Sheba

This was quite shocking to Dolores as he had been brought up to believe that the British were very rational, sensible people. Dolores repeated her question about tea, deciding to ignore the question about bicycles as she was not sure how to answer it.

She had learnt more recently during her induction training at the home that older people, especially those with dementia, often spent time back in their memories of the past and could quote chapter and verse about events from fifty years before but not remember what they had for breakfast. These thoughts often came out as bizarre answers when they were asked questions.

“Did you ride a bicycle when she were younger, Dorothy?”

“What do you mean when I was younger? I was out riding my bike yesterday. Don’t you remember I cycled all the way to Otley.” Dolores had been to Otley and tried to calculate the distance from where they were in Leeds. “That is a long way. You must feel very tired.”

“Yes, I am. But the reason I didn’t sleep very much last night was that the telephone kept ringing and I had to get up each time to answer it.”

Remembering that the morning staff handover had mentioned how restless Dorothy and other residents had been last night Dolores thought back to yesterday’s afternoon activity of community singing and made a mental note to mention its effect to her colleagues. They needed to finish future sessions earlier and give time for the residents to be quiet before they went to bed.

Thinking that Dorothy’s thoughts might now be surfacing in the present, Dolores tried again to offer the cup of tea. However this provoked a frown as Dorothy said “Can’t you remember anything. I never drink tea, I only drink coffee.”

Smiling to herself as she made her way back to the kitchen, Dolores thought, ‘well you can’t win all the time’.