

## Divine's Providence

The truck outside was huge and clumsy and it looked defeated. Its driver was not. He was small, neat and township sharp. From his two-tone shoes to the jaunty little feather in the hatband of his Fedora, he exuded confidence. It showed in the white-toothed greetings he scattered like Papal benedictions around the gloomy interior of the ice-plant.

Overalled workers trudged by, towing great opaque, frozen blocks behind them, their gumboots clumping and splashing in the shallow water. Mostly, they avoided his eye, withdrawn and stolid in the humbleness of their task. Cat-like and fastidious, Divine Ngwenya picked his way across the irregular islands of bricks that led one, more or less dry-footed, to the office.

Odendaal glowered up through a cloud of smoke from one of his foul cheroots. Pillay's on Main Street stocked them for him – only him - an acrid blend of obscure Central Asian tobacco and heaven knew what else.

Divine breathed as little as possible, his cheery greeting squeaky as a result.

"Hullo, boss! I'm here! It's Wednesday - collection for Vlakvarklaagte!"

"I know what damn day it is". Growled Odendaal. "Sign here...." thrusting forward a clipboard from which a cheap ball-point dangled on a length of greasy string. "And get a move on this time - none of your stopping along the way. They bitched about the wastage last week – the bloody stuff melts, you know!"

"Puncture, boss. Couldn't help it. Bye-Bye!" and Divine made his escape, eyes watering and resisting the impulse to wipe his signing hand on his trousers. That string was really something.

Back in the sunlit street, Divine lit a Lucky Strike and watched the workers sliding the last of the huge blocks into the rear compartment of his truck. Marginally insulated with old packing case planks, it served to preserve the ice as well as to reduce rusting – although it had clearly not succeeded for some time.

Vlakvarklaagte boasted very little, including electricity, so Divine's weekly ice and grocery run was all that stood between the inhabitants and spoiled meat and warm drinks. It was not somewhere to be found in tourism brochures.

A few hardy travelling salesmen ventured out there from time to time, only to scuttle back quickly, their empty order books and unopened sample cases evidence of the self sufficiency of the place. What they needed, they fetched for themselves from 'town' as they referred to Slangfontein.

Slangfontein, with its three dusty streets, police station, general store, filling station and a few other run-down businesses, rows of corrugated roofs and forlorn, petrified gardens. The deserted premises that had housed an undertaker for an unprofitable and ghoulish year, as he prowled the town assessing prospects, were boarded up, the refrigeration long ago de-commissioned and sold for scrap.

It was one salesman too many that did for Slettie van Hoorenstein. That is to say, one dazed, thirsty, disappointed salesman too many that accepted her invitation to come in out of the sun on some pretext to discover that she was predatory in the extreme. He had long since fled to whence he came, when time, and perhaps the climate, wrought certain changes in Slettie van Hoorenstein.

When there could be no further doubt, she tearfully donned her mother's yellowing wedding dress, stretched out on her bed in the relative coolness of the bedroom and

swallowed a box of Rattex, spoonful by spoonful from a cut-glass pudding bowl. Possibly the bottle of gin with which she washed it down stupefied her enough to prevent any possible suffering.

The maid who came in next morning for her perfunctory weekly clean-up suffered a lot more and for a lot longer. She had emptied the bin before tackling the house, so the tell-tale box was nowhere to be seen.

Certainly the young Slangfontein constable who emerged ashen-faced from the house could not remember seeing a more peaceful corpse. In fact, he could not remember having seen *any* corpse before this. His shaky notes on the official Sudden Death Report sheet recorded her clothing as 'white dress' and nothing more. "Circumstances of death" he had endorsed "unknown", and his sergeant's yelled instructions on the crackling telephone line, above the whirring of the hand-crank, were to bring the corpse back to Vlakvarklaagte. So that a post mortem could be held. When a G.M.O. could be found.

The constable surveyed his dusty 500cc motorcycle and pondered his options. They were all bizarre. Then he brightened.

Divine's truck had just breasted the escarpment, and was poised for the descent, hydraulics and radiator hissing and trembling with age and exertion alike. A moment of recovery and then it tilted and started trundling down towards the little outpost. Around him, those who had arrived here with all their possessions to discover the shortcomings of life in this wilderness were opening ice-boxes and unconnected freezers. Anything that would maintain temperature and delay the inevitable.

Gratefully, the truck wheezed to a stop in what passed for a main street, ice-melt trickling incontinently through the cancerous lattice-work of its rusted body to darken the sand. Divine leaped down, for all the world the sole donor of life-saving supplies to a benighted tribe - but with his order-file under one arm and a stainless steel Parker clicking busily in and out.

The constable waited for the scramble for provisions and ice to slow, before stepping forward, a nervous palm upheld. Clearing his throat, he made an unpopular announcement. Enough ice was to be left in the truck to ensure the preservation of Miss van Hooenstein on her last journey. Back to Slangfontein where she would await the arrival of a qualified person to establish the cause of her demise - her corpse hopefully accommodated in the deserted undertakers' with more ice grudgingly supplied by Odendaal.

Divine clapped his hands at the brilliance of the plan, although he was less enthusiastic when he was press-ganged to help carry the mortal remains on a kitchen door taken off for the purpose. Slettie was not overly buxom, but the four bearers were sweating by the time they had stowed her securely, shrouded in one of her own lounge curtains.

The motorcycle was more cumbersome, and heavier, but one did not mind taking hold of its hard, inanimate frame and protuberances to wrestle it into the now empty grocery compartment. In the process, Divine's eyes fell on the constable's clipboard, laid aside for the moment. He was the second person to brighten that day.

Ephemiah Magadla was a determined young woman. She knew what she wanted. She wanted Divine, with all his swagger and self-assurance, but there were conditions. Divine would have to provide. For all her mission-school background and the poorness of her surroundings, Ephemiah had acquainted herself with the workings of the modern world. Even in Slangfontein, the glossy periodicals and big-city newspapers made their appearance, even if it was as packing material or draught excluders in the sprawling shanty-town on the outskirts.

Ephemiah had enjoyed her dalliances with Divine, although this had reduced her bride-price somewhat, and she had badgered her aged father into accepting it instead of pricing her out of the available market. Most eligible husbands had left for the cities and Ephemiah was not enthusiastic about being left on the shelf. Despite the conditions she had set for the wedding, Ephemiah had covered all her options. She had invoked the miracle of mail order and ticked the appropriate block beside a product listed as “Wanton Hussy – hooyaaaah!” and confirmed her choice, in white, with a postal order.

The long return trip to Slangfontein was uneventful, Divine whistling along with the quaitto music from a tape-player tied to the grab handle above his head and the constable watching the scenery and declining offers of Lucky Strikes.

For both, it was something of a relief to find themselves at the undertaker’s now darkened building, the Slangfontein sergeant standing boozily by to assist with the final process of manhandling a curtain-swaddled mass onto audibly sweating ice-blocks commandeered from Odendaal.

There had been other phases in Divine’s life, at a time before he fell to driving a bushveld delivery truck. Unexciting though this latest vocation was, it offered him steady employment and freedom from looking over his shoulder or averting his face whenever a police van passed and remembering his latest alias when they stopped.

By and large these days, with the prospect of Ephemiah’s hand and other body parts permanently on the horizon - or closer - he was well content.

Still, when he detached himself from the surrounding darkness and ghosted across the shrivelled lawn to the back of the undertaker’s premises, he experienced that old rush of excitement when his crowbar prised the first nails with just a breath of protest from a desiccated window frame. Twenty minutes later, he emerged, the bundle under his arm replaced by another, and then was gone into the night.

On her wedding day, Ephemiah was radiant, beaming and proud. Her snowy tulle wedding dress exceeded her expectations and the claims of the manufacturers of Omo. The coy but passionate glances she directed at Divine, surrounded at the meat fires by his guffawing male supporters, boded well for the night ahead.

Her nuptial conditions had been met, and she spared little thought for the ‘hows’ and the ‘wherefores’ of how Divine had transformed a Wanton Hussy into this thing of beauty.

Two days later, when a travel-weary medical practitioner from further up the line addressed his task for the first time, he considered the SAPS Sudden Death proforma.

At “Clothing of Deceased” he scored a first tick beside “white dress”, although he wondered at the skimpiness of the garment and that with the price tag still on it, it should be at least two or three sizes too big for deceased S van Hoorenstein, late of Vlakvarklaagte.