

Bixie has just moved to the quiet and peaceful beach town of Sleaufort. The town quickly heats up with three murders. Bixie must deal with the problems of her new life before she becomes the next psycho-killer's victim.

Slayings in Sleaufort

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SLAYINGS IN SLEAUFORT

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ONE

"There are a lot of ways to begin my story," I thought as I sat on the toilet seat beside the dead body while I waited for the police. At least it should be a short wait, since the toilet seat was located in the women's bathroom at the Sleaufort courthouse, right next door to the police station. The reasons that had brought me to Sleaufort would be a starting point for my story. Did my journey from Rustin begin when my sons moved out of the house, leaving me on my own—"the empty-nest syndrome"—or did my journey start with the day I was conceived, an accidental combination of genetic DNA material which led to the unique person that I had become—"the philosophical theory?"

I know the precipitating factors that had dumped me here. First, November had been particularly drab - cold, rainy, with dead leaves, mud, and appropriately enough, the awards ceremony at the medical research center where I worked. I went to the ceremony to congratulate those winning the awards—nah, I went because it was an acceptable excuse to escape work for an hour. Also there was free food.

With the onset of OSHA regulations, work had become increasingly tedious. To protect the worker from blood-borne pathogens, it was now necessary to gown up with a water-impenetrable gown (no water in, no perspiration out), two pairs of gloves, a face mask, a hair-covering, and shoe protectors. No technician had contracted a lethal virus, but so far at least thirty had been treated for heat prostration, generated by wearing so many protective garbs.

The awards ceremony was always a special time for the employees at the research center. How we enjoyed giving recognition to our fellow employees—sure we did. The fact that we got out of work for two hours had no relevance at all.

I found several friends and sat with them. The HR head guy blathered about how each person was important and how the institution thanked us for our sacrifice and devotion that had created such a wonderful place to work in.

To be honest, I don't know what he said because I was catching up on the latest gossip about Sam and his newest conquest.

Sam is a forty-year old Lothario who routinely cheats on his devoted wife with whatever flavor of bimbo is about. The bimbo thinks Sam is going to leave his wife, and Sam thinks with his little head, and one day he'll get caught. We were analyzing the odds of Sam's wife discovering his latest escapade. To be sure, we were also clapping for the employees as they were honored. Employees with ten years of service were followed by those with fifteen years and then by those with twenty years of service. Fewer people stood up as the number of years of service increased.

When we were at the fifty-year mark, the lights dimmed and music began to play—some kind of march song, and slowly three guys dressed in tuxedos guided a wheel chair down the aisle.

Glenda whispered in my ear, "That's Roselle, the fifty-year employee, in the chair."

The wheel chair passed our aisle. Then I whispered back, "I think she's dead; did you see how her arm just hung out?"

"No, no, you are wrong; just watch and see."

When the wheelchair reached Hank Arbus (the CEO who was handing out certificates), it stopped.

Two of the tuxedoed guys (My thought was that they had to be hired talent, because I am certain, that our facility doesn't begin to have such hunks.) helped Roselle out of the chair and held on to her as she took the certificate from Dr. Arbus. The third guy handed her a huge rose bouquet.

Everyone was cheering—well, we weren't, but everyone else was.

Roselle bared her dentures in a pleasant smile, and the clapping continued.

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My thoughts were, “Oh please, strike me dead if I become a sixty-seven pound collection of bones, receiving my fifty year service award. I need to do something to get out of this rut.”

At the ceremony were two acquaintances who were receiving their thirty-year pin, and incidentally were also retiring—Shirley and Hazel. After the ceremony, as I ate and chatted with the two, I learned of their future plans.

Shirley and Bob (her husband) were going to follow their long-held dream. Following their retirement they planned to motor to Florida once a year, fishing along the way in the scenic lakes and rivers as packaged by the company “Retire and Fly (fish that is)”. Shirley was excited at the prospect.

Hazel, on the other hand, had different plans for retirement. For one thing, Hazel had no Bob, so she couldn't do like Shirley and Bob because—I realized, coming back from my memories to the present, that I had been talking out loud to a group that had gathered outside the toilet stall. Shooing them away with mutters of “police,” “under suspicion,” and other threats, I went back to my thoughts.

Hazel was rumored to have been married long, long ago to a man who was killed when he fell into the path of a hole-borer and was crushed. The explanation for why he was using a hole-borer on the day after Christmas was never clear, but Hazel coincidentally always got really nice presents from her supervisors.

Hazel was planning to stay at home after retirement and expand her part-time interest to full-time. She collected Elvis Presley memorabilia and had two rooms dedicated to commemorative items—plates, perfume bottles, statues, early Sun recordings, dirty costumes. Once a year she went on a pilgrimage to Graceland. As I talked (or listened) to these two soon-to-be retirees, I felt walls closing in. Was this to be my fate in a few years; fly-fishing trips and Elvis meetings? I needed a change, now, before it was too late.

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As I drove home, a storm whipped up. Brown, sodden leaves fell everywhere. When I pulled up in my yard, I was greeted by beaten-down grass drowning in the red clay mud. I made my way through the treacherous pile of leaves. The wind blew through my thin coat and I suppressed a shiver.

My thoughts were on a warm cup of soup and a quiet evening wrapped up in a blanket.

However, this was not to be. Rain dripped from the kitchen ceiling. This seemed to happen every fall. A variety of roof-repair folk had given their opinions about the cause of such a phenomenon. At a dear price they had tried to fix the problem, but still every fall, the rain drops kept falling on my head.

I grabbed towels and started swabbing the water up. I overreached and slipped and landed quite hard on my derriere.

It was then that the phone rang. I caught it just as the message kicked in. It was a lawyer, Charlie Stealer. He told me he was the attorney who was in charge of probating the will of my Aunt Jasmine.

I told him that she had been dead for years, and I knew for a certainty she had left nothing to me, her dearly despised niece.

Charlie Stealer cleared his throat and then said, "Miss Biddle, I have some good news for you that obviously is coming as a surprise. It has taken several years to clear up the vagueness of the will. But be assured that your aunt has left her house in Sleaufort to you, provided you meet the terms of her will."

I answered, "Mr. Stealer, I am sure that you mean well, and I would truly love to have her house, but first, I have a job and a home here in Rustin, and that isn't really important anyway, because I can't believe that she would leave me her house. There must be a catch. I heard Aunt Jasmine left her house to some church in Sleaufort."

"You are so right; she did leave the house to a church in Sleaufort. However, the scandal that shook the church six months later invalidated that aspect of the will."

"What did the church do?"

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“I will be happy to update you, when I see you—but for now, I really need to finalize the terms of the will, or you will lose out. Can you come to my office here in Rustin tomorrow morning?”

And so I spent the evening, thinking about the strange phone call. Aunt Jasmine was my daddy’s sister. I had found her to be a bitter, spiteful, criticizing, witchy kind of woman. When I was young and her husband, Uncle Beau was still living, she wasn’t so bad, but her later years were filled with strife and turmoil.

I had loved visiting Sleaufort, but Aunt Jasmine became more than I could tolerate. She hated my guts, as well, so we were better off far far away from each other.

It would be wonderful, though. I could rent out her house, making some extra income, and when I retired, I could live in Sleaufort. I fell asleep listening to the rain drops pinging the pots I had set up in the kitchen to catch the flow and dreaming about Sleaufort.

For a moment, I had gone back to Rustin, but when I glanced around, I quickly returned to the present and the companion that kept me company—the dead man lying on the floor.

It was better for me to keep thinking about the circumstances that had led to my living in Sleaufort than wondering how the body had wound up in the bathroom that I was supposed to be cleaning.

The morning after the awards’ ceremony I had called in sick and had gone to the lawyer’s office to learn about my inheritance. Two minutes into our conversation, I had been reminded once again of Aunt Jasmine’s spitefulness.

Lawyer Cheater handed me a letter that had been written years ago by my beloved aunt. The gist of the letter was that if I did wind up getting the cottage, certain conditions must be met: I must live in the house 24/7; I must never remove any of the mirrors or her portrait; finally, I must always keep the brass urn that contained

her ashes in plain sight. Then she concluded the letter by saying, that even on her death bed she would be getting pleasure when she thought of me—plain, ugly Bixie Lee living in a beach paradise, surrounded by beauty everywhere.

Lawyer Cheater probably thought I would turn down possession of the beach house with so many restrictions. The good lawyer was prepared to make a generous offer. The offer was a tad bit above zero. But he was so wrong in his assumption.

I was so ready to move and although Sleaufort is about three-hundred miles away from Rustin, it is light-years away in philosophy. Less stress, less traffic, the sun shines brighter, and there is a view of the ocean, sunrises, and sunsets, beautiful, brilliant. The air is fresh, the people relaxed, and I wanted it.

Lawyer Cheater was unaware also that I had contacts in Sleaufort. My brother was an important lawyer with the county government. I knew he could pull strings and get me a cushy job as a clerk in the courthouse. I could wear expensive suits and Xerox briefs or wear expensive briefs and Xerox suits.

So, in a blink of an eye I had signed all the paperwork at the lawyer's office, handed in my two day notice at work, packed all my belongings in an U-Haul truck and left the vista of Rustin in my rear view mirror.

I may have been a tad hasty. I had not allowed for the shift in the political winds, which did not unseat my brother, but had shifted his power which is an explanation for why I, with my two degrees, my IQ of 160, my "charm and beauty" (shut up, Aunt bitchy) was now sitting on the toilet seat beside a dead man in the Sleaufort County courthouse.

Oh, I did get a job with the county. I have my uniforms furnished and I am cleaning up at this job—cleaning the toilets, the trash cans and the break room refrigerator; I scrape gum from courtroom benches and wash the graffiti off the walls. Yes, I'll say it; I am now a custodian-in-training. Thanks, brother George.

Surely I had been sitting here long enough for the police to come and start their investigations. Was I to be permanently rooted

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to this spot, breathing through my fingers, trying to keep breakfast from coming up while I waited and waited?

When I saw my two rescuers, I knew why I remained alone with the company of my charmingly quiet gentleman for so long. Sonny and Junior were by far the two largest men on the police force, and I had forgotten that today was "eat all you can" at the Pig-Out Barbeque place on Oak Street. The Pig-Out could afford such an offer because many pig by-products were used in the barbeque. On a visit to my brother's once, many years ago, we had eaten there, or rather, I had eaten there, for a previous commitment had kept my brother away, and after finding the stitching from a wallet on the plate, I had forgone pork since.

Sonny was the bigger of the two and had the worse hygiene. He resembled an inflated Pillsbury dough boy, and smelled of week-old garbage. Junior was kind of average from his shoulders to his waist, but he had a humongous rear end. His chair, it was rumored, had to be specially made for him, with an extra large seat and reinforcements. The county had learned this lesson the hard way. It had been kind of sad when Junior had threatened to sue the county after he and his chair had collapsed. Pulling out the splinters had driven the nurse in charge to quit, and the annual personnel retreat to the Blow Ridge Mountains was cancelled in order to pay for sturdily-built replacement chairs.

The two policemen got down to business. First it was necessary for them to ascertain that the man was dead. He had been lying on the floor by the toilet with a wad of tape covering his nose and mouth. There was a scarf squeezing his neck. His face was blue. His deadness seemed an obvious conclusion to me, but that's why I'm cleaning sinks, not apprehending criminals.

Once agreement was reached about his "deceaseness," Junior began measuring distances to pinpoint the dead man's position, and Sonny sat on the bathroom sink and began questioning me. We both heard the cracking noise that the sink made and my bet was on the sink falling to the floor in the next few minutes.

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By now, the combination of odors, lack of food, and post-finding-a-dead body were causing me to feel weak. Did I mention that one of the secret ingredients used by the Pig Out was garlic, a tasty companion to the ever present onion in the slaw? Sonny had forgotten, again, that old adage about cleanliness being next to godliness. Thankfully, the detectives were winding down and the coroner, Old Doc-lost-his-license, had approved the removal of my lunch time companion.

Sonny, Junior, and I had reached the same conclusions: the man was dead and there were many unanswered questions, such as who killed him, why, when, how, what?

TEN

Tuesday dawned with another blustery rainy day, although the weatherman said that the sun might come out in the afternoon. I got to the courthouse early so I fix the chairs. The floors looked good. So did the inside of Miss Thomas' desk drawers. I had been working on my collection of keys and finally I had found one that would open the drawer that she always kept locked. Not that I am a snoop, I simply wanted to be sure that everything, everywhere was nice and clean.

I didn't have time to check out the stuff because I heard J Bird and Miss Thomas talking. She was using her "steely magnolia" tone of voice. As they came into the office, Miss Thomas said, "You had better have it or else you may be next." They found me in a corner trying to remove a blemish in the paint on the wall.

I apologized for the imperfect cleaning. I doffed my hat, wished Miss Thomas a good morning and left. J Bird was on my heels. I asked him how his mother was and after a moment's worth of gears grinding in his brain, he said, "What do you mean?" — "What are you saying?" I started to explain and then I just shook my head (internally), and said "Don't forget to nebulize the hoses before you start cleaning."

For my amusement, I had started giving J Bird nonsensical commands, and he never seemed to recognize that they were gibberish. I wasn't sure what substances he used besides alcohol, but to be on the safe side, I had started locking up the organic cleaning solvents. So sad, really, to see a brain filled with loose connections; all those nerve synapses and relays just sitting there burned out.

I had to clean up a leak from the roof caused by all the rain, and then Miss Ditzbrain over-reached for the pencil sharpener and spilled the toner for the copier machine. Of course, cleaning up all spillages was on my job duty list. I closed off the area to contain the

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fumes, which gave me a chance to go through the drum of papers awaiting recycling. If I were writing or receiving some of the letters I saw, I would have long long ago shredded them, and not left them for recycling.

The only thing that seemed relevant to the murder case was approval of a zoning variance that would allow the God's Living Will Free Baptist Church to relocate closer into town than had been originally approved. There had been two major concerns voiced originally: first, that the land had already been designated as a park and secondly, the church desired a graveyard site be included as part of the church, and the land they wanted was very close to the water runoff for the Noose River. It appeared that some of the town council members had been persuaded to change their minds on the variance.

Seeing the Reverend's name so soon after attending his church service made me wonder who exactly was he? Most of the people in Sleaufort, the pasta at least, have been there forever; everyone knows all about them, but not much was said about the Reverend, so I knew what I had to do. A visit with Aunt Mattie was in order. But before I could do that, I still had five more hours of work.

Today seemed to be my day for cleaning spills. "Someone" had flushed "something" in the men's urinal upstairs, and I got to swab down those dicks, oops, I mean decks. I had fled research to get away from the OSHA biohazard part, and here I was, gowned, gloved, and masked up, cleaning up organic waste.

Oh well. On the bright side, I had skipped lunch, so I was not worried about suffering a gastric upset at all the messes. Somehow my appetite had fled earlier. It may have been due to Dolly's dulcet tones as she described the manly physique of Dick Dave. I had seen a photograph of that man's body before, and it offered an excellent reason for the creation of clothing.

In the afternoon I cleaned out the break room and its refrigerator. At least once a month I do this. There were many delicacies that had been kept, just in case someone was tempted to snack. The winner of the gross award this time was a bowl of

vegetable soup. It had been in the refrigerator for twenty-one days and the vegetables had slowly decomposed and been replaced with an assortment of bacterial colonies—blue fuzzy ones, high red columnar ones, and blobs of yellow ones. As I snapped a photograph of the winner (first prize for visuality), I had to give a honorable mention to the tuna fish casserole for its smell.

I disposed of all these little treats and after disinfecting the refrigerator, for some reason, thought about J Bird. I had not seen him since early this morning, which was kind of unusual. To be sure he generally napped in his closet until lunch, with the stress of so many commitments being on his shoulders, but he always managed to emerge at lunch time, so he can chat up the women folk with either "Yes ma'am, youse can count on old J Bird to do a real good job for you ma'am, Yes ma'am," or his "Hey babe, for a pretty little lady like you, I'll do an extra `specially' good job." The first speech is for the women over forty and the second is for young women, and it doesn't matter what he says, cause J Bird don't do nothing, no way, no how.

But now it was mid-afternoon and no J Bird. I listened at his closet, but the sound of the snoring that defined his presence was missing. I asked Miss Thomas if she had seen him and she said he had complained about feeling sick, which figured, because today was the great recycling day, and J Bird usually was the one who pushed the ginormous containers of cans out to the dumpster so the recycler could get them in the morning.

Recycling had become less of a problem, because the county had recently purchased a trolley to tote the inside recycling drum outside. Coincidentally, the donation came after J Bird had hurt his back lifting a big box.

It should be noted that J Bird missed work at the drop of a hat. Not only had J Bird attended funerals for five mothers and two daddies, four brothers, and whatever, but he had also thrown his back out, damaged his knee, twisted his shoulder, and had experienced psychosomatic blindness, when he had seen Ms. Ida changing her pantyhose.

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I saw that the drum of cans was gone. Perhaps J Bird had already put the drum out. I went down the back stairs and saw the drum near the dumpster, but no J Bird.

Something, I don't know what, compelled me to go over to the dumpster and open the door and inside, on top of all the bags and debris, was J Bird. His head had been pounded in with a metal pipe. I deduced that this was true because the pipe lay beside him with red and gray particle matter on it. My head swam—the smell, the sight. I hadn't liked J Bird, but I had worked with him and now here he lay.

I put the dumpster door back down and went inside and reported my findings to Miss Thomas, who happened to be the first person I saw. A strange expression crossed her face, and then she said she would call the police. Thank God, I had had no lunch—not Sonny and Junior again, so soon. I was in luck, though, because the two were out on a call at the other end of the county in Squatter's Corner, where a woman had gone berserk and shot her husband's four hunting dogs.

So I got deputy Bubba. Bubba, I could handle—the bumbling, blubbery bum. Bubba was a deputy and would always be a deputy, because of an unfortunate accident in his youth. On a dare, he dove into Mr. Jenkins' pond from a fishing boat; his friends had neglected to tell him that the water at this particular spot was very shallow. As well, the bottom was covered with debris, which explained the murkiness of the pond. Bubba was unconscious for a while but when he came to, much of his thinking capacity had disappeared. His friends felt responsible and so he was assured of a job forever. But, on the bright side, he didn't eat garlic stuff for his lunch and he did practice such exotic personal hygiene habits as daily baths and deodorants so, all in all, I was in for a treat.

When he showed up he was very polite and thoughtful, and listened really intently while I explained the steps involved in finding J Bird. I could see that I was finally communicating with him; there was a light in his eyes, real comprehension. When I finished, he said, "Did you know when you talk, that your tongue goes in and

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out, just like a lizard?" So I hit my head, and wrote down my statement, signed it, and gave it to him to take back to his office.

Miss Thomas dismissed us all early, out of respect for J Bird or so she said. Whatever, the sooner I left, the more time I could visit with Aunt Mattie.

FIFTEEN

The weather was clearing outside, a good time to go clean up the papers and trash that collect around things like the dumpster where J Bird had been found. For this job, I definitely wear gloves. If our trash reflects what we are as a civilization, we are Miller Lite Beer, Burger King Whoppers, Old Jim Beam, and used condoms. If we had had a normal police department, I would not have expected to find anything relating to the murder around the dumpster, but... so I looked and sifted through the trash and leaves. I wasn't sure what I expected to find, but in the corner of the dumpster, I found a key and, mixed in with some french fries, a pawn ticket.

I stuck both prizes in my pocket and quickly picked up trash—chocolate wrappers, newspapers, bags, gum wrappers, and a dead squirrel. I felt a cold wind on my back. No, I was mistaken. It was Miss Thomas' frigid stare.

She screamed, "What do you think you are doing? I told you to sweep the inside steps and then wash them, not to come outside. Leave that bag there; no, better yet, let's see what you were really doing. Leave that bag in my office. I'll look through it after lunch. I'm late for a meeting now at the bank."

I thought to myself, "Why did she want the trash? Was she redecorating her house, or did she think J Bird had dropped something. Miss Thomas likes to know everyone's business, that's for sure."

I put the bag of trash in her office near the heat vent and turned up the thermostat and closed the door as I left. I hoped that her appointment would take a long, long time.

After washing my hands good I ate lunch. Dora shared her cookies with me. Dora was showing promise away from Dolly. If she were to shuck her grey clothes, lose thirty pounds, cut her hair

and wear makeup, she could give some of these women at the courthouse a run for their money.

Of course I can evaluate how to make women beautiful since I myself have such great attractiveness.

The afternoon sped by. Miss Thomas did not come back from the meeting at the bank, and I took out trash from all the offices (except hers), washed the stairs, and cleaned the bathrooms again. The men's bathrooms had become a popular place for the bums of Cedar Street to come in and do whatever in the bathroom's confines. The "whatever" meant that I must clean the bathroom several times a day and definitely use industrial strength air freshener.

I swept the hallways and the break room and I cleaned under the library shelves in the law library. I had to change the furnace filter and the insect traps, better known as roach motels, I believe they are called. In bigger institutions, a pest control person would be doing this job, but not in Sleaufort.

People were leaving, but I kept myself busy. Today would be a good day to collect stuff again. Eventually the place was cleared out and I emptied the office trash cans one final time. All the interesting trash went into my collection, which I had stored in my closet. Sifting through the notes, I learned that Dolly was through with her antibiotic prescription. I guess the sexually transmitted disease (or bacterial infection) had run its course. Dora had discarded an empty box of Accutrim and a notice for Weight-Watchers, so maybe she was trying to lose weight.

Sylvia had thrown out reminders to call the following people: Sleaufort High School, Mr. Sloan's office (juvenile probation officer), Dr. Quincey (psychologist with the court system), and an empty bottle of Mylanta. They say that Sylvia's son is having some problems. One group says, "Boys are going to be boys," and the other group just feels sorry for her because she has three more boys coming along.

I wouldn't criticize anyone's parenting skills, not with my own children's antics. (A matter of public record although the actual

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stories have been way distorted!) But I have heard some horror stories about Sylvia's Homer, from both Anthony and Jewel.

Jewel said that she had to physically restrain her brother, Stone from throttling Homer. Stone had left the poker game early because of his gastric distress and had found the young man, Homer, his blue jeans about his ankles demonstrating massage techniques to his daughter, Amber. Homer had quickly dressed and skedaddled, but had suffered a painful injury from the jean's zipper, in his pubic region. Amber skated through the whole episode, with an elaborately-concocted story. She is planning to be a news reporter, so she really is good at creating believable tales.

Anthony had Homer in a shop class for two weeks. After an incident with the nail gun, Homer was permanently excluded from all shop classes. This exclusion seriously hampered his educational career because with the elimination of shop classes combined with his innate lack of ability in college preparatory classes left only classes like home economics I, sewing, drama, chorus, and scrap booking for him to pursue.

I skipped Miss Thomas' office. I didn't want to disturb the ambiance that was developing therein from the bags of trash she had demanded.

My last trash collection for the day included stuff from the cashier's office and the Department of Human Resources (formerly called Personnel). Clarence was the head of this office, but his secretary, Mairs, did all the work.) Clarence had (depending on the source) either a vitamin deficiency problem or a fatigue syndrome problem, which meant he had to take a lot of little naps during the day. I would call his problem alcoholism, because when I hit the redial button on his phone in the late afternoon, more likely than not the numbers reached were either Eddie's Tavern or the "You Drink, We Deliver" take-out liquor store. In some places, Clarence would have been discretely let go, but not in Sleaufort, not for the mayor's baby brother. His favorite drink was gin; I do the trash, I know these things.

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The law clerk's office trash revealed that the two of the lawyers were still betting on the horses. Not doing too well, I would guess, since the races are known to be fixed. I'm not even sure that these horse races can be said to have any relation to gambling. However, they do provide a focal point for the churches to preach against when, the subject turns to gambling.

There again, with so many activities available for people to do on Sunday mornings added to the great number of churches seeking members, would a reasonable church really be wise to preach against drinking or gossiping or adultery? Think of the outrage that the good church members would feel if they felt they were being criticized from the pulpit for their trifling sins. On the other hand, horse racing only appeals to the tourists or lawyers externing for a year. The subject of dog fights or cock fights is never raised at church either—too many locals involved.

I continued checking the trash and the redial phone buttons, but I found nothing that helped with solving the two murders. And to tell the truth, I began to feel just a tad bit nervous being in the building alone. Once again, I became aware of extraneous sounds and vibrations. To be sure, that is just the way old buildings are, but nevertheless, I cut my detecting short.

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