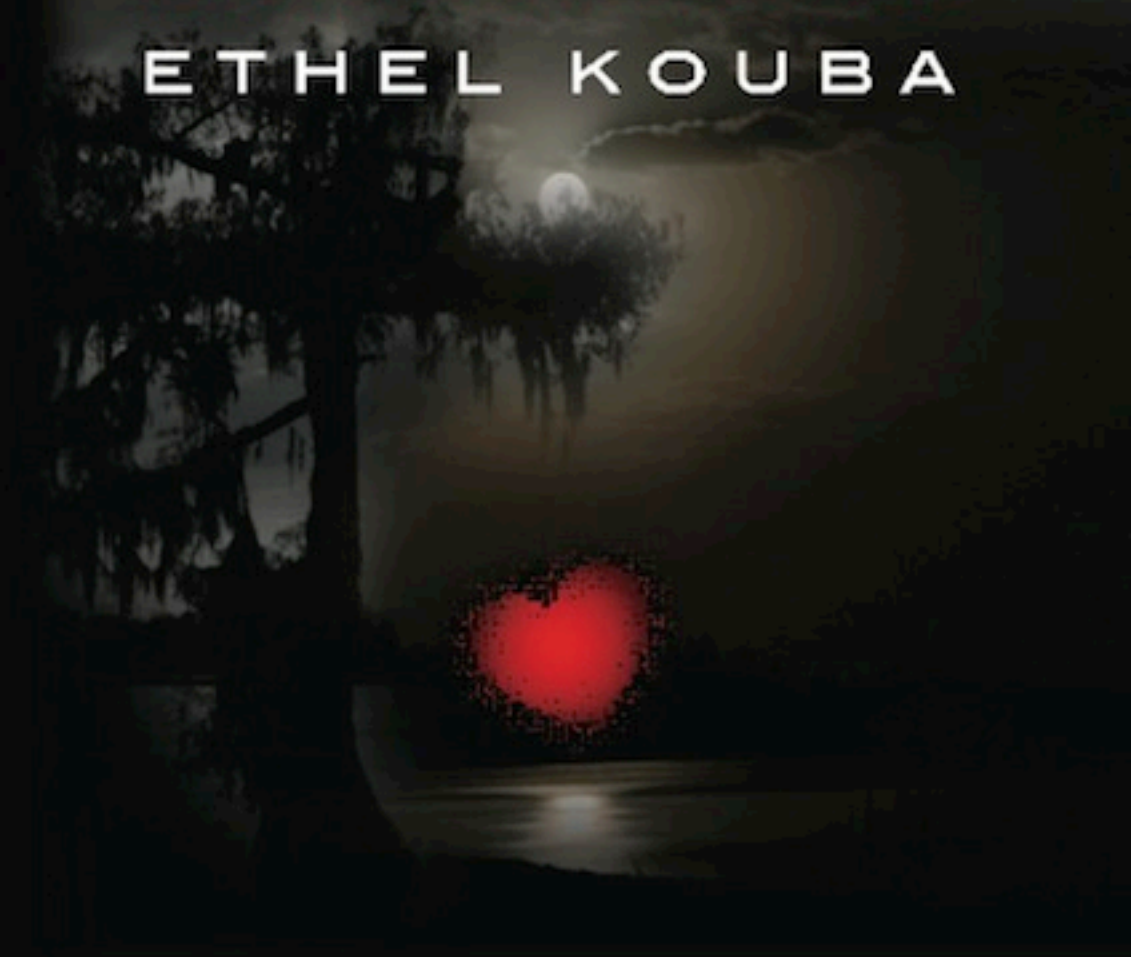
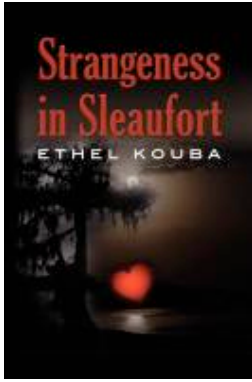


# Strangeness in Sleaufort

ETHEL KOUBA





*The Thomas family once again threatens Bixie in this Sleaufort adventure. During this Valentine season, the candy offered to Bixie is deadly, and the sweetheart-stalkers have the ever-familiar Thomas eyes. Bixie is surrounded by her back-biting, ever increasingly demented co-workers at the courthouse. There is no help offered from neighbors or friends in her encounters with the Thomas clan. Will the seventh adventure be the last for Bixie? Say it is not so.*

## **Strangeness in Sleaufort**

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**STRANGENESS IN  
SLEAUFORT**

**ethel kouba**

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## ONE

The beach is a beautiful place to visit. Tourists enjoy the warm sun, the gentle breezes, the sounds of gulls and the waves hitting the shore. A visit to the beach brings a renewal to the spirit, a rejuvenation of the soul.

Oh sure, it does, if you are not Bixie Lee Biddle, living in Sleaufort, in January. Christmas was over and I had survived. Ever since I had relocated to Sleaufort, I had been stalked by a group of demented killers – the Thomas family. I was not paranoid; I had escaped death so many times, most recently when the exalted scientist from Rustin, Dr. Thomas, has almost succeeded in his plan to eliminate me. Sure, I had been the primary one who stood between him and his being freed from multiple charges of murder, extortion, tax evasion, bribery, unpaid parking tickets and a sundry of other crimes.

However, now Dr. Thomas was dead. Sadly, in his pursuit of me, he had fallen into a well and landed on a skull which ended his life once and for all.

I still felt unsafe. I no longer knew how many Thomases were still alive and in pursuit – but for the present, fears of dying faded into the background.

I had enjoyed the few days off from work, but the moment of truth was at hand. Today I had to return to the madness of my courthouse gig. I knew what was waiting. Before Christmas, there had been a huge effort by the courthouse staff to decorate the entire government building. Maysie Everhardt had spearheaded the campaign. Maysie was well known for her community involvement. She had more time than good sense. A few years ago, she had gotten several women's groups to

become advocates for reading to the jailed prisoners. The prisoners were allowed to select a book that they wanted to hear.

At first, things went well. Betty Lou's prisoner wanted to hear the Song of Solomon. Sally Pegram, of the Pegram family, well-known in the genealogical circle, had to read Tobacco Road, chapters three through five. There were words that she wasn't sure how to pronounce, but she did her best. However, the selection of books rapidly slid downhill to the level of muck.

Justine by deSade and O by whomever may be classics, but .... The final book that ended Maysie's efforts was a graphic novel, very graphic actually, mostly with pictures. Unfortunately, Prudence Hightail, a sixty-five year old virgin was to have been the reader. When she viewed the first few pages and did a little research, she was struck with hysterical muteness and the program was abandoned.

Maysie was undeterred by this failure: so many projects, so little time. Needless to say, the incentives offered for the winners of the courthouse decorations were enough to encourage everyone to make an effort. The staircase railings were wrapped in tinsel. All the doors had decorations – holly, mistletoe, Santa Clauses, bells, reindeer antlers, snow scenes, chimney scenes, woodland creatures with winter caps. Someone had wrapped the bases of the toilets in the first floor men's room with tiny lights run by a battery.

To be sure, I, along with the rest of all the courthouse population, had enjoyed the ambiance – the smell of Christmas – pine and cedar sachets and sprinkles of gingerbread in the elevator's shaft – the sound of Christmas – tinkling bells, classic songs like Little Drummer Boy and

Jingle Bells every time a door was opened. But enough already, cleanup time was here.

And two guesses who the cleanup committee was. Was it Maysie and her group of women? Oh, no. Maysie was on her way to the Bahamas, exhausted from all her charitable endeavors. Guess #2: was it the courthouse workers – Dolly T with the talking tongue that wouldn't stop; or Ms Grimsley, eager to lose a few of her extra hundred pounds, or old Mrs. Oates, the oldest employee at the courthouse or perhaps the three useless policemen – Winkle, Blinkle, and Nod – I mean Sonny, Bubba and Junior? The answer for both guesses was a resounding "No!" The courthouse workers who were actually planning to show up at work today, and there were many who were not, what with sicknesses, family leave days, jury duty, and funerals, would be busy talking about all their holiday excitement and extravagant Christmas gifts.

So who would be doing all the Christmas cleaning-up? Why, BLB, of course. By herself naturally, because no assistant had yet been hired to replace the ones who had migrated through. There had been J-Byrd, a victim of senseless violence; Wilma, a demented psychotic killer; Violet, the lazy mother of Dick Dave, and two or three more people, whose names I had forgotten.

Apparently, I had been lost in a daze for several minutes. The smell of eggs burning on the stove brought me to my senses. Forget the good breakfast. I hurriedly combed my hair, wiggled into my tight uniform, dratted Sleaufort humidity, grabbed a breakfast bar, and rushed out of the house. I learned later that I had taken another bird food bar, all enriched with sunflower seeds and corn and millet.

It was winter at the beach. The Arctic wind blew off the ocean, adding to the already cold temperatures and brought the wind chill factor down to -45 degrees or whatever. Where were the beach tourists? Oh, please, they were somewhere warm. Only the people who were permanent residents remained.

Jewel, my next door neighbor waved as I ran to my truck. She was swaddled up in some kind of ratty-looking fur coat, and a red scarf covered her face.

I say, "My truck," but really it belonged to William, an undercover policeman – William's mission in life was to destroy every pornographic ring targeting children that existed within the so-called churches. He used me from time to time as his bait or beard.

I had no trouble finding a parking place at work. I checked in, took off my coat, hat, scarf, gloves, and then viewed the task that waited for me.

The holiday things hadn't gone away – the tinsel, and bells and ornaments and huge cardboard figures of Santa and Mrs. Santa, and fourteen reindeer and Santa's workplace and the snow families. Oh, my jingle bells!

I started with the big things first. Good bye Santa, and Mr. Snowman and Parson Brown and Tyler, the little drummer boy. And the Christmas tree that came to life.

Each figure required a trip to the outside dumpster. I froze when I was outside and sweated when I came back in.

By now, some of the courthouse workers had arrived. They gladly pitched in, when they saw what I was doing. They pitched in with useless advice. Dolly T wearing her brand new tight pair of jeans that snuggled every bump and unwanted pound said, "Oh, don't toss out the woodland creatures. There is a bunny and a cute little



squirrel wearing a red cap, and a darling raccoon with a Christmas tie. Why don't you store them for next year – maybe down in the storage room? It's such a waste."

Dolly would have said more, but she left when I threw the pile of pine cones toward my barrel and inadvertently hit her. Oops! She screamed and moved along.

The next courthouse worker to offer advice was Ms Grimsley. Ms Grimsley had apparently spent her few days off, eating. She had solved the problem of the few extra pounds by cinching her middle with a wide belt, a la Michelle. The fat oozed out, above and below the belt. But that was no never mind, for preventing the great lady's interference.

"Bixie, can't you keep the tinsel dust down to a minimum? Some of us have allergies. If this continues I will have to take sick time off and visit my rheumatologist, Dr. Nose." She then sneezed a few times and fake-coughed.

What a whiner! She sang a different song, when I shook my cloths over the trash barrel. The cloth was filled with dust from the mouse nest I had found. Oh well, but there was no tinsel-dust.

She screeched and hurried off. I did not have to wait long for my next helper, Old Mrs. Oates. Mrs. Oates had grown shorter in the last few days. Can people shrink so quickly?

The explanation for her decreased height became quite obvious, when I glanced at her feet. They were not covered in their normal two-inch high orthodontic heels. Rather, Mrs. Oates was wearing a pair of fuzzy bunny slippers. Was she trying to be playful or had her mind slipped another cog or two down the dementia trail?

Not my problem. However, her whispered comments were an irritant.

She muttered in a barely audible voice, "Bixie is making a great big mess; why is she taking down all the pretty decorations? My wedding is right around the corner, and Papa has spent a lot of money, hiring the very best decorators in the South to get this church ready for the wedding of the season. Mama sewed all those silvery embroidery chains and Bixie is throwing them away. Mama sewed so much that she has taken to her bed and Papa is diddling the maid on our formal dining table - right out in plain view."

I had been trying to ignore old Mrs. Oates, but it was becoming obvious that something was seriously wrong.

I tried to get her to sit down, but she told me to keep my hands to myself. Finally, I pulled the cardboard figure Parson Brown from the trash and told her that the reverend wanted to hear the marriage vows she had written.

I left her blithering away and looked for her bestest friend, Ms Grimsley.

Ms Grimsley snarled at me, at first and then listened to my comments. She followed me down the hall, muttering as we went. "I was afraid something might happen. Her worthless nephew was visiting her with his six or seven kids and the household was turned upside down. I guess she forgot to take her medicine, or took too much."

I asked, "What's her problem?"

Ms Grimsley gave me the evil eye. "Stress...working with you has put her under so much stress, that the beloved old lady is forced to take all kinds of medicine to help her out."

"Oh, sure!" I thought. "Sure, it is stress!"

Out loud, I muttered the word, "Whatevah."

By the time we reached old Mrs. Oates a crowd of concerned workers had gathered. Among them was Al, the only policeman I would have trusted.

"Shall we take her home and let her rest from this illness that has suddenly overtaken her?" he asked.

"That would be good, and check her medicine bottles and liquor containers."

I realized later, if things got worse for old Mrs. Oates, I would be accused of endangering her health, but it was what it was.

The morning had whizzed by and I was not very far along with my cleaning of the Christmas decorations. It did not help things to also be responsible for the routine courthouse cleaning that included the two hundred forty sinks and the seventy-five toilets and the break room refrigerator, biohazard labels required. In the milieu of cleaning were the contributions from two street people who had camped out under the basement stairs for the last four days. They had brought their own food, which they had cooked over an open flame. Their meal appeared to be some kind of bird, judging by the feathers – maybe a pigeon.

The mess would have been a 1000% easier to clean if they hadn't broken into the empty room in the basement. This room seemed to pop up as a nexus for trouble. Miss Thomas killed herself in this room, and it has been used for a pay-as-you go whorehouse, an off shoot Pentecostal church, a meeting place for all kinds of clubs, a rendezvous love nest for men and women cheating on their spouses, and finally, the site of the local coven's thirteenth convention.

However, the empty room most recently had been used for moonshine production. It contained boxes with bottles of alcohol. There were also two operational stills sitting idly by.

The two street people had done their level best to consume all the moonshine available - and with what a resulting mess.

Someone, and my bet was on the university law student interns, was going to be really upset when they returned to the court house and found their profit margin from the stills reduced to negative numbers.

I was taking the empty bottles out to the recycler-dumpster, when I felt a cold wind blowing on my back.

I whisked around and there was Mr. Gorham giving me the evil eye. Now, what was wrong?

"Bixie, you know you are responsible for cleaning up all the decorations and yet here you are wasting time - and may I remind you, it is not your time but the people of Sleaufort's time, you are wasting - think of the poor widow, giving her mite and do you care?"

Uh, oh. Mr. Gorham was going into his scary persona. The one he gets into when he runs out of Viagra and Mrs. Gorham hasn't gone on one of her out-of-town trips.

I had no recourse; I was forced to stand at attention, until the big G ran down in his gibber-gabbering. In my mind, I listed all the animals I could think of and subtracted 7 from 99, until I reached 1. Listening to Mr. Gorham's rantings was a sure way to insanity - look at old Mrs. Oates.

Eventually, his words petered out. I doffed my figurative hat, thanked him for his concern and continued in my work.

Mr. Gorham went back inside, to search for an undestroyed Hustler magazine to tide him over during this famine of no-porn.

I waited until the coast was clear and dragged my half-frozen body back into the courthouse. I was starving. In my rush to be on time for work, I had forgotten my lunch. I

wasn't too worried. My coworkers would for sure be going out and I could get them to bring me back a take-out lunch.

My mouth was watering at the possible choices. The three temps, Hope, Faith and Charity or whatever, always chose the Fantastic Fishhouse. I loved the restaurant's fried oysters, sitting on a nest of French fries, surrounded by a puddle of grease. I didn't worry about the fat content, because everything was cooked in poly unsaturated, omega-3 rich, canola-sesame oil.

Millie always got her lunch from the nearby Chinese restaurant. My favorite meal was the breaded, deep fat-fried vegetables with spicy noodles. Once again, the calorie count was a no brainer. How many calories are in broccoli, cauliflower, squash, mushrooms, and legumes – and bread is bread.

Some of the other courthouse workers would be less willing to bring me lunch. Who knew why? Of course, I was sometimes late in repaying them for the meal they had bought, and sometimes, I told them I would count the meal as my birthday/Christmas/anniversary present. But I was rolling in money today.

I touched the gray sock that carried all my spare change – mostly pennies. But 100 pennies makes a dollar and I was sure that I had at least 600 pennies.

As I moved with purpose about the offices of the courthouse, I learned some very bad news. Most of the courthouse staff were on diets.

The temps offered me a share of their lunch, Uno had brought in raw vegetables. Duo had chosen to eat rice crackers, and Tres had dessert, crushed peppermint candy (sugarless).

Millie had already eaten her lunch, a power bar with all the vitamins, minerals, protein and carbohydrates needed to satisfy the nutritional requirements of a guppy.

The rest of the staff seemed to be foraging from brown bags or Tupperware containers.

I could already predict the outcome from this shift in meal time eating habits. First, the break room refrigerator was going to be filled with bags and containers that in a few days would require biohazard-handling. Second, by mid-afternoon, I would be faced with a whole group of snarling, calorie deprived employees. The work environment was already heating up, what with Mr. Gorham's porno-deprived snarling and Dolly's cheap perfume and Sylvester's off brand cologne.

The smell of his cologne would have been tolerable, but sadly Sylvester, the newest HR hiree chose to spend his money on stiffly starched shirts, instead of soap and deodorant and the resulting smell was a tad-bit strong.

Sonny, the policeman, known for many characteristic traits, including kindness, tolerance, humor –nah, Sonny best known for his bathing only on Saturday was a spring walk in the daffodil garden compared to Sylvester.

Sylvester's appearance in the HR group was a surprise. According to Hannah, the manager, his transcript had appeared the day before the Christmas holiday, with a notation penned in that said, "Hire him!"

I checked Sylvester out, really carefully but he had normal colored eyes, although blood shot and his last name was Wallace – so Bless Palootie, he wasn't a Thomas.

As I sat in my closet, I took a minute to sigh in relief. So far in this New Year, I had seen no Thomases, no individuals, sneaking about with their grayish, greenish, brownish, pond-scum colored eyes. I savored every bite of the

peanut butter sandwich, I had found, tucked away in my spare coat. Life was good.

The peace and serenity lasted for about thirty more seconds, before there was blamming on my door.

When I opened it, I was greeted by Mr. Peckinsniff, the assistant manager.

"Bixie," he growled. "There is so much to do, and here you sit. I wish I could just sit and do nothing, but...."

Mr. Peckinsniff said a lot more things, but I had retreated to my safe place, just like Dr. Mike on TV recommended. After a while, Peckinsniff's mouth stopped moving and he handed me a list, and said his parting words. "Implement these things immediately!" He was gone, back to his man cave and xxx-rated Internet sites.

I glanced down at the list. There were twenty items listed beginning with "Store the Nativity figures in the Thomas farmhouse" and ending with "Help set up the Health Fair."

The Health Fair was a new thing. I had heard nothing about this project. Of course, as a matter of always, I never read the important memos we received daily. I thumbed through the most recent pile, until I found one that said "Employees Heath Fair Screening."

I skipped through the words that talked about the benefits of being healthy and keeping down the health cost for the community and for the nation. There was a brief mention of the need to increase the county employee's cost of health insurance mandated by the change in the new policies being instituted nation-wide.

I skipped through the words and graphs that showed how the price of food has increased 400% in the last ten years, and medical expenditures had only doubled.

At the bottom of the second page, was a mention of the Health Fair. This coming Friday, a team of health-care

providers were graciously visiting the courthouse. All kinds of screening would be done; cholesterol, glucose, blood pressure, breathing function and testing for psychosomatic-disorders and exercise fitness. The first floor court room was going to have different stations for the testing, which would begin promptly at 8:00am.

When I returned to the Peckinsniff list, I saw he had written in. "For the health day, you should report to work no later than 6am, so you will have time to set up the eight tables, and chairs about the tables. Also, the wonderful health care providers have sent over some posters and educational material that needs to be arranged around the tables. Oh, and make sure there's coffee and pastries for these wonderful volunteers."

Mr. Peckinsniff could take this last request and blow it out his nose. I was not going to even try to do these things. Who did he think he was – my boss? Well, actually he was, as he had no trouble yelling at me a few minutes later, when I protested my duties at the health fair.

"Bixie, you may think your job is secure. I am not sure why you have reached this conclusion. As you know your most recent job performance evaluation had negative numbers. Bla, bla, bla."

I quit listening to the pontificating Peckinsniff. Enough was enough.

After a while, he moved on, back to his perusal of porno.

I had spent so much of my day, dealing with difficult people. The pile of holiday decorations was still covering the hallways. Mr. Gorham was going to be very upset.

I went to my closet and got out the wide-sweeper broom. I pushed all the tinsel and garland and sprigs of holly and broken ornaments down the hall to the nearest



empty room. I knew no one would be occupying the small courtroom until next week. By storing everything in this room, I could slowly, each day take the debris to the dumpster.

I tossed in Mrs. Santa Claus and the jolly old elf-cardboard and all eight or twelve or whatever of the reindeer. Gone were the bells, the Christmas stockings, the chestnuts roasted on the fire, the jolly carolers, everything went into the conference room.

Soon I was finished, and I relocked the room. I mopped down the hallway, and when Mr. Gorham came to do his inspection, he could find nothing to criticize. Things looked spotless.

He grudgingly handed out his compliments to me for doing such a good job by saying, "See, Bixie, when you actually work instead of complaining or gossiping, you get the job done."

It was so time to leave. I hurried home. Jewel sat on her porch swing, waiting for her daughters to come home. She looked ready to explode. I waved to her and rushed inside.

I needed a complaining board, but Jewel was definitely not a good choice. Jade was somewhere; she had been vague about her plans. She might have mentioned going on another cruise; but she was somewhere besides Sleaufort.

My brother, George would have been ever so happy to listen to my work whinings, but the cost was too great. He was still expecting me to baby sit his five girls, when he and Charlemayne went on their annual Caribbean trip. So far, I hadn't committed myself.

Frankly, there was no way I would do such a thing. My nieces were all lovely, to be sure, with their food allergies and idiosyncrasies. One could not tolerate meat, one

could only drink green tea; one must never get up before 7:30am; one could not be spoken to except in a groveling kind of voice. One hated yellow food; one hated wrinkled clothes; one could not stand her sister's friends; one hated all things hairy, and so on. But they all hated me.

A wise man had offered me a suggestion on how to deal with life's little challenges. Actually, it was William. For a belated Christmas gift, he handed me a journal and told me to use it for venting. He said he loved listening to my witty earth views and he knew that the world would enjoy hearing everything I had to say.

I pulled the journal from its special place in the kitchen. I had used it to even up my table legs and prevent the table from wobbling.

I fixed a peanut butter sandwich and began writing. I filled five pages with my thoughts on the first day back at work after the holidays. I described my coworkers, my bosses, the futility of the tasks I must do. After I was finished, I felt relaxed. Venting had helped clear my mind. I was in a different place – for about three minutes. Then the phone rang. I let the machine do its thing. There was silence and then I heard George's voice, "Do what I said – do it – if you plan to use your ipods ever again, you'd better do it." There was a short quiet spell and then the pure sweet chorus of children's voices rang out. The song choice was "You are our sunshine; our only sunshine; you make us happy, when skies are gray..." the song continued, until a shrill voice said, "Quit poking me; I'm singing the stupid song to stupid Aunt Bixie, just like stupid Daddy said to..." Thanks to the great thunderclouds above, the message space had ended. No more song.

The phone rang again. It was Jade. I picked up the receiver. "What's up? Where are you?"

Jade quickly updated me. She was with the love of her life, Quincy, whom she had met while waiting to post Holden's bail. Quincy had taken one look at her distraught face and taken her away from the bondsman's office, to a tropical paradise.

I interrupted Jade's monologue. "Who is Holden? Why were you posting bail; what did he do? Who is Quincy? Where is the tropical paradise?"

Jade laughed. "Bixie, you are too much in the concrete foundations of the earth. You need to float, to reach for the skies above. If you put your nose in the ground; you will never breathe the summer breeze."

She was talking more jibberish, but I had heard quite enough, and I hung up. The phone rang again, but I had had my fill.

I settled into watching TV. The new winter season was beginning. There was a new Bachelor show, several new crime series and a new historical drama, set in the last century. Sadly, however, all the regular telecasting was postponed so that the president could give us a summary of the last year's events.

I listened for five minutes or fifteen seconds and fell fast asleep. I woke up several hours later and briefly watched the show that was on TV. It was horrible, and the true crime that was being presented, gave me nightmares for the rest of the night.

Tuesday morning arrived – all dreary. I tried to avoid looking in the special mirror that Aunt Jasmine had bequeathed to me. Unfortunately, I was not successful and there I stood with my grey face and bloated body. Aunt Jasmine's words came back to haunt me. "You'll never be pretty; you'll always be alone; you will be..."

Once again, I retreated to my special alone place and thought happy thoughts and repeated my mantra.

Somehow, with the help of Ben and Jerry, I got dressed, fixed a low-fat bologna sandwich for lunch and drove to work. I was early, but the great boss-dude had already left a note on my closet.

"Don't forget the small court room is going to be used as the meeting place for the IS AN ASS group this morning."

That note was the first mention I had heard of the meeting. I stormed to Mr. Peckinsniff's office and blammed on his door. It was, of course, shut so he could carry on his private e-mail conversations with all his women. My belief was that many of the so-called women were not what they purported to be. I knew for a fact, that one of the most prolific e-mailers was the combined team of the law student interns.

I had overheard them as they conducted their affair with the great Peckinsniff. I could hardly wait until they were confronted with his demand for a face-to-face meeting.

When Mr. Peckinsniff opened his door, he had a red face and unzipped pants – oops. He demanded to know what was so important that he had to interrupt his desk calisthenics.

I kept the obvious comment to myself and asked about the meeting schedule. "Sir, I have no helper and I simply cannot keep up with the additional demand of cleaning after private meetings. The IS AN ASS is a particularly bad group to clean up after.

When they had their Christmas, I mean holiday party, it took three hours just to clean up their food leftovers and the sand and the dead fish were just the icing on the cake."

*Strangeness in Sleaufort*

The IS AN ASS group was composed of out-of-state retirees who had selected a beautiful part of the beach to spend their remaining days on earth.

The group was into conservation, recycling, and tooting their own horns. To protect the pristine beauty of their beach they had set up a security gate with an armed guard and in the evenings, the area was patrolled by rabid dogs.

My thoughts had drifted, but quickly my mind returned to the present, when Mr. Peckinsniff waved his hand in front of my face. "Bixie, in today's economy, we at the courthouse, are forced to make whatever changes we feel necessary to obtain the funds needed to run the facility.

Thus, we are now renting out rooms in the courthouse to outside groups. I am making a list of the times that meetings have been scheduled. You may need to work some evenings, but you will not be paid any overtime.

Here is the plan that Mr. Gorham and I have come up with. Your fellow employees will help you with your tasks. We are going to post a sign-up sheet online and encourage everyone to pick out a duty or time that is convenient.

Isn't that special? Team work will get us through our hard times..."

I left the office as he began singing some kind of hippy song.

What had he been drinking or sniffing? He was totally delusional. There was no way that my beloved coworkers would be helping me, with anything.

I could hear Dolly and Ms Grimsley now. "Did you read the latest memo? We are supposed to sign up to help Bixie. Ha ha ha. The only thing I want to help her do is pack up her crap in the closet and move on out. Then my beloved,

(fill-in the blank) husband, deadbeat brother-in-law, unemployed son, young lover can have her job."

I walked down the hall, mumbling and grumbling until I realized that the room scheduled for the IS AN ASS group, was the room I had put all the tinsel and other holiday debris in.

Quick, quick, as the Sleaufort tides, I loaded up the trash barrel and hurried to the outside dumpster. It took seven trips. Finally, I vacuumed up the pine needles and tinsel and broken Christmas bulbs, and then arranged the chairs in a meeting-friendly order.

It was almost 10am. I had met the deadline. I went to my closet and sat for a moment. I was exhausted. Just then, I smelled a distinctive odor - roses. Dolly Thorne was coming. For a while, Dolly had forsaken her trademark of rose perfume, available at nearby drugstores for the low, low price of \$1.99 per pint. She had used subdued fragrances, partly because the judge rotating through Sleaufort was allergic to roses. He wasn't actually allergic to roses, but was sensitive to cheap perfumes.

Dolly stood at the closet door and said, "I might have known. Here you are sitting, while the women's bathroom has not yet been cleaned. It is disgusting. I plan to lodge a complaint with Mr. Gorham.

You need to be gone. My beloved Dick Dave, the best man in the world, hasn't been able to find work in this terrible economy, and you have a job and don't appreciate it or do what you are supposed to do."

Dolly left. There were so many flaws in her little conversation. Dick Dave had had eight or nine jobs in the last year. The jobs had not lasted.

There were many reasons for his failure to keep a position. On one job, he had spent the work day sleeping;

on another, he had sexually harassed a woman, who turned out to be the boss' wife. He had stolen the petty cash, \$4.70. He had installed some electric circuits that later set the enterprise on fire. He had deliberately fallen and then tried to sue the business. No matter how much my two bosses might want to replace me, their choice would never ever be Dick Dave, Dolly's beloved husband.

I left my closet and went to the bathroom that had been labeled "disgusting." All the toilets were flushed. The sinks were sparkingly clean; the trash cans were nearly empty. The floor had no debris. What was Dolly talking about?

Well enough was enough. Miss Dolly Temper-Tantrum could just show me what disgusting thing she was talking about.

I finally chased her down. After checking her most obvious hide out spots, the break room, Ms Grimsley's office, the empty room in HR, I found her chatting up the new law clerk – Claude. Claude was a different breed from the other law clerks that had been hired. He was a man, over forty, and supposedly married. It had been noted recently that the law students who were mostly young, single males wasted quite a bit of their time with the female law clerks. Then, too, there was the problem of unexpected pregnancies. Hence, Claude.

I interrupted Dolly's tryst and demanded that she show me what disgusting mess she was talking about.

"Fine, Bixie. If I must do your job, let's go." Claude looked relieved as we left. He was gasping to put air into his lungs.

We went into the bathroom and Dolly marched up to the mirror. "Do you see this – this disgusting thing on the mirror?" I looked in the mirror. I saw my grey face, with the

new wrinkles from my morning's interactions. There were strands of tinsel in my hair, but I saw nothing more. Dolly screeched, "Oh, my stars, Bixie, look, look, it's here." She touched the mirror.

I looked again at the mirror and then at her face.

"Dolly!" I said. "The thing isn't on the mirror. It is on your face. It looks like some kind of boil or infected sore. It is awful."

Dolly screeched and left the bathroom. I removed the tinsel from my hair and also left. Dolly was nowhere to be seen.

When I returned to my closet there was a note on my door. It read, "Bixie, important meeting today at Noon with our new labor allocation hiree in the HR conference room." There was no signature, but the authorship of the note was obvious. From the tightly pressed down writing to the jagged letters, everything screamed Mr. Gorham.

By now, the special people of the IS AN ASS group were drifting in. I had first met these folk in December, when I had played Santa Claus at their holiday party.

I made myself inconspicuous, so I could watch them. It was January and the weather was cold, but that made no never mind for these people. They wore a collection of beachwear. The men had on white pants and brightly colored shirts and the women, not to be outdone, had on floral blouses and coordinating colored shorts in all hues of the rainbow. They even had on sandals.

They tromped into the meeting room, and began their monthly business. I remained in the back of the room, organizing my cleaning supplies. I was spell bound. It was like watching a group of exotic animals at the zoo.

The focus of today's meeting was the dumpsite which had been found on an empty lot in their special



confounds. With today's economy, the lure of beach property had disappeared. Property values were in the toilet, and so unsold houses and land remained that way.

Miriam Pringles began flapping her mouth. She was determined to have the supposedly-single man from New York notice her.

"You all know how important my daily walk is with my beloved shitzpoodle, Clemantha. We love to walk along the pristine path that leads past the Nolan's house and the Smythe's house, and the empty house for sale, and the lot that had been for sale forever.

You know how I have done everything to make the Sleaufort County government accept more responsibility and accountability to our Island Land-Owners Association. They really need to step up their efforts to cut back the unsightly foliage that is taking over the lot...."

Annie Means, the president of the IS AN ASS cleared her throat in an attempt to get Miriam back on course, but she blathered on. "Well, when Clemantha and I came to the lot, we were horrified. You all know how I carry my little bags to clean up the doody that Clemantha may make. Well, sitting right in front of the lot was a great big pile of... it was too unspeakable to say more about it. I almost lost my breakfast, and poor Clemantha started howling, and I had to carry her all the way home. You all know about my bad back, which got hurt at our Disco Dance.

We need to rally and stop this outrageous behavior. I am sure that it was none of our beloved pets who were responsible for this atrocious behavior.

I believe it is the poor white trash of Sleaufort. They are envious of our good fortune, and they sneak their great big dogs into our restricted, gated community and allow this to happen. I would not be surprised to learn that they feed

the animals laxatives just to make sure that the mess is as bad as possible."

Miriam sat down; she was panting from her emotional tirade. She glanced at Tad Sloat, seeking his approval. After all, a single woman must do what she can to get notice from the only single man in their little paradise.

I was so enjoying the drama. I knew a piece of information that Miriam was unaware of. Tad was sure enough single, but he had all the female companionship that he needed. According to Jade, he belonged to several online dating groups. He seemed to be quite the stud, "dating" middle-aged women by the score. His modus of operation was chat them up, invite them for a weekend stay in New Bern, wine them, dine them, um-um them, and then try to sell the empty lot to them. Middle-aged women may be suckers for the smooth talkers, but they are hard pressed to spend their money on a lot, even a beautiful lot overlooking the ocean – not in today's economy.

Tad's latest conquest had brought her enormous Great Dane with her. The dog was guilty of the pollution; Tad was complicit. It would remain his little secret.

The debate raged on: what measures could be taken to keep Sleaufort outsiders from doing nasty things in the gated community. Eventually the group discussion moved on to another topic.

I had tried to be invisible, but I was attracting a lot of glances. It was time for me to move on. I doffed my figurative hat and left.

I whipped through my cleaning – the one hundred toilets and the forty-five sinks, plus the trash collection. In keeping with my New Year's resolution of not being nosy, I threw out all the trash. Sure, I did – there were just too many

*Strangeness in Sleaufort*

interesting things – the wadded up pink stationary in Dolly's trash can, and the receipts from the drug store in Ms Grimsley's and speaking of receipts, there was a whole slew of them in the law clerks' offices. And I asked you, who could ignore the magazines and newspapers in the judges' chambers?

I tucked the interesting things in my bag, and carried the rest of the trash to the dumpsters.

Life seemed peaceful. I had found no dead bodies stuffed in the dumpster or lying in a crumpled heap behind the dumpster. There had been no mysterious phone calls, no whispered threats. Perhaps the Thomases had moved on. Maybe the death of Dr. Thomas in December had stopped the madness. I could only hope.

\*\*\*\*\*

Meanwhile, at the nearby airport, a huddled group of three waited for the commuter plane to land.

The first person spoke. It was difficult to tell if the speaker was a man or woman. In a gravelly voice that trembled, he/she said, "She's going to be in a frightful mood. On the phone, she was ranting and raving about how we had failed. She said all she had asked from us was to revenge her fall from the peak she had occupied here in Sleaufort. Was Bixie Lee Biddle's death too difficult a thing to request?"

The gravelly voice grew silent and then said a few more words in a whisper. "I know she is my sister, but I wish she were gone. I don't know if I hate her or Bixie Lee more."

A squeaky voice came from the second of the standing figures. He was very short and presented a troll-like presence. "Hush! Don't you know that she has sold her soul

to the devil and knows everything we say or do? Frankly, I just want to get beyond all this and join my friends in the underground enclave."

The third figure was silent.

The plane landed, and a woman walked over to the three. "Well," she said. "I see that I cannot trust you all to complete the task I set forth. Why am I surrounded by ignorant, incompetent ingrates? Why?" Her voice rose to a shout. People around began to stare at her.

Six pairs of grayish, greenish, brownish pond-scum colored eyes met the pair of grayish, greenish, brownish pond-scum colored eyes possessed by the screaming woman. Helplessness confronted madness.

The woman lowered her voice. "Fine, I will help you and then I plan to return to my home in St. Thomas and live Bixie-Lee-Biddle free for the rest of my life."

The man-like woman opened his/her mouth to argue. The woman who had flown in jabbed him/her with a pointed nail and hissed. "One more peep from you and I will take your tongue out and feed it to my pet." She pointed to the small valise at her feet. There was movement within.

Then she continued in her diatribe against the three. "I don't even really care what Bixie Lee Biddle does to you all. But I am running out of money. Young men come with a price in St. Thomas. I may be letting you in on a secret you were unaware of, but there is Thomas money hidden here in Sleaufort.

I have been reading some of the journals that my father, the Judge left, may his soul burn in Hell forever and ever, and in with all his ramblings about his genetic research and pornographic going-ons, he described the treasures of gold, jewelry, and money he had hidden.

*Strangeness in Sleaufort*

Apparently, he was very generous in his lending practices. However, when payment time came and the poor foolish borrower couldn't come up with cash, my beloved father and his sidekick, my beloved uncle, may both their souls roast in the eternal flames, would take their pound of flesh, whether it was cash, jewelry, gold teeth, or young daughters.

Dear old dad hid his most of his ill-gotten gains all about Sleaufort County. He had plans to move to Brazil and live with some of his German cronies, but sadly, because of his many near encounters with death and the slow decline of his mental faculties, he died, as he had lived, stuck in Sleaufort."

The woman who had flown in began to shriek. "He is gone, along with his foul-acting brother, and his evilly complicit wife, my mother, who assisted him in my torment. You are lucky, Tom, for you escaped most of their handiwork. I lived in a prison for years, until the beautiful fire and the hungry hogs and grease on the stairs freed me and allowed me to become my own woman. Today, I am free, free I say." She began laughing and sobbing and sank to the ground in a blubbering puddle.

People were pointing and trying to get security intervention. The man-woman pulled Miss Thomas, for the woman who had flown in was Miss Thomas, obviously not dead, to her feet. Between the three, the man-woman, the troll, and the man who did not speak, they managed to get Miss Thomas to their car. She sat in the back, talking to the thing in the valise. "Baby, baby, I'm okay." The snuffing sound from within the valise stopped. The four Thomases left the airport, Miss Thomas still talking about hidden treasure.

## TWO

It was time for the meeting with HR and the person newly hired to be a labor allocator. Perhaps there would be some lunch provided. I was starving.

I was the last of the group to enter the small conference room. There sat Mr. Gorham, Mr. Peckinsniff, Mr. Phrogge (the county lawyer), Ms Bytchely (the HR chairperson), and a person that looked vaguely familiar.

I sat down as everyone glanced at their watches and sighed. Mr. Gorham sighed extra loudly and then said, "Well, let's get started, we have wasted enough of our time, sitting and waiting for Bixie Late Biddle.

Let me introduce our new hiree, Ms Priscilla Wright. Ms Wright has had a great deal of experience dealing with labor issues ranging from fighting cases against folks trying to get awards for social security disability, to those trying to soak the government for workmen's compensation. The whole group of disgruntled fakers got zero money for their troubles.

Ms Wright lived in Sleaufort a few months ago. She says she loved everything about Sleaufort, until she had a slight problem with some kind of self-absorbed county worker. It was a life altering event. From that day on, she vowed that never ever, would a government employee be allowed to mistreat a citizen, the very person who gave their hard-earned money in taxes to pay for the government worker's salary. Without further ado, let me introduce our new fighter for the right, Ms Priscilla Wright.

The well-dressed woman stood and began to talk. Her voice was familiar. Who was she; who was she? Then I remembered.

Our interaction had occurred almost nine months ago. (For the whole exciting story, read **Slitherings**.) I had been cleaning bird doody off the courthouse steps, when inadvertently, I had sprayed Priscilla. She got a tiny bit upset, maybe because I drenched her au couture outfit, ruined her hair do, made her makeup run, and pretended she was a mangy dog.

The saga continued for the next several weeks. The drenching had not helped profile her beauty nor had her subsequent profane outburst. As a result, she first lost her (wealthy) fiancée, and soon her chances of becoming the Sleaufort county spokesperson went down the drain, as well. The incident had made it to the Internet and various T.V. shows.

I tried to look not like myself. Maybe she would not remember me. After all, it looked like she had moved on. Then our eyes met. If death could have been dealt by a pair of frosty blue eyes, my nearest and dearest would have been making funeral arrangements.

Priscilla began her analysis of my job status. "Honorable members of the Sleaufort County Courthouse, I have carefully looked over the appeal which Bixie Lee Biddle has written. It was difficult reading for me, because it was so badly constructed.

I do not know if Bixie has a learning disability, or took insufficient time to write out the job description for her assistant, but frankly, before I can make any kind of recommendation, I need a clearer plan expressed.

For this reason, I am suggesting that there be a delay in hiring a support person for Bixie. I will take the new plan under advisement in sixty days.

Until that time, both you, Mr. Gorham and Mr. Peckinsniff, have made some excellent suggestions. The

idea of letting other courthouse employees help Bixie out in their down-times, is the thinking out of the box, I like to hear.

I would suggest that the volunteer time sheet be posted as soon as possible.

Does anyone, not you Bixie, have any comments? Then let's meet in sixty days."

She smiled at everyone, and beckoned for me to come nearer. She whispered. "Just so you know, you will never get a helper and when I'm through with you, you will be lucky to have any kind of job or friends. See how many friends you have, once they have to help you in their free time." She stepped back and graciously shook everyone's hand as they went from the room.

I thought to myself as I left. How petty, she is. Doesn't she realize how much grief I saved her? It turned out that wealthy fiancée was a serial killer who preyed on lonely women. After he broke the engagement with Priscilla, he had returned to his home in Georgia. His name surfaced several months later in America's Most Wanted, a show I do not watch, but I just happened to have on while I waited to hear PBS' new show exploring early artisan artifacts in the Piedmont.

I was so surprised to see a familiar face. A manhunt was on to find the guy. He apparently was not wealthy, but targeted women that he believed had cash. He married them, lived with them briefly, and then when the women (sadly) had fatal accidents, he moved on to the next prospect.

His record had caught up with him, and he was suspected to have killed women in California, Nevada, Iowa, Tennessee and North Carolina. Priscilla had been lucky – her fur coat had made the guy believe she was



wealthy. It would have only been a short time, before she was on the list of deceased wives.

But was she seeing the big picture? No!

I went down the hall and knocked on Mr. Peckinsniff's door. I heard the familiar sounds of clothes being readjusted and then the sweating man came to the door.

"What now?" he asked. "What is your problem?"

"When will the sign-up list be posted? I need help!"

"Bixie, I could say something to you like, if you didn't waste the county's time complaining, you would have more time to do the county's work; but that comment would be too subtle.

Here is what will be done. Pricilla Wright is presently writing out the sign-up list. She has decided not to wait for volunteers, but will assign the staff to certain times.

And to show our solidarity with the concept, Mr. Gorham and I will be the first helpers. I plan to assist you this afternoon at 3:00pm.

Is that good enough for you? I will use my precious time and help you do your work. So long, don't let the door hit you on the way out."

I did not like the sounds of this offer of help – Mr. Gorham and Mr. Peckinsniff, both coming at 3pm. Yikes!

I spent the remainder of the morning and early afternoon, dealing with the mundane cleaning tasks. I dragged the recycled barrels outside, muttering "Thanks!" to the person who had stolen the recycled cart. I cleaned the dried-up Mountain Dew on the basement stairs. The mess had come from the law students' relay race. They had rolled cans of different soft drinks down the stairs to determine which can would go faster.

For the record, diet Dr. Pepper had won. The Mountain Dew can had rolled faster, but had been disqualified, because when it hit the bottom, it exploded.

Of course, I had to re-cleaned the eighty-seven toilets, the sixty-five sinks, and dump all the trash. I kept the most interesting pieces.

Finally, 3pm came and Mr. Peckinsniff sullenly appeared to do his stint at cleaning. Mr. Gorham was a no-show.

I bubbly greeted him and said, "I'm going to let you clean the room where the Is An Ass group met this morning. This seems fair, because their meeting is the latest example of the extra work coming our way due to county's attempts to earn more money. I'm sure that this community-minded association didn't do much damage. The meeting only lasted about one hour."

I gave him a pair of gloves and the very best trash cart and sent him on his way.

I continued my cleaning by dealing with homeless camp that had been set up near the Confederate soldier statue. The statue nestled in a clump of bushes, which in the springtime would be ablaze with beautiful colors from the azaleas and camellias. However, now the homeless folk had moved in their cardboard boxes and other debris and set up their place of abode. Even that might have been tolerated, with homelessness being such a social concern, except for the fact there was an upcoming visit by some of the leading congressional figures who planned to participate in a Meet the People TV show.

I had posted a warning sign to alert the homeless camp that I needed to demolish it.

I was stunned when I rounded the corner and found the camp gone. One of the men who lived at the camp nodded to me and said, "I am doing the last bit of policing

for this area; we have moved on, and we appreciate the County's kindness at letting us reside here. Also, we want to apologize for overloading your dumpster. Someone has put a whole bunch of something in the back dumpster, so we made a neat pile nearby. Thanks again."

He left. I had no work to do. I was puzzled by his mention of the dumpster, but I decided to leave well enough alone.

I walked down to the police station and spent a pleasant half hour talking to Al, until old Mrs. Oates toddled down. She was huffing and puffing but the mail must go thru.

She was delivering the most recent love letter from Molly to Sonny, the soap-abstainer policeman.

She saw me and said, "I will report you for goofing off. Why must I take time from my busy schedule to do your work – you are loafing."

It took a few minutes for her to realize that a person delivering love letters had no cause to complain about another person's loafing – her mind and the filtering process on her tongue, being warped with age. Eventually her mind shut down her mouth and she wagged her fingers in good-bye."

I asked Al, what was going on with the strange, relationship between Sonny and Molly. "It's like the mating between a dog and a cat, or a lion and a zebra. It doesn't compute.

Molly is married. I think Sonny is a nice guy, but he only showers every other week and he's a pig."

Al answered, "I've been wondering the same thing and this is what I've learned – Molly has been suffering from kind of sinus problem. I do not believe she can smell things. Yesterday, there was a fire in her office. She should know

better than plugging in four appliances in a standard outlet. There was smoke billowing out when we got there and she was still pondering the cause of the cloudiness in her office. I could not breathe and there she was smelling, nothing.

Molly's husband is AWOL, or so the story goes. I am sure you've heard on some of the trash shows you watch, how a guy goes out for cigarettes and comes back three hours later.

Molly's husband went for a lottery ticket before Christmas and is still somewhere out there. We have our suspicions, here at the station, of his location and personally..."

I interrupted Al. "I need to go back and see how Mr. Peckinsniff did with his cleaning. See you later."

When I returned to my closet, I met a sweaty, angry-looking Mr. Peckinsniff.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Bixie, you gave me the most disgusting job."

"No, No, the IS AN ASS group is very civic minded and opposes littering on every level. They are into recycling and debris-picking up. Their gated community is kept pristine. The flowers are not allowed to shed dead blossoms; the dogs cannot be larger than five inches or weigh more than fifteen pounds; the cars must not be older than five years and are kept in tip-top mechanical condition.

One family had dogs that were medium-sized. They tried to hide the presence of the dogs. They dressed them in children's clothes; they bought dog food outside Sleaufort County – but they eventually got caught. One day they were there; the next day they were gone – vanished. It was as if they had never existed."

Mr. Peckinsniff growled. "Are you crazy? I could not believe the mess I saw. There was food everywhere, organic food, to be sure. There was an assortment of reading materials, magazines, letters, and newspaper articles – all with a liberal, save-the-planet bit.

Someone had spilled something in the corner and someone else had filled the trash can with – I don't know what – but it smelled like vomit. It would have been cleanable, but obviously – they don't appreciate the use of plastic bags. They removed it and put everything directly in the can."

By now, I had quit listening to the great Mr. P. "Welcome to my world." I thought as he threw his gloves in the trash can and left.

It was time for me to go as well. I packed up my stuff, including my collection of tidbits from the trash cans.

As I drove home, the question uppermost in my mind was where to assign Mr. Gorham for his trash detail tomorrow. Mr. Peckinsniff had promised that Mr. Gorham would show for his work stint. One place that dearly needed cleaning was the basement storage room. The room comes to my attention periodically, because of the misuse it has gotten over the years. Last year, it was the site of Miss Thomas' suicide. Miss Thomas' image had been on my mind lately for no particular reason except day after tomorrow would be the anniversary of her death.

The room was filled with clutter and served as a storage room for all kinds of earlier Sleaufort court cases. Recently an enterprising young woman had been caught rummaging through the boxes. She had given some kind of horse-manure story about having been hired by an outside contractor to inventory the records.

The story was totally bogus, but when she flashed her feminine charms at Mr. Gorham, he let her go, once he had gotten her personal information. For his troubles, she had given him an incorrect contact number.

The mess still remained. It was the right job to assign to the big G.

I needed food – not fast food, but nutritious food. I stopped at the Stop'n Shop. I parked the truck and went inside. I cruised the aisles and tossed in packages of bran flakes, low fat cheese, turnips, kale, cans of salt-free soup, heavy duty fiber oatmeal, sugar-free jello and lots of other good food. In total, I had five bags, bringing the total cost up to \$18.

I managed to choose the slowest check-out line, but that was just fine, because I was able to spend quality time with Angela.

Angela had been a close friend of Jade. She was an on-the-edge, risk-taker kind of girl friend until she had met Orvil. Orvil belonged to one of the more fanatical church groups located in Sleaufort. He was a good-looking man which explained the hold he had on Angela. He made her give up her friendship with Jade, her job as a massage therapist, and all her Internet buddy connections.

Angela's appearance today was not good. Her complexion was pasty, and she looked dumpy.

"Hi, girlfriend, how are things going?" I asked.

"Things are going badly; Orvil and I aren't together anymore. I have no job or place to live, and I hate myself when I look in the mirror."

"What happened?"

"You know how Orvil acted like he was so good and pure and he was looking for a soul-mate, good and pure? I thought he was perfect and I was going through some

rough times with my old boyfriend – so I fell into the Orvil trap.

I can't begin to tell you what Orvil and his church group are up to."

I interrupted, "Which church group are you talking about?"

"Oh, you know, the whatever name they choose for this month – the one on the Noose River. It is the church that had the woman preacher that wore the veil and told the made-up story about her bout with the devils in hell-fire or whatever."

Hmmm, this was interesting. The church Angela was talking about was the one William was investigating and the preacher was Wilma Thomas, or so I believed.

It was check out time. I wrote down William's phone number and got Angela's cell phone number. "Listen, you need to get in touch with Jade. I think she needs another sales clerk, and she may have an apartment she can sublet to you.

William, my friend, has been trying to learn more about the going-ons in the church you went to, so maybe you can help him out."

"Bixie, I am scared to death to anger Orvil and that church. If I told you the kind of punishments they give, you would think I was making up stories."

"Angela, if people do not fight evil, evil will prevail – don't you realize that if you do nothing, eventually the church will 'get' you anyway?"

I could see that my words had been understood by Angela.

We said "Goodbye!" Angela's last words were "I'll call William and Jade. Later."

It was getting windy and a steady rain had started.

I was glad to get home. I unloaded my bags and looked through all I had bought for supper fix'uns.

What was this? What nutrition guru had gotten all this stuff? Where were the chips, the cookies, the Hershey chocolate almond bars, the Ben and Jerry ice cream? Who wanted to eat this sugar-free, salt-free, fat-free stuff?

Sadly, I prepared a bowl of bland soup and ate it with bland crackers and bland cheese.

My cable was on the blink. I had read all my good books and only had two books left, one written by a former conservative Senator entitled Seventeen Steps to Restoring the Greatness to our Country and the other by a noted health-fitness expert with the title Seventeen Steps to Restoring the Figure and Stamina You Once Had.

Surely, no one was in a worse situation than me.

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The three figures were trying to start a fire in an old house in the middle of Bogue Swamp. The wind whistled outside the house and bursts of frigid air came in through the cracked windows and under the warped door frame.

The wood in the fireplace was damp and despite the earnest efforts of the troll-like figure, the fire would not start.

"Hurry! Work faster! She will be here soon, and she will not be happy with a cold house, and you know how fearful she is when she is unhappy."

The troll snapped at the growly-voiced figure and said, "You are welcome to start this fire, if you think you can do better. Have a go at it."

The third figure said, "Shut the argument down. Put some of that paper around the wood, set it on fire and then the wood will burn."



*Strangeness in Sleaufort*

The troll work earnestly. Soon a fire was burning and throwing its heat out. Joy at this deed quickly ended as smoke billowed out into the room.

"The chimney must be stopped up. Put out the fire before we choke to death."

Once the fire was out, the three figures wrapped themselves in whatever they could find – mildewed curtains, mice-eaten blankets, cobwebbed sheets, and shivered as they ate cold Vienna sausages and pork and beans.

"Surely, no one is as wretched as we are and the worse is yet to come, when she arrives."

Just then the geek-figure received a text message. "It is from Her. She says that she plans to spend the night in the Notel Motel, where she will be warm. She'll catch up with us tomorrow."

"We are very fortunate," the gravelly voiced he/she said.

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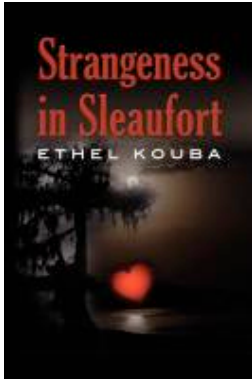
I sat on my couch and started reading the "Seventeen Steps" book. It didn't really matter which book I had selected – the format was the same. The first step was "evaluate the past; mistakes from the past have led to the shape the country/body is in now."

The second step was "Avoid mistakes from the past – the same thing for either the body/country. Fatness in the budget/diet leads to flab that the body/country learns to live with and flab once accumulated is very difficult to get rid of."

I got up and began looking for a pad of paper and pen to take notes. The information that I was reading was just too good to forget.

I scrambled through my junk drawer, and although I didn't find a pen that worked, I did find a bag of peanuts. Emboldened by my good luck, I decided to give the TV another try and blessed Turnip tops, the cable was back on, and I was able to eat my peanuts peacefully while I watched some kind of reality TV show that featured a work place. The show had the grumpy boss, the nosy co-worker, the flirtatious administrative assistant, the senile old woman, the lecherous assistant manager, and a bunch of other stereotypes.

Finally, I had seen enough. Where did they come up with such far-fetched plots? I cut the TV off and trundled off to bed.



*The Thomas family once again threatens Bixie in this Sleaufort adventure. During this Valentine season, the candy offered to Bixie is deadly, and the sweetheart-stalkers have the ever-familiar Thomas eyes. Bixie is surrounded by her back-biting, ever increasingly demented co-workers at the courthouse. There is no help offered from neighbors or friends in her encounters with the Thomas clan. Will the seventh adventure be the last for Bixie? Say it is not so.*

## **Strangeness in Sleaufort**

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