

For Bixie, in Sleaufort, springtime brings new problems; a tyrannical boss, more work, mold in her house and in charge of courthouse Easter festivities. Her brother wants her to babysit; Jade wants her to be a xxx-rated bunny. The Thomas family is still a threat. A pink coffin is waiting.

SMACKDOWN IN SLEAUFORT

by ETHEL KOUBA

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The background of the cover is a photograph of a riverbank. In the foreground, there are several large, weathered tree stumps and roots protruding from the sandy ground. A wooden boat is partially visible on the water in the middle ground. The background shows a dense line of mangrove trees with their characteristic hanging roots, under a hazy, overcast sky. The overall mood is somber and atmospheric.

SMACKDOWN
in Sleaufort

Ethel Kouba

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First Edition

Cleo was the next supplicant. She was just hoping that the bestest aunt in the whole wide world would let her best friend in the whole wide world spend the night with her. Her best friend was Chris. Amaryl quickly informed me that Chris was seventeen and he had been expelled from several private schools. He was also rumored to be the baby's daddy for 2 girls. I gave Cleo a firm "No!!" to her plans. She left hissing and hitting Amaryl. I wasn't worried. Amaryl was a stocky girl and could easily take Cleo. I gave up my plans of dosing the chocolate milk for my nieces and instead let them watch TV until their bedtime came. I had learned my lesson the night before, and I maintained my watchful vigilance until the girls were asleep.

I fell into a restless, fragmented sleep. I was greeted by the screaming alarm the next morning. I check Charlemayne's list to see what was on the agenda. Yay, for us! We were supposed to put on our Sunday best and go to the early community church service.

George and Charlemayne believed that their beautiful daughters should attend many different church services, so they could decide which was best for them personally.

Belle was leaning toward devil worship and Daphne was currently worshipping a tree called Mother Maple. The other three girls had not pinned themselves down to a single religion.

We proceeded to get all prettied up. I had to send Belle and Cleo back upstairs to put on proper Sunday attire—cutoff jeans and halter tops were a "no-no."

Finally, we were all set to go. The community church was located on the edge of Sleaufort. We arrived late and had to park across the street. When we entered the church, the choir was hard at work playing some unrecognizable song that told us about the trees and flowers and songbirds nodding their hellos. Next up was a lovely solo sung by a woman who should not have been allowed to open her mouth at all. After another song from a tiny tyke who mercifully had forgotten her words, the ushers went around handing out a collection of instruments—drums, cymbals, xylophones, kazoos and horns.

The guy up front explained what we were going to do—something about if a single instrument is played, there is no music, but when all the instruments are joined together—truly God hears a beautiful song.

Perhaps with another group, a beautiful song would have been created, but sadly not with this group. The instruments did not sound so bad, but Belle and Electra began singing. I am not sure where they had picked up all the words they were singing, but the people around us were horrified.

Amaryl didn't want to lose the group's attention, so she began to mumble stuff, as if she was speaking in tongues. Cleo and Daphne did a shimmy-shake dance.

We were escorted out by the ushers and told not to return.

I was disgusted at the five's behavior. I told them "Very well, we will go home. Let's see how you like spending the afternoon inside. I had planned to take you to the beach, but we will not be going."

Just then, the clouds blew in, and heavy rains hit our car.

When we got home, I unlocked the front door, and let the girls go in. Little Electra began whining about how she had left her little dolly out in the car.

"Fine, I will go out and get your little dolly, even though you certainly don't deserve my help."

I tore the car apart looking for the dad-blamed dolly. It was not to be found. Finally, I gave up and went back to the house. The door was locked.

"Girls, open this door right now." I could hear snickering. "Right now," I said.

A cab pulled up to the house. My beloved brother stepped out. I ran down to the street.

"Why are you here?" I asked.

"Oh, Charlemayne had some kind of psychotic breakdown yesterday evening. Personally, I think she forgot her 'vitamins.' But she began wailing about forsaking her beautiful girls. She got worse and worse. Finally, I said we can go back home if you want. It turned out what she wanted was for me to go home and be with the girls, so here I am. Charlemayne decided to stay."

"George, they have been awful. They have locked me out and they did so many bad things." The cab driver stood by, impassively listening.

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George said, “Well, we’ll see; there’s a new sheriff in town. When Charlemayne is around, I am not able to do squat about discipline, but now we will just see. Take the cab and go. Enjoy the rest of your Sunday.”

The cab driver and I left. As we drove off, I could hear George bellowing, “A new Sheriff is at the door!”

Dolly whispered, “Didn’t you get the dress code memo—everyone was instructed to dress up; no exceptions.” Dolly snickered, “Oops, I must have forgotten to give you the memo. Don’t worry; you look just fine.”

I got a lot of stares and whispered comments that suggested I did not look just fine.

At 9 am, we were all shepherded into the big conference room. A new guy was introduced. He would be in charge of the courthouse administration. Gorham had been given an unpaid leave. Peckinsniff was appointed to the position of assistant associate manager, but with a reduced salary and a smaller office.

Mr. Williams, the new boss, began his spiel. He said that his analysis had shown that over the last six months, there had been an increase in abuses of the system and a decrease in productivity. If this trend were to continue, Mr. Williams predicted that according to the equation of $t=km(n)^2 \times l$ where t =time, m =hours worked, n =number of employees and l =inverse number of leaves taken by the employees, and k =coefficient of productivity, the county courthouse bank account would not exist by summer. He then produced a flow chart that showed the role of everyone employed at the courthouse. Mr. Williams said in the next few months that the number of workers must decrease by 10% but cost-cutting applications would still need to be implemented to cover the increasing costs of the bureaucracy that was needed to run the courthouse.

Mr. Williams said, “I dream of a day, when there stands one manager for each worker. Of course, this is only a dream solution, but we do plan to add a finance officer, a HR director, a PR manager, a manager of time sheets’ violations, but I digress. Where we are now, in the next few weeks, we need to let go three HR associates, one policeman, one-half of a custodian”

I interrupted Mr. Williams’ talk. “Sir, there is only one custodian. Of course, Management has been trying to find an assistant custodian, but....”

Mr. Williams looked at me and said, “You must be Bixie Lee. I have heard a great deal about you—and none of it was good. If your productivity does not improve, you will be gone.”

Then he talked some more, blathering about government waste and how the whistle-blower had made his job so easy. Whistle-blower?

As the meeting drew to its inevitable end, Mr. Williams beckoned for me to stay behind. This interaction did not go unnoticed. As Mr. Williams continued in his slashing read of people's jobs, the mood of the group went from gray to dark black. Finally, the meeting ended.

I was trying to sneak out, but Mr. Williams said "Not so fast! Come here."

When I was close to him, he bent down toward me, and with a threatening voice, not helped at all, by his breath stinking of unbrushed teeth and onions, he whispered to me. "I know who you are and what you did to my beloved stepfather, Dr. Thomas of Rustin. Do you remember him? He was a wonderful researcher, whose death you caused. He was answering life and death questions.

To be sure, he was not the best man in the world—the beatings, the being locked in closets with virtually no food, and fighting with the cockroaches for scraps. But all this made me a better man and you are responsible for his demise. I was six hours of graduate credit away from my PhD, and from a job as vice president (director) of the Institution. I had already set up my account in the Cayman Islands. In five years, I would have stolen, uh, earned enough money to retire forever. You ruined these chances; I vowed revenge on you, and revenge will be mine.

For now, until you cease to exist, you will remember, Miss Bixie Lee, I am your boss. When I say jump, you will ask how high, and when I cut your hours back, you will say, 'Thanks for allowing me to work with the greatest manager I have ever known.'"

I backed away from Mr. Williams. He was seriously twisted. Saliva dripped down his chin; his face was purple; veins stood out on his forehead.

"Don't you leave, Bixie Lee Biddle! Fall on your knees and worship me. I am your destiny!"

By then I was gone. I ran into Ms. Grimsley, almost knocking the fat bat to the floor. "Bixie, I will report you if you ever strike me again.

Why are you running—in a hurry to cram your eight hours into the five hours that are remaining?”

“Ms. Grimsley,” I stuttered. “I have had the most awful confrontation with the new manager, Mr. Williams. He threatened to cut my hours and to make my life a living hell, because I caused his stepfather, Dr. Thomas to die. He is insane.”

I was still talking, when a strange sight greeted my eyes. Mr. Williams was escorting old Mrs. Oates down the hall.

He greeted the two of us, and in a soft, gentle, melodious voice said, “Hello ladies. I have been conversing with this wonderful lady. She has been sharing her memories of courthouse life, with me. I think it might be super to record her memories, as well as write up the history of Sleaufort.”

Then he smiled at me. How his canine teeth sparkled, as he licked his lips.

“Bixie, you would be a perfect person to write up all this history. I have been wracking my brain on how I could keep you employed for forty hours a week—what with the austerity measures that are being implemented. This is what I propose. You will do your custodian work in thirty hours/week. We have already hired a temp to help with the other ten hours. With the rest of your work week, you can research all the history of Sleaufort. You might begin with the beloved Miss Thomas, who was the manager when you first came here. She possessed such a quirky personality.”

I covered my mouth preventing, the vomit creeping up my throat to spew out; could the man say anything else that would make the situation worse?

The answer was “YES!”

Mr. Williams smiled again. “Bixie, they tell me that your house has been condemned for habitation, until the mold problem is cleared up. My heart has been filled with sadness, thinking of your plight. Then an answer came to me while I was praying. Bixie, I have completed the paperwork that will allow you to live in our beloved Miss Thomas house, until your house is deemed habitable. What do you say to this wonderful suggestion?”

SEVEN

I had decided that I was going to eat better and exercise more, but I had not known that I would be the Easter celebration chairwoman. I needed food and it needed to be greasy, sugary, and filled with calories.

There were many places that could fill this need. After all, I lived in Sleaufort, once voted the town with the most grease-consumption in the south-east.

I had heard of a new restaurant that had opened up recently near the courthouse. Its gimmick was to calculate the cost of a meal, based on a formula, using a person's weight and age and height.

I drove over to the establishment, named BMI, parked and went inside. My glasses fogged from the warm greasy air.

I ordered a slab of ham with a slab of cheese, both wrapped up in a slab of pumpernickel bread, and then deep-fat fried in a coating of cheese biscuits. To wash down the sandwich, I got a low-fat soy milk, infused with chocolate chip ice cream.

To determine the cost of my meal, I had to step on a scale and tell the cashier my age. He put the values into his calculator and said my meal cost one hundred and twenty-five dollars.

Needless to say, I started screaming my protests; the manager was called, and ten minutes later the disagreement was solved after proper notice of decimals and conversion factors were used.

I left with my supper and not too much poorer.

When I got home, I sat on my porch and ate supper, while I watched the antics of the sea gulls.

Jewel waved "Hello" and came over to tell me the latest Crystal/Tiffany news.

Crystal was taking a mail-order class that taught religion. The group offering the class was promising a fulfilling career for those who graduated from the class.

Jewel handed me the brochure, describing the educational process.

“Did you read this?” I asked, once I had scanned through the brochure.

“To be an ordained minister, a person must take twenty classes, each one costing five hundred dollars, and then the person must student preach for a year, but not in the US, and then they will get a provisional certificate. Oh, my sweaty sneakers, Crystal will be forty years old before she finishes—assuming that she does finish.”

Jewel shook her head. “You are so right; I already knew this. It is just one more thing she’ll try. Remember when she wanted to be a model—no, wait, you weren’t here yet. She read all the magazines describing what was needed. She was four inches too short and a tad bit too heavy, but she was optimistic and forged through all my objections.

She wanted me to take her to New Fern, so she could enroll in model school. Nag, nag, promise this, promise that, she would not listen to reason.

If I had not disconnected a wire under the car’s hood, we would have wasted hours with our trip to New Fern.

With this religious learning gig, I figure lesson 2 will be the factor that helps change her mind. I don’t believe Miss Crystal will enjoy ministering to the sick over at the Sleaufort Nursing home. She’s not much for getting her hands dirty.” Jewel stopped talking, because her beloved daughter had just driven up and was bellowing for supper.

“See you.”

I heard my land-line phone ringing. Who could it be? My beloved friend Jade, who didn’t offer me a place to stay during the mold crisis, or my helpful brother, George, whose offer came with hangman strings? I let the answering machine do its thing.

The message was from Jade. “Hi, Bixie, I hope everything is good. I need a favor from you—a teeny-tiny favor. I’m having a spring time, debauchery party for some of my best customers, and I need....”

The message was cut short. Sorry, no help for Jade. I had my own spring-time folly to set up. There was no time like the present. I started a list: Easter parade, Easter egg hunt, Easter decorations. So as to not offend anyone—the words “Spring time” must be substituted for “Easter.”

steps. I call him an Easter bunny, because he was wearing a floppy, flowery hat—you know the kind I mean—the one the housewives of New Orleans wore in their production of Celebration of Spring with the Bunny Hop.

I told Crystal that I needed to remember to tell you about the great big Easter bunny, but with so much on my plate—taxes, the church revival, Tiffany’s big announcement, I wasn’t sure that I would keep the information in my brain.

Crystal offered to get a pen and a piece of paper; she went into the house, and that was the last time I saw her.

I had to dose all the bushes with her stinky perfume by myself, and now I have a massive headache, plus look.”

She held out her hands. I could see she had a rash developing on both hands.

“Crystal’s perfume contains some kind of noxious chemical and it keeps the blamed animals from eating the shrubs, but lawsy, I didn’t realize the perfume would react with my skin.”

She said goodbye and left.

I stood there, trying to make sense of the conversation. The one thing that stood out was the mysterious bunny knew where I lived. Not good.

Meanwhile, in a nearby trailer park, an Easter bunny was returning to his temporary home. The trailer was a dump. It stood on cinder blocks and mud surrounded it and puddled underneath.

The interior had last been decorated during the Truman administration. The rug smelled; the commode sometimes overflowed. Various mutant forms of roaches resided within the walls.

The Easter bunny noticed none of these things. Compared to his previous dwelling, the trailer was a palace.

He took off his fur costume and hung it carelessly on a chair. The rabbit suit hid a multitude of uglinesses—dirty skin, scabs, scars, a mean little mouth, yellowing teeth, but sitting on top of a blood-vessel red nose were the Thomas eyes—brownish, grayish, greenish, pond-scum colored eyes.

He wrenched open the door of the refrigerator, swallowed a 40 oz. beer, in a few gulps, belched, and then warmed up a Lean Cuisine meal.

There was a knock on the outside door. "Come in," Bunny said.

A well-dressed middle-aged woman came in. She smiled, but no warmth was present.

Bunny shivered.

"So, Bunny, have you done what I asked?" She said in a sugary voice.

"Not yet, but I am near."

The well-dressed woman blinked her grayish, greenish, brownish, pond-scum colored eyes. Her voice raged, "Not yet! Not yet!

Did I not tell you that speed was our friend, and delay, the death for our project?

I want BLB gone, once and for all. I have been paid very well for accomplishing this action and you, as well.

And why did you kill Mr. Williams? This just alerted everyone to our plans."

The bunny answered. "Wait a minute. I had nothing to do with that. I was in Rustin on another job. PETA records will back me up."

The well-dressed woman appeared stunned. "Who killed him, then? I must leave and sit down somewhere quiet and think. Something very odd is happening."

In a flash, the well-dressed woman had left.

The bunny sighed with relief. "No way am I admitting anything to anyone, whether or not, I did it." Then Bunny noticed the box of candy that the well-dressed woman had left behind.

"Yum, chocolate truffles, my favorite, she must not have been too upset. I will just have a sample."

With that, he poured a half-dozen of the candies into his mouth.

A shake of a bunny-tail later, he fell to the floor, froth pouring from his mouth.

Bunny had done his last hop.

The well-dressed woman came back into the trailer, now accompanied by an old familiar resident—half man-half woman, but all Thomas. Wilma/Thomas had returned.

"Get this useless sack of a human being out of here. The Sleaufort bog will be a good place to put him. It holds many secrets now; it can contain one more."

Of course, Mr. Gorham was blithering nonsense. Since the labor discussions and strike ten years before, no county employee could be summarily let go. The employee must be written up three times, followed by a meeting between management, the employee, and a labor representative. A full analysis needed to be made, including a psychiatric evaluation, a socio-physical appraisal of the workplace, plus independent collaboration from no less than three people.

Dolly overheard Mr. Gorham and was so excited. “Dick, sweetie, do you hear what he said? If you do really good today, you will get Bixie’s job and tonight, I will do that special thing that you like so much.”

Dick Dave shuddered, not in a good way, at the thought of the special thing. Memories of the last time, it was used, were fresh in his mind. He smiled bravely and said, “Don’t worry, my little rose petal. I must get to work now, before I follow my passions and . . .”

Dolly left, and Dick Dave surveyed the list of jobs—the seven thousand toilets, the four hundred forty-four sinks, the tons of recyclables, to take outside. Yesterday evening had been the meeting of the overeaters anonymous, so the pig sty that had been created would need massive cleaning.

The three temps, Connie, Bonnie, and Lonnie, or whatever, tripped up to Dick Dave, and while he appreciated their micro outfits and their six-inch-high heels, he cared less for their request of finding the cause of the big stink in the basement closet and disposing of it (dead squirrel, or dead bird, or the most recent nesting place of the random homeless guy.)

Dick Dave was a free spirit and as a free spirit, he refused to let himself be chained down. When the hallway was empty, he put on his cap, and he was gone—on his way to Hunka Hunka Burning Love Massage Parlor.

The morning crept along. Messes were not clean; toilet paper ran out in the ladies’ room; trash cans overflowed. By lunchtime, it was apparent that no one was doing any kind of cleaning.

Mr. Gorham was furious. He sent out an email memo, chastising Dick Dave who was gone. He screamed and hollered and finally

stopped a random guy in the hallway. “Go to the janitor’s closet and see if the \$%#@ is asleep. Hurry back!!”

Ronnie, whom Mr. Gorham had targeted to be the errand boy, was to be pitied, because Ronnie did not work at the courthouse. He was a visitor to Sleaufort and was researching the sand flats that were found at the courthouse, near the Confederate statue. He believed that the sand indicated that the sea had originally been three miles interior to its present location. If this were true, it would without doubt validate the premise of global warming, plus the three miles interior would not belong to Sleaufort citizens, but rather to claim-stakers, of which he was one.

An acre of prime beach land was certainly worth the hours of research Ronnie had done.

Poor Ronnie started to object to Mr. Gorham’s demand, but when he saw the redness of the man’s eyes, and his clinched fists, he realized the folly of a refusal.

“Sure, I’ll check.”

Poor Ronnie walked down the hall, tapped on the closet’s door, turned the knob, and looked in. No Dick Dave, no person at all was inside, but on the table sat three lovely chocolate-covered donuts, glistening in the light from the overhead bulb.

Ronnie was on a diet. His significant other, Bonita, had insisted. She, herself was a trim little woman with a BMI of 17. She had nagged and cajoled and debated with Ronnie about all the dangers associated with obesity—diabetes, heart disease, COPD, damage to the joints, bla, bla. Ronnie always acted absorbingly interested, but he still ate like a pig. Finally, Bonita used the ultimate threat—she told Ronnie that until his weight had gone down fifteen pounds, there would be no more nookie.

Ronnie had truly tried to lose weight—rice cakes, all kinds of vegetables, tofu, no grease, sugar, or takeout foods. His weight had crept down a little, but the jiggle still jiggled.

That morning, all Ronnie had had for breakfast was oatmeal (no sugar), an over-ripe grapefruit, and cherry-flavored water. Coffee, it seemed, was also off the table during his diet.

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When Ronnie saw the donuts, he did his best to resist. He reminded himself of all the promising treats offered by Bonita, but Bonita was not there and the chocolate donuts with sprinkles of crushed nuts were.

He told himself, he would only eat a tiny piece of one donut, but a tiny piece led to a bigger piece and in a twinkle of the eye, he had consumed all three donuts.

He sat down; his conscience began to poke him. “Bad, bad!” His stomach hurt and soon his head also hurt. In a blink of an eye, all the pain stopped. Ronnie was dead.

As I was enjoying my half-day, things were not going so well for the Thomases. Wilma's delicate psychic-balance between male, female and monster was shifting incrementally toward the monster. Mother Thomas, aka Ms. Greene was losing control of the situation. The Easter bunny was demanding more money and refusing to work eight hours/day. Mother Thomas was becoming more and more angry. She had removed two of her part-time troops for insubordination, and she was not worried about getting rid of more.

Easter bunny Thomas had a valid question for Mother Thomas. "If you keep treating us like outdated potting soil, we can quit and then what will you do?"

"What an interesting question. You, perhaps have not realized that Judge Thomas, my beloved grandfather was a wonderful man (note to readers, Judge Thomas was a psychopath, a horrible, horrible man!!), and he had produced many children. The womenfolk could not keep their hands off him and he was very potent, so there are many offspring. Some may have been institutionalized, marginalized, or ostracized, but they all are connected with each other.

Furthermore, you must realize that the two who have been most recently removed were not true Thomases—their blue eyes gave them away.

Now, my little child, if you want to keep asking questions and throwing your asinine theories and thoughts out, about how I consider you all so much crap-infused mud, I have a pleasant surprise for you. Would you like a piece of my test confectionary creation? I call it, 'Special' because it tastes so good, but its caloric intake is zero."

Easter Bunny Thomas reached for a bonbon, but quickly his paw drew back when he remembered the previous cases of poisoned chocolates, no thanks!

He knew when it was time to fold his cards. He blinked his brownish, grayish, greenish, pond-scum colored eyes and put on his bunny costume. His last words were "Couldn't someone have paid some small amount of money to have this costume dry-cleaned? I can smell old wet stinky fur and when I put on the bunny head, it smells like something that has been swimming in the Sleafort bog. He left.

As has been said, three Thomases now remained in Sleaufort: Wilma Thomas, desperate for a fix of estrogen, Mother Thomas (aka, Ms. Greene), and the generic Thomas, who had not yet done anything noteworthy, except being a rather, not good Easter bunny. For the moment, the alias Ms. Greene has not been a part of the story. Mother Thomas was a relatively new figure in the Sleaufort soap opera of Thomases. She had lived up north and prospered until her various money-making schemes had drawn the attention of the law. She was fairly attractive in the right light and had targeted lonely men and subsequently married them. After a few blissful months of marriage, the men had succumbed to various conditions—they were all old, after all, with heart disease, high blood pressure, irritable bowel disease, diabetes, PTSD, etc. After each “death” Mother Thomas became a little bit richer. Her executions of the men were perfect, and no suspicion had ever been aroused, until she met, married, and said her final good byes to Maven.

The fault did not lie in Mother Thomas’ deed—after all she was perfect. However, Maven had already been targeted by Moira to be her next husband. Moira was another attractive, mature woman who had been “dating” Maven for months. She had seduced him, and was circling him for the kill—marriage, when she was hospitalized for a gall bladder attack. Her health insurance was nonexistent, and her medical care was therefore not so good. The removal of a gall bladder lobe had injured the liver. She did have a good malpractice lawyer, so after several operations she was made all better, with a sizeable amount of money to sweeten her recovery. Moira had used the money for a Caribbean cruise, figuring that old Maven would just sit in limbo, until she returned. When Moira returned, she learned that her true love Maven had died. She knew Mother Thomas was responsible, because the signs were obvious and were in the pattern that she herself would have used. She notified the authorities, but Mother Thomas escaped with just the clothes on her back. Of course, she had sewn uncut stones in the hems of her clothes. So, it was all good.

Mother Thomas needed a new place to settle down. Town after town, city after city were visited, until she at last reached Sleaufort. One evening she was at a bar that featured young women dancers and

old men slobberers. At one of the tables, sat Wilma—poor, poor Wilma—whiskers popping out on her/his face, straggly long hair, with a prominent bald spot, dressed in a mix of female/male clothes.

Mother Thomas sat at Wilma's table and bought him/her a beer. Wilma continued crying in his/her beer. Sometime later he/she confided her/his story to Mother Thomas. How she/he had been Thomas Thomas, but she /he had always felt there was a woman inside, trying to become free. But the lack of money meant that the needed-surgeries would not occur, and pharmaceutical help was out of the question.

Mother Thomas listened, but after a while, the alcohol fog and self-pity flowing from Wilma, made her talk blur into bla blanness. The name, Bixie Lee Biddle, was a name that was spoken many times.

Mother Thomas remembered the name, Bixie. She had been responsible for ousting the paragon of virtue, Miss Thomas from Sleaufort in an utterly ruthless manner. Mother Thomas had vowed to bring Bixie down, when she had the time. She needed to be eradicated. As Mother Thomas sat in that non-descript bar, she vowed to be the instrument of destruction for Bixie Lee Biddle. She gave Wilma a bottle of estrogenyl estrogenate pills and said she would be in touch.

Wilma wanted, no, needed more estrogen and she followed behind Mother Thomas like a beaten female dog.

sumptuous living room. The house was not hers, but belonged to a very rich man, who was semiconscious in the basement. Ms. Greene had been feeding him a mixture of oysters, barbiturates, and cooking sherry over a period of time. When he finally gave up the ghost, she planned to store him in the deep freezer.

Wilma (once more in control) began weeping when she saw Ms. Greene. "I am so miserable; you must help me. Give me some of the estrogen that I crave, and a little bit of money, and I will be on my way out of Sleaufort. You will never see me again.

Ms. Greene smiled her yellowed-smile and said, "Sure, baby, I will take care of you. Just sit down; I will get everything you need."

When she came back, Wilma was almost asleep, comforted by the music and warmth of the room. Soon Wilma was gone. She had not received what she had demanded from Ms. Greene, but now she no longer had a need for them.

Ms. Greene cleaned the golf club that had ended Wilma's unhappy life, with a few quick hits. Poor Wilma had wanted to be a female, but at the end of her life, she was a pile of undetermined mess.

Ms. Greene was muttering to herself, "A better place, she needs to be in a better place. Someone will find her here." She was trying to drag Wilma out of the house. She stopped and started cussing. "Wilma is too dadblamed heavy to move; I need help!"

A few minutes later, the Easter bunny popped up. "Hey, babe, you need my help? You know it will cost you!"

He heaved and hove, until finally Wilma was in Ms. Greene's Mercedes. "You're going to owe me big," he said. Ms. Greene did not care for his tone of voice. However, their relationship was almost finished. When they got to the Sleaufort Bog, part of the Great Dismal Swamp, the Easter bunny pulled Wilma from the car and slowly dragged her to the banks of the swamp. In she went.

The Easter bunny snickered and then turned to Ms. Greene. "I believe you owe me more money. I am not beginning to make ends meet with the paltry salary that the bunny gig is bringing in. You know I have expenses—alcohol, gambling debts (Who would have predicted that the Patriots would lose in the Super Bowl?), and last, certainly not

least—there are all the lovely fems, plus the three-ugly baby-mothers, claiming to have my children.”

Poor stupid bunny. He was complaining to the wrong Thomas. Ms. Thomas whapped his head, with a handy shovel and bye, bye bunny. Into the dark, dank waters, he went.

This section of the swamp-bog was home to many creatures, frogs, snakes of all kinds, moutons, and snapping turtles. As well, a pair of the most terrifying gators called this part of the bog home.

The female gator, was affectionately known as Sarah SueEllen; she was the dominant gator of the pair. Gabriel was a more laid-back gator, and he was the latest in the series of male partners for Sarah SueEllen. When she grew tired of her male partner, he became her week-end meal. While all the Thomas drama had been going on at the side of the bog, below the waters, Sarah SueEllen was snapping at old Gabriel. “You are becoming too fat—all you do is lay in the mud and fill up on whatever human trash gets dumped here. You used to be so handsome, with your sparkly teeth and feisty attitude, but now....” In the midst of this domestic chat, in flopped the body of the Easter Bunny Thomas.

“No, that’s the last straw—this disgusting synthetic covered thing—No, this stops now.” With a mighty push of her snout, Sarah SueEllen pushed the Easter rabbit out of the water, and so he lay in the primeval mud, and slowly returned to his basic components.

Later, he would be discovered by a group of boy scouts. Some people suggested draining the bog to search for other bodies, but saner minds won: any extra money would be used to support next year’s Miss Sleaufort beauty contest.

While all this adventure was being played out, I was trying to make some kind of progress in cleaning the Thomas house. I did what I could—very little, but finally gave up. I would return another day.

When I got home, Jewel tapped on my door. She gave me a big bag of food. “Bixie, you can enjoy this Easter meal. I have decided that I am going to Charleston to visit my sister. I will be back in a week or so.”

“What about your two girls?”

She went on to explain that during the next three days, the coffin would be decorated with flowers, butterflies, and other beautiful things, and in the end, it would be a heap of all things beautiful. Then it would be carried to the sea and be allowed to float away. By now, most of the attendees had left the room. Refreshments had been left by the 4-H club in the next room, and first come, first served.

And most people had not been listening to the blitherings of Ms. Poppinstock because she was a well-known wacko.

I stayed to the end, and when the room was empty, except for the pink coffin, I went to the front, and opened the coffin. Inside, oddly enough, there were several layers of reinforcement wood—strange, I thought, why? It was almost as if soundproofing had been added. The bottom of the coffin was reinforced, as well.

I would have continued my examination, but duty in the form of Mr. Gorham called, “Bixie Lee Muddle, can you attend to this mess?”

Well, to my surprise, the decorating of the coffin was a hit. All day, Friday, Saturday, and even Sunday, townspeople came by, to put live flowers (they died quickly) and pictures of flowers, butterflies, and baby animals on it. The coffin was barely visible, beneath its load of sentimental trash. The coffin was moved outside on Sunday evening, and it rested beside the statue of the Confederate soldier.

Unfortunately, the monsoon rains came on Saturday and continued into Sunday morning. The Spring Fling parade was a washout—literally, and the children’s Easter egg hunt was a disaster that made the children cry. Of course, I was blamed for everything. Could I not have controlled the weather better? By Sunday evening, I had it up to my chinny-chin-chin. My phone had blown up with messages. Then the 911-text came across. The courthouse roof was leaking, again, and it was feared that the computer system would be destroyed. My immediate attention was demanded.

So perfect. I put on some grungy work clothes and went to the courthouse, swearing all the way. When I arrived, I was greeted by two of the cadets, I had seen with Ms. Greene. They led me to a great big puddle on the first floor of the courthouse. I looked around. I noticed a very strange thing. There sure enough was water on the floor, but no signs of moisture on the ceiling. I turned to the uglier of the cadets and

began to query him about the leak. I felt movement behind me. At that point, I was aware of others moving toward me. Ms. Greene and several cadets were moving on me, with a variety of work tools. Then I was gone.

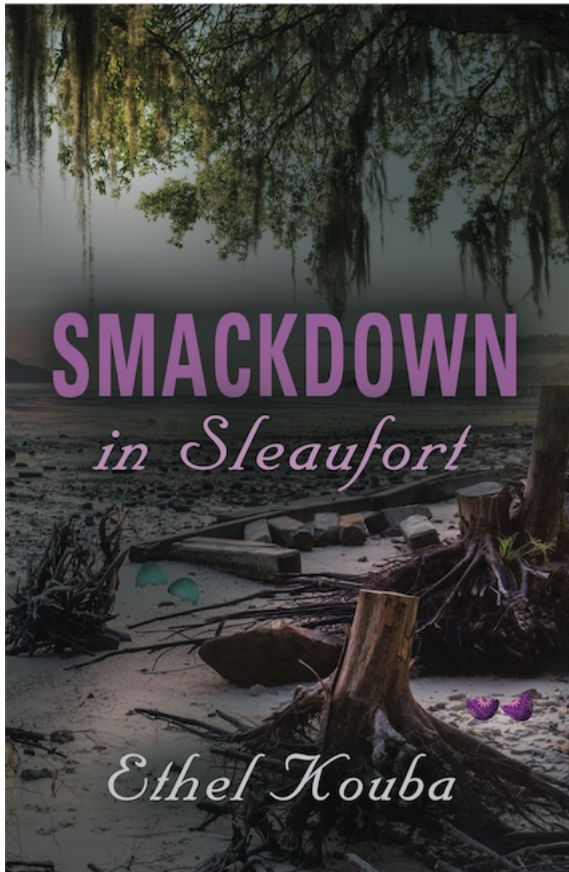
When I “woke” up, I could not move, and I lay in darkness. Where was I? Why could I not move? Why was it so dark? Then I realized that I was in the coffin, all trussed up like a sacrificial lamb. Then I heard voices. They sounded like they belonged to Bubba and Junior. “Why is it us that have to move this here pink thing—why don’t they make some of the synthesizers move it—they are big enough?” Sonny chimed in with “Did you see the one with Ms. Poppinstock? She was big!! Like a fat, old hawg—; no, a hippo; no, a whale.” The three policemen continued their debate.

Bubba said, “I am glad they decided to use the tractor to move this here pink beast to the sound. They, at first, were talking about us, dragging the thing to water? They were going to even have a parade, with bands and dancing bunnies. It must be four blocks to the nearest water. They must have been on something to come up with this idea.”

The three policemen continued in their talking. I was aware of the plans for the coffin. It would be taken to the sound, pushed in the water, and then allowed to drift away until it sank. Not good. I struggled to move; I couldn’t take a deep breath. Which death would come first— asphyxia or drowning?

I reassessed my position. My hands and ankles were taped. My mouth was also taped. The air level was getting low. And now the coffin was on the move, being carried to the edge of the water. Those in charge hadn’t taken into account the movement of the tide. The water was twenty feet out from the shore. The group shouted, “We can drag the coffin out; sure, we can!!” They couldn’t. The oozy-ness of the sand discouraged even the strongest of the group.

“Eh, leave it. We’ll return at 2 pm; the tide will be back in. More people will have gathered to see the event.”



For Bixie, in Sleaufort, springtime brings new problems; a tyrannical boss, more work, mold in her house and in charge of courthouse Easter festivities. Her brother wants her to babysit; Jade wants her to be a xxx-rated bunny. The Thomas family is still a threat. A pink coffin is waiting.

SMACKDOWN IN SLEAUFORT

by ETHEL KOUBA

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