



# Chill Factor

*A short mystery by* CECELIA TICHI

**T**he bizarre death of Miles Moody was reported everywhere on the Vanderbilt campus by mid-morning of a brilliantly clear, cold January day. Conflicting rumors flew — that Moody had collapsed and died on the spot, that he was found bludgeoned in a pool of blood, that in death he appeared to slumber as peacefully as a cradled infant. This much was known: The custodian's body was found by a student just before 8 a.m. on Tuesday, Jan. 18, in a basement corridor of the Stevenson Center. Vanderbilt police immediately cordoned off the complex, and classes scheduled in Stevenson were canceled for the day.

I, Barbara Koppage, assistant dean for curriculum development, heard the news in Kirkland Hall. I'm new to Vanderbilt. My assignment is to speed up curriculum changes that are already under way but stalled for the usual reasons—egos, inertia, turf battles. With a Ph.D. in the humanities, I'm a troubleshooter of sorts. It's not the career I'd planned, but at 38, childless and battered by a recent slugfest of a divorce in Chicago, I'm grateful for this opportunity to come to Vanderbilt to a new life working with top researchers and classroom teachers—and, to be frank, far away from the glass and steel towers and the Lake Michigan icy wind that remind me of my ex. I plan to work hard and on lunch hours walk the arboretum for solace as I reclaim my life.

Now, however, death—a bombshell this winter morning as six of us gather for an academic meeting, though two members are absent. A professor of finance begs off because

the alumni nervous, and “modernize” upsets faculty apt to be suspicious of fads. We are deep into “leveraging resources” when the provost’s assistant, Margeurite Ives, slips a note to the committee chair, Professor Victoria Ordway of the political science faculty. Her garnet rings flash as she reads aloud, “The provost announces that the Vanderbilt University community is deeply saddened to learn that a deceased person believed to be Vanderbilt Buildings and Grounds worker Miles Moody was found earlier this morning. Funeral plans are incomplete at this time.”

The room falls silent. Victoria Ordway is a graying ash blonde with piercing blue eyes that well with tears as her chin trembles. It's startling to see a faculty member weep at news of a custodian's death.

“Miles Moody wasn't just another janitor, Barbara,” says Professor Luis Ortiz as he leans toward me. Ortiz is a slender man with olive skin and bedroom eyes, a renowned

Vanderbilt alumni annually invite him to reunions. They remember his folk wisdom and his kindness when they were freshmen in dorms where he worked. You won't find another school where a custodian is held in such high regard.”

Others nod, and in minutes we file out in silence. I'm at the elevator when the redheaded Marguerite taps my shoulder. “If you have a moment, Barbara, the provost would like to visit with you.”

Translation: Get to the provost's office ASAP. Welcome to the South, where a direct order wears velvet.

So I sit across from Provost Zachary (“ZZ”) Zachos, a prize-winning economist and now a top administrator. His dark wavy hair is dabbed with gray at the temples, and I've been warned about those dark eyes that give what faculty call The Stare. The man is buff. He is my boss.

“How goes it? We're getting you moved into Kirkland shortly. Hope the Sarratt cubi-

## Did the beloved Miles have a mortal enemy?

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she's called to the Owen library, where someone has vandalized more than 100 books on finance, gouging library bar codes beyond machine recognition. Coincidentally, our Blair School conductor has excused himself to call an emergency meeting of his own. It seems orchestral music disappeared from music stands and was found ripped to pieces in a men's room stall.

“Petty” and “nasty,” “mean” and “warped” are regretful terms as committee members assure me this sort of thing does not happen at Vanderbilt.

“Not until now,” says Jonas Tomchuk, a philosopher. He has a point, but no one replies, and we settle into an agenda on leveraging resources, which is academese for accentuating the positive. “Reform,” you see, makes

authority on tort law. “Miles has become a legend on the Vanderbilt campus. He played trumpet in a blues band. Last October the chancellor held a reception to celebrate his 35th year at Vanderbilt. The room was filled with well-wishers.”

“September, Luis. It was September 24th.” This from Katrina Holstein, a Divinity School expert in the Old Testament who had skirmished with Ortiz throughout the meeting. The petite Holstein wears stilettos, the woman's version of elevator shoes, and a double-breasted pinstripe suit. I sympathize. I too have a female “power point” authority wardrobe on tap as needed.

Professor Ordway continues the impromptu eulogy. “The measure of affection and respect for Miles Moody, Barbara, is that Van-

derbilt alumni annually invite him to reunions. They remember his folk wisdom and his kindness when they were freshmen in dorms where he worked. You won't find another school where a custodian is held in such high regard.”

“The committee made a good start this morning. We'll make progress. Count on it.” This means I either deliver on new programs or hit I-40 by spring. Trust me, my post-divorce rehab requires success in this job. I want to be here, mind and spirit, enjoying the campus dogwoods and redbuds and, I hope, the basketball finals, men's and women's. “Your message about the custodian was read to us,” I say. “Everyone was stunned. Was it a heart attack?”

His gaze shifts, odd for a man whose trademark is eye contact. “We're looking into the circumstances. Campus police are on the case.”

“Case?”

He colors. “In a manner of speaking. There's some confusion.” Will he say more? I wait. “For instance, a TV monitor was found smashed by the body. Campus police are investigating. Moody was on temporary assignment in Stevenson. The chancellor went over to see for himself. I'd have gone, but ... .” He points to a stack of plastic milk cartons filled with folders. “Tenure cases,” he says. “The future of the University's in those milk cartons.”

“Tough decisions.”

“Some are, some aren't. It's the borderlines that keep me blinking at the ceiling in the middle of the night. And once in a while a faculty member goes off the rails. You see the files on that table? The guy was up for tenure, a very popular teacher, part-time intramural tennis coach. His record looked good, and then word came that he'd plagiarized.”

“His scholarship?”

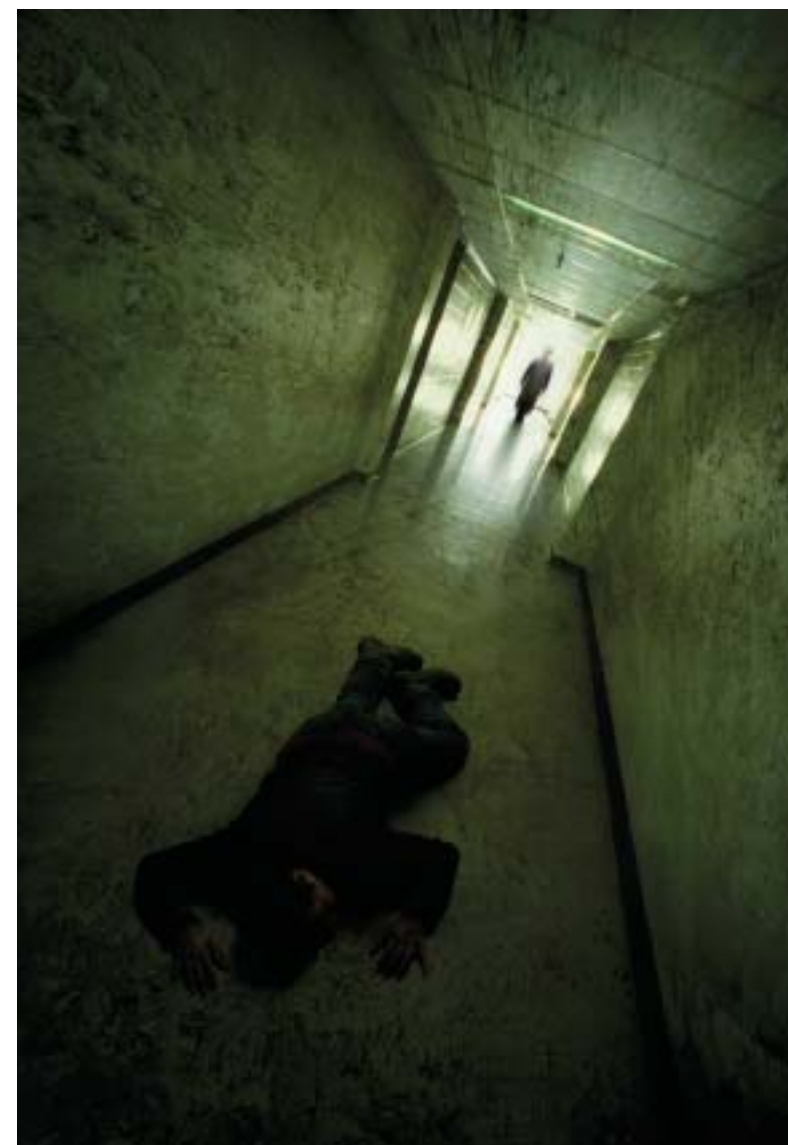
Zachos nods. “Ever hear of Morris Louis?”

“That's the professor?”

“No, Morris Louis was an abstract artist in something called color field painting. He's best known for paintings of stripes, and they hang in all the major museums. This professor's book on him was about to be published when we were informed that whole sections were copied almost word for word from somebody's doctoral dissertation. We'd become one more academic plagiarism story for the *New York Times*.”

“Is he still here?”

“Resigned, but not without a fight. He threatened to sue us—defamation of character, breach of contract. When his lawyer saw the evidence, he advised the guy to quit. He's still around, though, lunging at the Uni-



versity Club a couple days ago. As if he's flaunting it.”

“Ick.”

Zachos's phone rings, and I can't help overhearing him say “Light Hall” and “Jesup.” Off the phone, he bites his lip. “Crazy. That was the fourth call in two days about vandalism.”

“I heard about the book bar codes and the sheet music.”

“We're getting worried, Barbara. Did you hear about the blinds?”

My ex was a hunter. “Duck blinds?”

He laughs. “I wish. No, the window blinds in the computer classroom in Heard Library. No one touched the 25 new computers, but the new custom mahogany venetian blinds are smashed to splinters. That's not all. The athletic department reports somebody pen-

etrated the tight security of the stadium football field last night and dug up the field with a backhoe left with some construction equipment intended for drainage work. Whoever did it used a grappling hook to climb up and scale the wall. The coaches are irate, the campus police embarrassed. And now this—the phone call I took a minute ago. Three professors' academic gowns have been slashed.”

Slashed. Somehow this feels like another level, more personal, violent. “None of these sound like standard student pranks,” I offer.

“Definitely not. Vanderbilt kids don't much go in for mischief. Some graffiti, we deal with it. But each gown, the sleeves have been shredded. Only the sleeves—one gown on the Peabody campus, one in Engineering, and now one in Light Hall at the Medical Center. An oncologist, a civil engineer, and an

educational theorist. Go figure. The registrars will search transcripts to find if any students took courses from all three of these professors, so maybe we'll get a profile. For now, we'll e-mail the faculty. ‘Lock your office, take home your gown.’ Zachos checks his watch and stands, a signal to me to rise. “Sorry to cut this short. Insane days. Maybe we can grab a half-hour later this week to strategize.”

“I'll look forward to it.”

“And Barbara—keep your eyes open, okay? You're new, you're all over the campus for meetings. Sometimes it takes an outsider to spot things the natives don't see. Think outside the box and call me.”

His eyes lock on mine. The Stare? Is he ordering me, southern-style, to try my hand

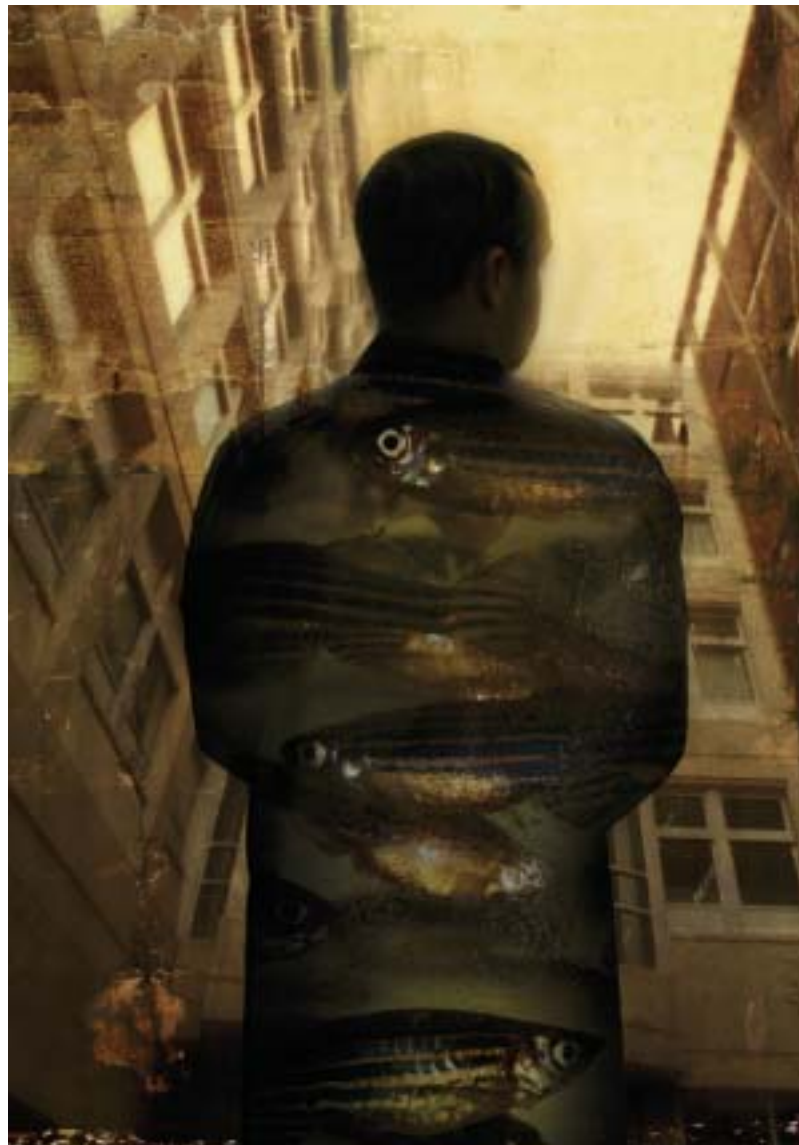
at solving this mess? Does my job performance rating somehow depend on it?

Clouds move in to match my mood as I head for the Law School cafe to grab a bite, but I detour past the bronze statue of Harold Stirling Vanderbilt to join the crowd in front of the yellow police tape at the Stevenson Center. Students bundled in new holiday-gift outerwear mix with faculty and staff, murmuring and whispering rumors about the janitor as Vanderbilt police radios crackle.

Two students hold cassette recorders and notebooks, a blond guy in a down vest, a dark-haired woman in a jacket from L.L. Bean. Doubtless student reporters, they prod a young officer with questions. The officer shakes his head, stonewalls them. No ambulance or hearse stands by for a body, for which I am grateful. Sunlight fades across a somber scene.

Back to my makeshift office with a takeout lunch, I start into my caesar salad and try not to think of Zachos's pointed advice, which has put me on the spot. Will I get demerits if I come up empty? Which, face it, is a virtual certainty. For distraction, I open today's *Hustler*. Above the fold is collegiate turmoil over dining-hall food, almost comforting as an undergraduate perennial. Below the fold, however, is the headline "Art History Professor Says Resignation Forced."

It's pure snooping on my part to seek the name of the plagiarist — Arthur T. Fueller, Ph.D., whose photo shows a broad face with moustache and goatee and a buzz cut. His self-serving quotes on the abrupt departure from Vanderbilt fill the columns. "Painful to leave my students ... my expertise rejected by the Vanderbilt administration." The dean



of Arts and Science doesn't comment, faculty personnel matters being confidential. Diplomacy rules, probably on advice of the Office of the General Counsel.

It's a relief to spend the next two hours cocooned with curriculum work, taking notes and doodling — a lifelong habit. A short break at 3 p.m. takes me downstairs to a soft drink machine, though my wretched sense of direction leaves me wandering along a corridor with art studios and the *Hustler* office. The two students just inside the open door look familiar — yes, it's the guy from outside in the vest and the woman in the Bean jacket. A third student stands between them, lanky, in a thick navy wool scarf and a distracted expression on his thin, pale face.

"So you saw blood?"

"On my way to the lab. My honors project's on zebra fish. They're pollution indicators. But there was smashed glass all over the hall floor. He was lying there, not moving. His head, the blood — hey, don't use my name, okay? I have to go. Don't print my name."

The young man whips past me, and the *Hustler* office door snaps shut. I pop open my Diet Coke and shiver at what I've just heard. Forget the rumors about Miles Moody sleeping like a baby. At work temporarily in Stevenson, did he have a fatal accident in a hallway? Or did something worse happen? An attack?

Murder?

Did the beloved Miles have a mortal enemy? I try not to think about any of it. I never knew Miles Moody, never heard him play blues trumpet or saw his smile. He wasn't my legend. I bury myself in work in the cubicle until

after 6 and treat myself to a French movie here in Sarratt. With popcorn.

The next two days at Vanderbilt are a bizarre mix of winter beauty against the backdrop of the custodian's death. First it snowed, a three-inch blanket that drew the Vanderbilt photographer, Mr. Gerald Holly, to his renowned 35-mm winter wizardry. And the students came out to play. Greek row sprouted anatomically correct snow figures, and snowballs flew between classes. Undergrads slid down the Kissam hillocks on makeshift plastic sleds.

But behind the scenes, it was said, an autopsy had been requested by Miles Moody's family. For two days I'd searched the *Tennessean*, including the obituaries, for news about his death — in vain. The *Vanderbilt Register* print-

ed a memorial statement without explanation or theory of the cause of death.

By Friday, a fourth academic gown is reportedly slashed, of a School of Nursing high-ranking dean who calls for additional police protection. Suspicion had fallen on one fraternity just off suspension for IFC violations, though all members flatly denied responsibility. It's the randomness that unnerves everyone, including me. By Friday all of Vanderbilt seems ready and waiting for — the next wave of vandalism? The results of Miles Moody's autopsy?

It's a late-afternoon Friday meeting, the mood sour, everyone eager to leave campus before the streets ice up. Jonas Tomchuk holds forth on Pragmatism as the basis for curriculum development, and I see Victoria Ordway check her watch and toy with her garnet rings, while Katrina Holstein's heels tap the flooring like a deranged woodpecker. I'm doodling, and the yellow pad before me shows

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the week's stress — a stick figure in an academic gown with shredded sleeves, a musical staff torn in pieces, a set of venetian blinds that look like toothpicks. The Pragmatist yields to a biologist, who now lauds, "... the zebra fish, which promises to solve genetic mysteries."

"Zebra fish ...," I murmur. "Zebra fish."

"*Brachydanio rerio*. It's a model system for vertebrate developmental biology, just two inches long. We are on the forefront of this pathbreaking research. The University has a major investment in those tanks full of zebra fish in our Stevenson labs."

"Tanks, zebra fish, Stevenson," I ponder. That's it. I get it. My god, hiding in plain sight. The others look astonished as I jump, bolt, flee the room, dash and pound on the office

door of the provost. No answer. "Stripes!" I cry at full volume to Marguerite, who stares as if I'm crazy. "Stripes — that's the vandalism, the book bar codes, the music staff lines." She doesn't move. "The football field, don't you see? Where's the provost?"

"With the chancellor."

"I need to see him."

"Barbara, he's with the chancellor."

As if God and Saint Peter. I dash downstairs, skid and slide outside across the icy peastone to Stevenson. No cops in sight as I hit the stairs to the basement and the corridors where Miles Moody died. Fluorescent lights hum, nobody in sight — except footsteps, a man with a goatee and buzz cut coming toward me. My god. It's Fueller, with a package. It takes everything I've got to walk slowly, smile, and ask his directions to the exit, then feel his eyes bore into my back until I disappear into the elevator, get to ground level, grab an emergency phone and hit 911.

Ice clinks as we observe the chancellor's pristine gown on a hanger on the back of his door. The provost says, "So the zebra fish clued you in."

"That's when the pattern became clear. It was stupid of me to go alone to Stevenson, but destruction of the fish had to be Fueller's main goal. The other vandalism was cruel and frightening, but minor. He wanted to wreck something vital to Vanderbilt and its researchers. And I was right; he had a bomb in that package, didn't he?"

Both men exchange looks. The chancellor finally nods. "Chief Arnow says it was crude but dangerous." I sip.

Neither brings up Miles Moody, but I do. "Fueller tried to blow up the fish tanks last Tuesday morning. I'd bet on it."

ZZ says, "The preliminary autopsy report shows Miles Moody died from head trauma sustained by a sharp blow with a blunt object."

I blurt "Stevenson," spell b-o-m-b, and wait out a cold eternity of mere minutes before the sirens scream, and the place is full of cops. In moments I see Fueller taken out. A cop in heavy padding holds his package.

It's hours later when I sit in the chancellor's office, joining "ZZ" Zachos in a whiskey in crystal glassware cut with the Vanderbilt V as the chancellor sips seltzer water. "So stripes were your clue."

"Yes. The expert on Morris Louis's stripe art was destroying Vanderbilt's stripes. Every act of vandalism involved stripe patterns, from bar codes and music to venetian blinds and the football field. Fueller bent on revenge when his plagiarism forced him out."

"And academic gowns, with stripes on the sleeves."

Tennis racket, I think, but don't say it aloud. My face is inches from the provost's own. "The custodian saw him and fought him off. I'd bet Miles Moody died fighting him, defending the zebra fish."

"Defending Vanderbilt University, Barbara," says the chancellor.

I nod. We rise to leave. It'll be a winter of DNA tests and other forensics. ZZ makes a lame joke about earning my stripes, and I force a facsimile of a hearty laugh. We put down our glasses, but my private toast is this — to my best possible work on curriculum development because, come spring, I am hell-bent on seeing those dogwoods bloom. ▼