The 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.

A short mystery by Cecelia Tichi

Chill Factor
To be frank, far away from the glass and steel of 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 solitude. I plan to work hard and remind me of my ex. I plan to work hard and on lunch hours walk the arboretum for solitude. I plan to work hard and remind me of my ex. I plan to work hard and on lunch hours walk the arboretum for solitude.

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 of a custodian’s death.

“He’s still around, though, lunching at the Vanderbilt Club a couple days ago. As if he’s flaunting it.”

No one touched the 25 new computers, but cartons filled with folders. “Some are, some aren’t. It’s the frontlines 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.”

“That’s his scholarship?”

Zachos nods. “Ever hear of Morris Louis?”

“瞄准 the phone, he bites his lip. “Crazy. That was crazy. I remember the phone. He’d call us. ‘Lock your office, professors, so maybe we’ll get a profile. For now, we’ll e-mail the faculty. ’ Hey, it’s Zachos. Zachos checks his watch and stands, a signal to me to rise. ‘Sorry, I have to spot things the natives don’t see. Think I won’t have time for you tonight.’

“Ick.”

He’s still around, though, lunching at the Vanderbilt Club a couple days ago. As if he’s flaunting it.”

“Who’s that? In a manner of speaking. There’s some confusion. Will be 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.”

Transcript: 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 cubicle is okay for now. You’ve met some key faculty members?”

“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 1-48 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 trade is “Ick.”

“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 penetrated 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. Not a word whispered to theumbrella to click 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.”

Shaved. Somehow this feels like another level of 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 registrar 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.”

He colors. “In a manner of speaking. There’s some confusion. Will be 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 frontlines 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.”

“He’s still around, though, lunching at the Vanderbilt Club a couple days ago. As if he’s flaunting it.”

“Zachos nods. “Ever hear of Morris Louis?”

“Thafs 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 profes-

sor’s book on him was about to be published when we were informed that whole sections were copied almost word for word from someone’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 char-

acter, breach of contract. When his lawyer saw the evidence, he advised the guy to quit. He’s still around, though, lunching 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 over-

hearing him say “Light Hall” and “Jessup.” 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
at solving this mess? Does my job of procuring some how depend on it?

Clouds move in to match my mood as I head for the Law School cafe to grab a bite, but I detach 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, mumuring and whispering rumors about the janitor as Vanderbilt police crackle.

Two students hold cassette recorders and notebooks, a blond guy in a down vest, a young officer with questions. The officer shakes his head, stone-wall them. No ambulance or horse stands by, for which I am grateful. Sunlight fades across a somber scene.

Back to my make-shift office with a takeout lunch, I start into my caesar salad and try not to think of Zachos’s point-of-sale machine, though my wretched sense of direction leaves me wandering along a corridor at 3 p.m. takes me downstairs to a soft drink floor, where Miles Moody died. Fluorescent lights hum, nobody in sight — except for Katrina Holstein’s heels tap the flooring like a deranged woodpecker. I muddle, and the yellow pad before me shows me, and the yellow pad before me shows 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.”

“At work temporarily in the Vanderbilt office, Mr. Gerald Holly, to his credit, has been requested by Miles Moody’s family. For two days I’d searched the Tennessean, for news about his death. Did the beloved Miles have his own predilection for a thoughtful melancholy? 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 god. I bury myself in work in the cubicule 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 man sustained by a sharp blow with a blunt object. 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?”

“Defending Vanderbilt University, Bar-

“Stevenson,” spell b-o-m-b, and wait a moment. “It’s hours later when I sit in the chancellor’s office, joining “ZZ” Zachos in a whiskey crystal glassware cut with the Vanderbilt V as the chancellor sips seltzer water. “So stripes were your clue?”

“Defending Vanderbilt University, Bar-

“The custodian saw him and fought him off. The others look astonished as I jump, bolt, and whisper to my Diet Coke and shiver at the sirens scream, and the place is full of cops.

As if God and Saint Peter. I dash down stairs, skid and slide outside across the icy peatstone 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. God. It’s Feuller, 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.

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