

Who is Teddy Villanova? –A Serial Mystery: Chapter 8

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by [Paul Illidge](#) (March 2024)



by Jack Levine

Shortly after dawn, I left the scene, the house a sodden, smouldering black ruin, no belongings to bring with me except Lisi's gun, which I had taken in my backpack when Molly and I went to *Respighi's* since, after the earlier showdown on the stairs, there was no telling what the situation at the house would be when I came home.

Fire and water damage were extensive, according to the commandant. There were serious structural issues as well. Marti had used accelerants. The fire had burned hot and fast. Crime scene investigators would be on site for the next ten to twelve hours. Was there somewhere I could stay? I told him there was, though at the time I couldn't have told him where, such was my distraught, shocked state, a feeling of overwhelming sadness verging on the deep despair that I'd known as a boy after my mother's suicide attempt. I couldn't begin to guess how much had been lost in the fire.

I called a cab and asked the driver to take me to Paradise Gardens, my place of refuge and last resort over the years. Perhaps the birder was about taking pictures? I could have a friendly chat with him then slip inside the mausoleum and try to catch a few hours of dreamless sleep before confronting the realities of my predicament.

Standing on the cemetery road up the hill from the mausoleum where he had been talking to Molly, the birder looked up from adjusting the telephoto lens on one of his cameras, noticed me approaching and waved. I waved back and headed over.

He put a finger to his lips when I walked up, pointing across the way at Marks and Engels talking to Victor Bruno in front of the mausoleum.

"I'm no lip reader," said the birder, who had introduced

himself as Cavendish, "but it looks like there's a heated argument going on." He passed me the telephoto so I could see for myself.

Bruno was doing most of the talking, or rather yelling, waving his hands in the air as he berated Marks and Engels, who could be heard shouting back in their defence, though it was clear Bruno had the upper hand.

I returned the camera. "I understand from my friend Molly that you've seen those three before."

"A number of times. I believe they're up to something."

"Can you get photos of their faces?"

"I already have."

He put a hand inside his jacket, brought out a card and passed it to me. *Geoffrey Cavendish, Wildlife Photography*. "Come by the studio anytime after noon and you can pick them up."

Marks throwing up his hands in frustration, he and Engels stalked off to their unmarked car fuming mad, roaring off down the cemetery road at a high speed. Bruno stayed behind, appraising the hinges of the bronze mausoleum doors.

I asked Cavendish to cover me with his camera if he could, ran not toward the mausoleum, but toward the black Lincoln Town Car parked on the cemetery road.

It wasn't long before Bruno turned away from the mausoleum, head down, lost in thought as he moved toward the Town Car—stopping in his tracks when he noticed me blocking the driver-side door.

"You owe me a two-way mirror, you prick!" he barked. "Forty-seven hundred, installed."

He lit a cigarette with his Zippo, which he continued opening

and closing as he had at Delavane Logistics. He moved to step around me. I blocked him. He punched me in the chest, hard. I made way.

“Marks and Engels killed Richie Havenhurst for you.”

He looked offended for a second before stepping past me, opening the car door, slipping behind the wheel. As he reached to pull the door closed, I stuck my leg out and blocked it.

He shrugged, threw me a sarcastic sneer. “I take it you don’t have the forty-seven hundred on you.”

“Richie was skimming from the product he was distributing for Marks and Engels. It was coming out of their cut. Richie was into them for a hundred large. Half of it yours. No way you were getting it back, so you wrote Richie off—”

He yanked the door shut. I kept it open with my foot.

“By the way, your preoccupation with the Villanova mausoleum is duly noted. My friend Cavendish,” I pointed behind me up the hill, “has photos.” Cavendish raised his telephoto camera when he saw Bruno looking over.

Fuming, he started the car, roared the engine, shifted into gear and, just as I removed my foot, made a fast U-turn, speeding up the cemetery road with the door swinging open straight toward Cavendish, who jumped out of the way a second before Bruno sped past.

Energized by my confrontation with Bruno, sleep out of the question, I phoned Gary, who I guessed was still asleep, so I left a message telling him where I was, adding that I’d confronted Bruno about Marks and Engels taking out Richie. I asked him to meet me at the usual place, the cemetery’s east entrance.

I stood there for a minute before slipping my backpack on and heading off. No idea where it came from or why, on a weird

impulse I opened the backpack, pulled out the rolled towel in which I'd wrapped the gun, unwrapped it, left the towel inside, held the weapon up and looked at it more closely.

Matte black, compact, fitting nicely in my hand, weighing no more than a pound, a pound and a half, a Smith & Wesson *M&P 9mm Shield* according to the label stamped on the base of the barrel. I popped the magazine. Lisi had fired one shot at Delavane Logistics. I had fired two after picking up his gun. It looked as if the magazine held seventeen rounds. Fourteen should have been left, but there were only twelve. Who, I wondered, had Lisi used the other two bullets on?

Reinserting the magazine, the impulse urging me on, I flipped the thumb safety off, raised the gun, sighted a cluster of cedars at the bottom of the hill just ahead, and fired. The crack of the shot rang out in the air and echoed for several seconds. I could feel the vibration in my ears.

When the noise died, everything around me had fallen into rapt silence, as if someone had pulled the plug on sound. There wasn't a peep from birds that had been chirping madly a second earlier. The gun had spoken. Everything was listening.

The impulse not through with me, I needed to listen again. I felt compelled to. Resistance futile, I raised the gun, pointed again at the grove of cedars, fired and listened until the echo had subsided, the acrid odour of burnt gunpowder lingering in the air around me as, real or imagined, I was suddenly overcome by the reaction of the birds, erupting in hostile protest with a riot of shrieking cries for my having violated their sacred space. A wave of guilt, I quickly tossed the gun back in the pack, pulled the straps over my shoulders, covering my ears with my hands against the thundering of wings around my head as I began to run, the screeching fierce as what felt like hundreds of sharp-beaked rabid birds descended on me like the ravens in Hitchcock's film *The Birds* to peck my eyes out. I shed the backpack, fell to my knees, my arms

covering my head and overcome with nauseous dread vomited, dry heaves coming on, hoarse retching, I laid down, eyes shut, pleading with the vicious birds to let me alone, let me never wake up, leave me alone with my shame.

How long I lay there on the grass by the side of the road I have no idea. The birds vanished. I felt wretched and for some reason humiliated. I couldn't move. Eyes closed, I began to weep . . .

A car horn sounded, breaking the silence.

I felt too weak, too afraid to open my eyes—

"Aaron!" Gary called, out of his car, rushing over, sitting me up, wrapping his arms around me. Holding tight even after I stopped sobbing.

We drove in silence for a few minutes. I sipped from a bottle of water he had with him.

He had some news if I wanted to hear it.

I did.

"Marks and Engels know through Bruno that you're the Missing Man. They're pinning Richie's murder on you. They also know you've got Lisi's gun."

"Should I get rid of it?"

"Not yet. You need something. They'll keep coming at you."

"Where would they have killed Richie?"

"I'm thinking his place."

"Me too."

"You have a key?"

"I do. Can we get some breakfast first?"

“We can—”

His phone rang. He was needed at a murder scene. Urgent.

He dropped me at *Cora's*, a waterfront diner where we often went for breakfast. We'd catch up later.

Cora's was as busy as ever. I took a seat in the rear, where Gary and I always sat.

Ellie the waitress knew us. She breezed over with the steaming coffee carafe, wondering, as she filled my mug, where my sidekick was. I muttered something about a murder scene, at which she frowned, then after a respectful pause asked if I wanted the usual. Cheese and green pepper omelette, bacon, home fries, orange juice. *Coming right up!*

While I waited for my food I took out my phone, went to check messages. The last battery bar on my phone blinking out, the phone died. I swore under my breath. When had I last charged it? I wondered pointlessly, mad at my carelessness, at the wall-mounted TVs around the room tuned to the local morning news, all showing the crowd of onlookers behind the police tape, the ETF vehicles, the mangled *Black Shadow*, Hugo's house engulfed in flames, numerous arcing jets of water from the firefighters' hoses disappearing into roiling clouds of black smoke from which orange flames were shooting skyward. I had to look away.

Should I try the payphone? I rummaged in my pockets for a quarter, my mind beginning to drift. A \$20 bill, my bank card, a credit card. Who did I want to call again? *Molly*, I said out loud. Then repeated her name in an uncertain whisper, remembering. It was just after seven. Maybe she wouldn't have left for the office yet. Maybe she could come and meet me at *Cora's*, I'd been up all night, the fire—

My hands shaking, I sat there staring at the dead phone.

Ellie brought my food, set it in front of me, asked if I wanted more coffee. I glanced down at the empty mug with no recollection of having taken a single sip. Embarrassed, my throat too dry to speak, I nodded. Asked her for a large glass of ice water.

A deepening sadness enveloping me as it had at the cemetery, feelings of dread, foreboding, despondence—how had I let myself get tangled in such a convoluted mess, a mess that I knew I had no hope of unravelling before it unravelled me?

I nudged the scrambled eggs around on my plate with the fork, Ellie returning with the glass of ice water, smiling brightly as she set it down on the table.

“Do you know if there’s a phone store in the vicinity, Ellie?”

“Hmm. Not sure,” she said.

A man at a nearby table having heard me, piped up to say there was one, and gave me directions.

I downed the ice water in one long gulp, took the \$20 bill out of my pocket, stood up, handed it to Ellie and before she could protest, bolted for the door.

“What about your breakfast?” she called after me.

I found the phone store with no trouble. The manager arrived about half an hour later to open up, though not for business for another hour, she informed me.

Holding up my phone, I explained that it had died and I needed to make some calls on an urgent police matter. Could she sell me a phone to put my chip in with a battery already charged?

Cautious hesitation as she looked me over, she shrugged, smiled, stepped aside and let me in.

Back in business, I tried Molly, who I knew would be having a

fit. I left her a message letting her know I was okay. I called the Mont Rémy. Hilario wasn't due for another hour. However he'd heard about the fire and had left word at the front desk that I was to be given a room if I came by

Energy draining fast, legs heavy, pain in my chest, headache worsening—why hadn't I eaten something at *Cora's*? Swearing at my stupidity, mind wandering into deepening guilty thoughts about the collapsing state of my life, how I was wasting it, something Molly had given up warning me about. *Not living up to your potential. Leading a ghost life with your writing and piano playing. Avoidance behaviour that had become pathological and was leading me to darker and darker places that she had no access to. Why did I insist on shutting her out? What, she demanded whenever we had these discussions, are you so afraid of that keeps you from taking the slightest ownership of your own life?*

I staggered north to Front Street, left the sidewalk and stumbled dizzily onto the road to a riot of horns from enraged rush hour drivers, managing by some miracle to flag down a taxi as a delivery truck swerved to a squealing stop a foot away from the rear door of the taxi, blaring its horn until I pulled the door closed behind me and threw myself down on the back seat, in a voice barely more than a whisper asking the astounded driver to take me to the Mont Rémy Hotel on Jarvis Street. At which point I passed out.

The next thing I knew, the taxi had stopped, the driver and Roland the head of hotel security were carrying me barely conscious inside, across the lobby, into the elevator, a short ride, off the elevator and down a hall, Mina the head of housekeeping hurrying ahead of us, opening the door to a room, running over to the bed, quickly pulling back the covers so Roland and the taxi driver could lie me down. I remember murmuring *Thanks* as Mina removed my shoes...

To be continued...

[Table of Contents](#)

Paul Illidge's most recent book is the true crime financial thriller *RSKY BZNS* (New English Review Press, 2022), a "fascinating story" (Frank Abagnale, Jr., author of *Catch Me if You Can*), a "gripping and intricate read" (Conrad Black). His book *THE BLEAKS* (ECW Press), was a *Globe & Mail* Best Book of 2014. Books in his *Shakespeare Novels* series *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *Othello*, *Twelfth Night*, *Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Macbeth*, *Romeo and Juliet*, are all available internationally at www.kobobooks.com

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