

Who is Teddy Villanova? –A Serial Mystery: Chapter 1

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by [Paul Illidge](#) (August 2023)



Party in Westchester, Jack Levine

Sitting by herself, only because she preferred it that way, my good friend Molly Connors got up from her table and, drink in hand, made her way over to the piano where I was just starting the last song in my second set, that night Elton John's

"Bennie and the Jets."

The bar was hopping, the crowd lively, a dozen or so of the more inebriated on their feet following Molly to the dance floor, having recognized the tune. She left them there and continued over to the piano, something on her mind, I could tell. She came around the piano, leaned down putting a light hand on my shoulder as she said into my ear: "*There's something we have to talk about during your break.*"

I glanced up from the keys to see a look of what seemed like relief crossing her face, but I couldn't be sure. She stepped back, smiling inscrutably, watching me play for a moment before turning and walking back to join the crowd on the dance floor: everyone having a blast, pumping fists in the air in time to the music, so into it they were shouting more than singing "*Bennie! Bennie! Bennie! Bennie and the Jets ...*" as if it was Sir Reginald Dwight himself in his funky glasses, electric boots and mohair suit pounding the keys at the Mont Rémy Hotel rather than yours truly, filling in for my friend Johnny Hutton, Jr., out with a recurring back problem that only opioids seemed to quell.

As more people caught the mood and headed onto the dance floor, I modulated to a higher key the way Elton John does playing "*Bennie*". I was just bringing my eyes back to the keyboard when I noticed Hilario, the hotel manager, trying to get my attention from the lobby across the way. He met my eyes, ran an urgent hand across his throat and, with a look of consternation on his face, waved me over.

No idea why he'd have been doing this so close to the end of my set, I knew that it must have been something serious. I stopped playing, rose from the piano and hurried over, Molly and the others in the sudden silence still belting out: "*Bennie ... Bennie ... Bennie! Bennie and the Jets ...* "

Hilario took my arm. "Don't turn around."

But I already had: a scuffle had broken out at the entrance. The assistant manager and the hotel detective were grappling with three “heavies” (Hilario’s term for the type) who had just come through the revolving doors: beefy, muscle-built men in dark suits with swarthy complexions, necks as thick as their heads. Two of the three were shouting, waving handguns, the third standing quietly off to one side, his eyes fixed on me.

“Apparently they want to talk to you,” Hilario explained as he hurried me across the lobby and down the hall.

“Talk to me, or Johnny Hutton?”

“They didn’t specify. They just said ‘the pianist.’”

“Maybe they had a request ... ”

“Very funny. Not these guys. You saw the guns.”

He pointed right and we sailed into the dining room, several couples looking up from their dessert in surprise as we rushed through. Staff busy cleaning up the kitchen, the dining room had just closed.

Hilario stopped me when we reached the back door.

“Take my car.” He handed me the keys. “You know where it is down the alley. Go home. Lock your doors and turn out the lights. If they knew where you lived, they wouldn’t have come looking for you here. Call me later to let me know you’re okay.”

“What about my clothes?” I was still in my tuxedo; my clothes were downstairs in the staff locker room.

The doors to the kitchen banged open behind us. Shouts and raised voices, crashing pots and pans—

“My house keys are in my pants.”

“Go to my place then. I’ll call Corinna.”

“What if—”

“*Get going!*”

I hit the crash bar, pushed open the door to the alley ... only to step into the broad barrel-chest of another thick-necked, muscle-built bald man in a dark suit: a fourth heavy, or so I assumed in the split second it took him to throw an arm around my neck and wrench me into a headlock so tight that I was gagging. My one arm pinned against his body, I brought up the other and landed what, because of his size, proved little more than nuisance punches. He was strangling me, I was suffocating. I tried punching higher, hoping to connect with his face, but he batted my hand down with ease, my wrist cracking where he’d struck it. I let it fall. On the way down it bumped against something hard tucked in his belt.

A shot rang out from the kitchen. A second later the doors crashed open. I managed to twist my head enough to see two of the heavies come charging outside, no sign of Hilario.

The guy holding me laughed and called to the others. “Look who I bumped into—” Before he finished speaking, my hand was inside his suit-jacket fishing for the gun until in a desperate move I managed to snatch it out of his belt, brought it up and poked the barrel under his chin, hard. My hand shaking badly as I held it there, my finger doing just as nervous a number on the trigger, the heavy no doubt sensed my inexperience but seemed to realize that a wrong move on his part could cause me to fire, and that in my adrenalin-charged state at such close range I was unlikely to miss.

He let up on my neck like he intended to release me. Which he almost did, but as he was letting go he made a fast move and lunged for the gun. I had anticipated this and broke free. I pointed the gun at the heavies to keep them at bay, thought about having them throw down their guns, but didn’t want to

stretch my luck in a further standoff, so I turned and raced toward the street-end of the alley, pitching the gun in the first dumpster I passed.

There was a brief commotion behind me, some swearing that died quickly. I soon saw why. Up ahead a gleaming black Lincoln Town Car had swung in off the street and started down the alley, accelerating fast, engine roaring. I threw a hand up against the glare of the oncoming high-beams, the driver leaning on the horn, the heavies laughing behind me—

“Say goodnight, Johnny!”

The alley a dead end, with no room to turn the Town Car around the driver backed down the alley to the street. I had been wedged between two of the heavies in the back seat, their shoulders looming over me so my only view was up front, Mr. Headlock in the passenger seat, no one talking, the only sound the husky breathing of large men.

There didn't seem to be any point protesting that they'd made a mistake and picked up the wrong person, or demanding that they release me so I could get back to the Mont Rémy for my third set, no hard feelings, no questions asked.

I stayed silent, in too much discomfort to be angry or scared. My neck muscles had begun to spasm, sharp pain shooting down my back. I could feel a gash in my forehead, a steady trickle of blood from it running into my right eye. Plus my testicles were throbbing, Mr. Headlock having decided to avenge my theft of his gun by ramming his knee into my crotch when he was “helping” me into the Town Car. With a sneering “Fuck you” he then made sure that I whacked my forehead good and hard on the edge of the door getting in.

The silence continuing, the driver finally spoke, ribbing Mr. Headlock for having lost his gun to me so easily. “It takes

the fuckin' cake," he laughed. "The fuckin' cake!" he repeated. The two heavies joined in the laughter. "A fuckin' *piano player*—"

"Okay," Mr. Headlock grunted. "You made your point."

Laughter subsiding, the driver lifted his eyes to the rear-view mirror. "Okay, Johnny," he said, "here's the deal."

"I'm not Johnny."

"Sure you're not."

"Johnny didn't come in tonight. I was taking his place."

"Sure you were."

"What's this about?"

They all burst out laughing.

"Hilario will have called the cops by now."

They laughed even harder.

I shifted in my seat, trying to find a more comfortable position. I needed air badly. The windows were all closed. I was squeezed between the two heavy-breathing hulks. They seemed to be sucking all the air out of the car. I braced my calves against the seat, struggled to squirm forward into the space behind the front seat. In a miscalculation my foot shifted, landing on the foot of the hulk to my right. His reaction a swift elbow to the head, I sat back.

"Face it," I said to the driver. "You made a mistake."

"Never mind that. We need a favour."

"What kind of favour?"

"Can't say," the driver joked. "We're in sales, not management!" He roared at his own joke, continued laughing as

he turned his eyes back to the road. Mr. Headlock gave a wheezy laugh. Silence resumed.

The car soon slowed. Mad because he had no idea where the destination was, apparently nobody had bothered to *fucking tell him*, the driver seemed intent on taking it out on his brakes, hitting them suddenly, speeding up, hitting them suddenly, speeding up— *"Pick a fuckin' speed, will ya!"* Mr. Headlock barked, leaning forward in his seat, squinting hard at the road ahead. The car's high beams were the only light where we were driving. *"There!"* said Mr. Headlock, pointing right.

"Where?" the driver asked, continuing straight ahead.

"Over there!" said Mr. Headlock.

"Over there *where?*" still not sure where Mr. Headlock was pointing.

"THERE!!"

"Fuck!" The driver slammed on the brakes.

We skidded to the left, came out of it and swung back right, the driver finally regaining control just in time to stop about six feet back from a chain-link fenced entrance.

"Take a fuckin' driving lesson why don'tcha," said Mr. Headlock. Opening his door, he stepped out, the car shaking he slammed the door so hard. I watched him in the headlights walking toward a double-swing gate, the fence on both sides topped with barbed wire. He took a key out of his coat pocket, unlocked the padlock on the gate and pushed the leaves of the gate open. We glided in.

Waiting for Mr Headlock to return to the car, I forced my way forward beyond elbow range to have a look outside. Off to the right I could see we were in the port lands, close to the harbour: the looming concrete silos of the sugar factory, the

shadow of a lake freighter docked at the pier, the green and red running lights of the ferry crossing to Center Island.

On our way now across what appeared to be a flat, open area—still griping that he had no fucking idea where we were going—the driver managed to keep his jumpy gas-pedal foot under better control; even had us moving at one speed for a minute or so, during which he asked Mr. Headlock why the fuck no one had bothered to—

“There!” Mr. Headlock cut him off.

“What the—!” The driver veered hard left, then for some reason began accelerating before we’d straightened out.

“Slow the fuck down!” said Mr. Headlock— *“There it is!”*

The driver slammed the brakes, tires squealing as the car fish-tailed, careened for a moment like we might flip but recovered, throwing me against the heavy to my left. Just as his partner had done, he lifted his arm, elbowed me in the side of the head with a *“Watch it, fuckhead!”*

The driver reverting to his gas/brake two-step for several minutes as before, soon three vehicles were visible in the headlights, a trio of black Lincoln Town Cars parked beside each other in an empty lot next to a long, single-story office building, a security spotlight illuminating the property in front of the entrance.

Out of the car, no one around, the two heavies on either side of me, Mr. Headlock following behind, the driver led us across the dark parking lot to the office building. A glassed-in entrance, a reception counter inside, recessed lighting on over a sign on the wall behind it: *DELAVANT LOGISTICS*, but no one was about.

The driver went to the keypad beside the door, turned to Mr. Headlock behind me and asked him what the code was.

“How the fuck should I know?”

“Find out,” said the driver.

We stood in the spotlight while Mr. Headlock made a call. I wondered if there were security cameras—

“*Four,*” Mr. Headlock called out. “*Seven, two, eight.*”

The driver punched in the numbers, the door buzzed, in we went.

Bright fluorescent lighting in the high-ceilinged grey hall we headed down, grey doors on either side, small viewing windows in them, dark inside. At the second last door on our left the driver rapped twice, the door opened a crack, then all the way, a heavy holding the door open until we were in. It clicked shut behind us.

If things weren't strange enough, when my eyes adjusted to the darkness in the room after the brightness in the hall, I saw that there was a two-way mirror taking up most of the wall to my left. The bluish-white light washing in from a larger room the mirror looked into, illuminated the much smaller observation room that we were in.

The driver, Mr. Headlock and the two other heavies remaining behind me closer to the door, two men were standing in front of the mirror looking into the larger room. The one closest to me waved me forward without taking his eyes off the room where the light was coming from. On the short side, maybe five-foot three or four, his silver-grey designer suit seemed to shimmer in the fluorescent light. That, along with his full head of combed-back white hair, the Florida tan, and the oversize gold-rimmed sunglasses sitting on his hawk nose gave me the impression that he was the boss. Mr. Big.

I glanced into the other room as I stepped toward him: fluorescent-lit, bare except for an antique pine table in the

center of the room, a man sitting at it wearing a dark blue business suit, a white shirt with the top few buttons undone, burgundy tie askew. His hands tied behind the back of the chair so he faced the mirror, a ballpoint pen and a legal-size pad of yellow paper sat on the table in front of him. A black balaclava mask had been pulled over his head backwards.

Mr. Big turned and appeared to look me over from behind his sunglasses, impatiently fingering a gold Zippo lighter with the thumb and index finger of his one hand, a tic of some kind the way he repeatedly flipped it open then immediately flipped it closed. He held an unlit cigarette between the fingers of his other hand.

The man standing next to him, also on the short side, also wearing sunglasses, a black fedora with the front brim turned down and a black trench coat that looked to be a few sizes too small, appeared to be not just holding but clutching a metal briefcase to his chest, its handle handcuffed to his wrist. Lips pursed, his pointed jaw set intently, he too was looking at the man in the other room.

“No need to have dressed for the occasion,” Mr. Big joked, nodding at my tuxedo as I stepped into the light. The others laughed along, except for Mr. Briefcase, whose gaze remained on the other room.

Mr. Big spoke over my head to someone behind me. “You told him about the favour?”

“I did,” said the driver.

“Good. Let’s get down to business then.” He turned back to the mirror. “We have with us there in the other room, someone from whom we would like some information. He doesn’t feel he can give it to us, however, and told us we could *go fuck ourselves* for all he cared. We thought rather than do that, we’d round you up. After all, who better to convince him than a close family relative?”

"Funny," I said, "I can't think of a family relative, close or otherwise, who'd tell *anyone* to go fuck—"

"—*It's your brother!*" Mr. Briefcase spat out. "*Your brother the thief!*"

"My brother? My brother went missing five years ago. Hasn't been seen or heard from since."

"Well," said Mr. Big, "turns out he's reappeared."

"As a close family relative and all, don't you think I would have heard?"

"And now you have." He waved the hand holding the unlit cigarette impatiently. "Lisi will take you in to see him. You're to tell him he writes down the information we've asked him for, or Lisi puts a bullet in his head, then yours."

No doubt Lisi would have liked nothing better, but my first reaction was to laugh, the bullet-through-your-head threat confirming my hunch that Mr. Big was another of my brother's victims, had lost money in one of his Ponzi scheme frauds probably, and wanted it back.

Or, I wondered, it wasn't about the money at all. He just wanted an excuse to kill my brother for ripping him off in the first place. Lisi would pop him, then me. Why me? Because Mr. Big would assume, as some had at the time, that as my brother was living at my house when he disappeared with \$338 million of other people's money, the two of us were in cahoots, and if he leaned on me hard enough I might—

"*That's it!*" Mr. Big snapped his thumbs. "*Lisi!*" Mr. Headlock—Lisi—stepped forward into the light, put his hand around my elbow and pincer-squeezed it, sharp burning sensations shooting through my forearm into my hand so that I soon had no feeling in my fingers.

I played along. "What kind of information is this I'm supposed

to be asking for?"

"Your brother will know," said Mr. Big.

"Don't you think it might help if I had some information about the information?"

"I've told you what you need to know."

I waited a moment. "Did you know my brother is a pathological liar?"

No reaction from Mr. Big other than to click his Zippo open and closed a few times, Mr. Briefcase came away from the mirror, stepped up to him and hissed something in his ear. Mr. Big nodded at Lisi.

He tried to turn me around. I resisted.

"—So he gives me the information, how will you know whether it's correct or not?"

"We'll cross that bridge when we come to it," Mr. Big said, the Zippo clicking.

"And you're prepared to kill us both if you don't get this information?"

"If we have to."

"Even though you lose the information?"

"It won't come to that."

"Look, like I told you, I haven't seen or talked to my brother in over five years. And we didn't part on the friendliest of terms. What makes you think he'd be convinced by anything I had to say?"

"That's not my problem."

"How do I know it's even my brother in there? No one else has

been able to track him down, the authorities, the media, dozens of very angry, well-heeled and powerful people, yet you've somehow managed to locate him? Congratulations."

"You're a little loose with the sarcasm for someone in your position." Mr. Big put the cigarette in his mouth and, flipping open the Zippo, lit it. "We're wasting time," he said exhaling. "*Lisi!!*"

Lisi spun me around, headed me for the door, a heavy holding it open for us. I saw him take his gun out and pass it to Lisi on his way by.

He brought me out to the hall, opened the next door we came to, led me quickly through a narrow hall to another door, opened it, then with his gun poked me into the fluorescent-lit room.

We walked over to the table, Lisi standing me in front of the man, my back to the two-way mirror.

He stepped around the table so he was positioned behind the man in the chair, the gun barrel against his temple, his other hand on the black balaclava, ready to pull it off.

At a rap from the other side of the mirror, he did.

I'd never seen the man before. A terrified look in his bloodshot eyes, the duct tape over his mouth muffled his panicked cries.

Turning to face the mirror, I shook my head. "This isn't my brother."

I turned back to tell the man that there had been some sort of mistake, I was sorry he'd been put through this—Lisi charging me, his gun levelled at my head.

My first reaction to step aside and stick out my leg, that's what I did. Lisi tripped, his arms flew up. The gun fired as

he went down, the bullet shattering the two-way mirror.

Next thing I knew I was on top of Lisi, my knee on his neck, jamming his head to the floor before he could do anything about it. He let go of the gun without a struggle. I reached down, grabbed it, got to my feet. The eyes of the man in the chair wider than ever, he turned at the sound of the door opening—the driver two-handing his gun, scanning the room in a crouch, the heavies right behind.

"Drop it!" I shouted coming out from behind the door. "Then lie down, face on the floor. All of you."

The heavies did so, the driver refusing, his gun still pointed at me.

"This is a mistake, pal," he said.

"The story of my night apparently," I said and, on impulse, fired at the floor near his feet, just to show him who he was dealing with. Pure bravado of course. It was the first time in my life I'd ever fired a gun. I didn't want to have to do it again. I cocked the trigger.

"Okay, okay!" he said, but for some reason he stepped toward me.

"Three, two—"

"Okay!" he said, finally dropping the gun.

"Kick it over."

He did. I picked it up, tucked it in the front of my pants, careful to keep my fingers well away from the trigger. "Now the keys to the Town Car."

"This isn't what you think, Johnny—"

"The keys."

He tossed them over.

Lisi sitting up, winded and helpless, the driver threw him a contemptuous glare. "You *fuckhead!*" he shouted as he got down on the floor.

I backed my way to the door, leaned my head out. All clear along the hall.

Mr. Big and Mr. Briefcase staying put well back from the shattered mirror glass, presumably having watched the sudden turn of events, I took off down the hall.

Outside to the parking lot, I hit the clicker of one of the Town Cars.

I jumped in and started up.

High beams on, my heart rate slowly returning to normal, I drove back the way I thought we had come—to my left past a row of single-story office buildings like *Delavant Logistics*, shipping and expediting companies all sharing the same vast parking lot beside the harbour.

I bumped up my speed as I approached the chain-link fence to my right that ran behind rows of parked tractor-trailers. Judging by the time it took us to reach *Delavant Logistics* on the way in, I figured the gate where we entered the complex would be coming up any minute. At least I was hoping so: the headlights of two vehicles had just appeared in the rear-view.

I drove as close to the fence as I could, watching it in the spill from the high beams, slowing when I realized I might have passed the gate.

A glance in the rear-view, the headlights closing fast—the gate flashed by suddenly. I hit the brakes, whipped the wheel around at the same time, accelerated as I pulled out of the skid, and floored it back to the gate.

Out of the car, I noticed the lock was hooked on the chain beside the latch, but the hasp hadn't been closed. I opened up the leaves of the gate, ran back to the car, drove through and stopped. I shut the gate, wrapped the chain twice around the latch, attached the padlock and closed it. Unless they wanted to play Bruce Willis and crash through, by the time they got the gate open I'd be well down the service road, home free, on my way back to the hotel to let Hilario know what had happened.

I lowered my speed to just above the limit driving along Commissioner Street through the port lands. Cops working nights were known to come down here with their coffee and donuts on break. Having two recently-fired guns in the car, blood on my face and clothes, driving a stolen car, the last thing I needed was to be noticed.

Thinking things through, I waited before turning onto Cherry Street. If I went right, I'd have to cross the draw bridge over Keating Channel. It was the only way out of the area at this end of the canal. Odds were that at this time of night the bridge would be down, but if for some reason it wasn't and a barge was passing through, I'd be a sitting duck. If I turned left, away from the bridge, I could at least wind my way south through the industrial area beside the shipping channel to the bridge at Villiers Street.

The decision was made after a final check in the rear-view: a car with one headlight, another in the lane beside it with two, both approaching fast. They'd be on me in no time if I went through the port lands. I'd have to go for the bridge.

I turned right and roared up Cherry Street, the draw bridge down, the Town Cars just turning onto Cherry. There was plenty of time, things were looking up, I'd be back to the hotel in time for my third set, and I could find out what it was that Molly wanted to talk to me about.

But with about thirty yards to go, the red signal lights on the lowering barrier arms suddenly started flashing. The bridge was about to open.

I looked back and saw the Town Cars, a police cruiser in pursuit, its roof lights flashing. Keeping the driver's gun tucked in my belt, I threw the one from Lisi in the glove box, powered down the windows, opened the door, keeping a hand on it as I leaned out just far enough for my foot to still reach the gas. I pressed the pedal to the floor, threw the door open all the way and dropped out of the accelerating Town Car just before it crashed through the barrier-arm, zoomed up the rising ramp and soared off the edge, climbing high briefly then nose-diving into the canal.

Forward motion hurled me hard against a concrete abutment at the base of the bridge. Dazed, I saw with relief when I managed to sit up, that the abutment had kept me from being tossed into the canal. I scuttled as fast as I could out of the floodlights, managed to stand up and ran hunched over to the salvage yard. I ducked behind the first dry-docked barge I came to, peering back at the bridge to see if I'd been spotted.

The Town Car sinking fast, water was gushing into the open windows as the car began to sink.

No sign of the Town Car with the two headlights that was pursuing me, the car with a single one shot across the broken barrier-arm, squealed to a stop at the base of the bridge, the driver and another man jumping out.

Behind them, the cops were out of their car too, running forward, guns drawn, shouting for them to stop. The driver had a quick peek under the bridge at the sinking Town Car before turning to face the cops, his hands held high.

The officers checked the canal, caught sight of the Town Car just as it was going under, the drivers from the other two

with their hands in the air swearing in offended tones, protesting their innocence as the Town Car disappeared under water.

My right hip, knee and ankle throbbing as they'd borne the brunt when I dove out of the car, I limped my way through the port lands, crossed Unwin and cut along Villiers. I thought about tossing the driver's gun into the canal when I was far enough from the bridge which, when I glanced back, was still open, police lights flashing on both sides of the canal now. But the way the evening had been going, I decided it was better to hang onto the gun, just in case.

It was close to one-thirty when I arrived at the 24-hour *Superstore* at Carlaw and Eastern. The parking lot was empty except for three cars by the entrance. Not sure why, but I waited while one guy came out, slipping his grocery bag into a back pack which he put on, went to the rack, unlocked his bike and rode off. I went inside.

My cell in the pocket of my coat back in the hotel locker room, I waited until the lone cashier finished with a customer before asking where I could find a payphone. He pointed down the row of checkout counters. "In the snack bar eating area before you get to the washrooms," he said. I thanked him, he and the three customers in line watching me go with concerned looks on their faces. Who could blame them? It was 1:30 in the morning, a guy in a tuxedo with badly torn pants, both arms of the jacket hanging off, blood on the front of his shirt and two mean-looking gashes on his forehead was staggering unsteadily toward the distant payphones.

I felt myself slowing down before I'd gone very far, what little energy I had draining away fast. I grew dizzy, my eyes blurred, my knees gave out, down I went ...

To be continued...

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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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