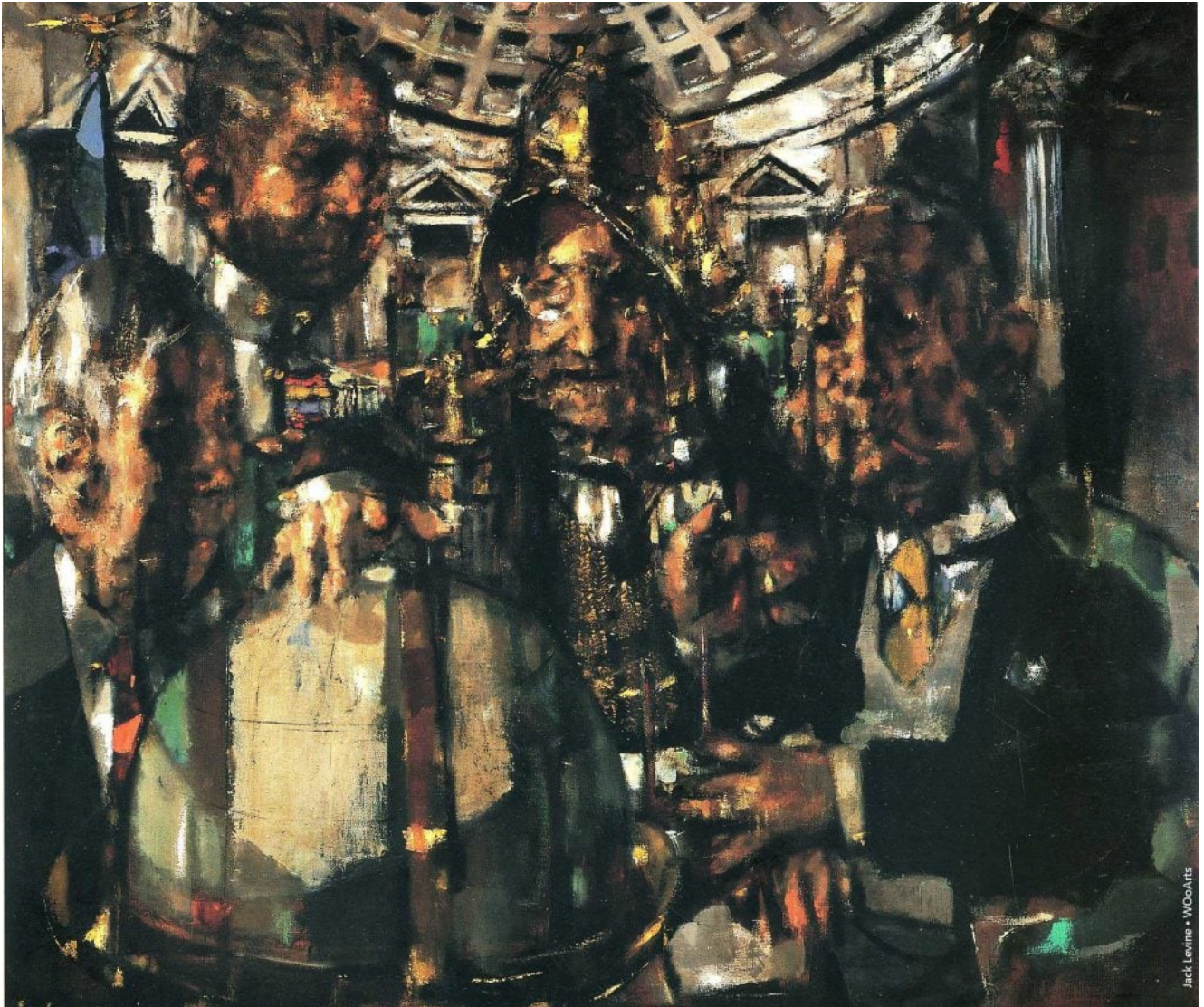


Who is Teddy Villanova? –A Serial Mystery: Chapter 10

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



Untitled, Jack Levine

On time for my meeting with the partners at Yeager & Wade, one of the city's more prominent architecture firms, they had asked me to come in and give them some reassurance that I could actually write a *Da Vinci Code* type of thriller centered on the dramatic challenges their company and the people who

worked there faced. Could I actually make it into a million-selling book that someone like Dan “*Da Vinci Code*” Brown would write?

This is what four of the six partners wanted in a book about the company. Fact blended with fiction, so they’d told me in my interview. Compelling reading. The inside story. Show the fascinating, cutthroat, big-money architectural world like no one had seen it before. Demonstrating the innovative, world-renowned features of Yeager & Wade’s international work via an informative, exciting, well-written story.

All of this was doable, I assured them, adding that it might not sell a million copies, that was a tall order. The secret was cross-promotion: creating a book that Hollywood would like enough to option for a movie so that promotion costs could be shared. With a scarcity of such material around in the new streaming arena, major actors and actresses would plead for parts in the film. That’s where real attention would come from. The movie sale would generate book sales. The world would want to read the story. I might even be able to get Dan Brown to write a blurb.

The fifth partner spoke up after me. He had been against the idea of a book from the beginning. He reiterated his resistance, his reasons mainly to do with the staid, conservative nature of the architecture world, the respect it enjoyed internationally, adding more importantly, or so he felt, that big international clients would not be inclined to do business with a firm that represented itself with a commercial pot-boiler.

The sixth partner, the *partner emeritus*, with all the vanity and egomania that often accompany such a designation, thought the book should include more about him than the other younger partners when, after all, he’d been one of the firm’s founding partners, and had the experience and the accolades on a par in his work—as well as in his own wild life—of America’s most

famous architect, Frank Lloyd Wright.

Partners five and six maintaining stony, sulking silence while further discussion went nowhere, Victoria Keating, who was chairing the meeting, (the firm's newest partner, its youngest ever at thirty-seven, as well as the first female: talented, ambitious, her extreme self-confidence easily mistaken by some, so I'd heard, for arrogant narcissism, the supervising of the book project her first real chance to shine), proposed a compromise to get us to the *next stage* of the book's development, if there was to be one.

I would write a draft nonfiction novel such as had been discussed in my interview. All the partners would read then vote on it as the basis for a final draft. They would give me six months, paying me \$4,500 a month (a stunning amount, the most lucrative commission I'd ever received) to write the draft.

Victoria asked if I thought this was doable.

"Absolutely doable," I assured the group.

A hand vote was taken. All six partners were in favour of proceeding with a draft (Victoria telling me later that the two naysayers, both passive aggressive sexists, were confident the project stood no chance of succeeding beyond the draft stage whatsoever and so it would *die on the vine*).

"Let the writing get underway then!" the senior partner exhorted me enthusiastically as he brought discussion to a close, pausing until I'd left the room before moving on with the next item on the agenda.

After the meeting, Victoria, who had let me know during my interview that she was such an ardent supporter of the book because the idea was so forward-thinking and *out of the box* from a marketing point of view—and if architecture was about anything these days, it was about marketing—asked me if I

wanted to grab a coffee at the bistro down the street.

I said that sounded like a great idea, so off we went.

From a family of architects (grandfather, father and brother), with Yeager & Wade for only a little over a year now and, in the partners' eyes, or so she felt, yet to prove herself, she let me know that nothing could have been further from the truth than company gossip she had picked up. The book was decidedly not an ego project. Brimming with confidence, candid, earnest and honest about both her strengths and weaknesses, she talked freely, letting me know there wasn't a thing she felt she needed to prove personally or professionally to anyone, except herself.

She admitted to being her own harshest critic, with a tendency to be easily frustrated when things didn't turn out as she expected them to. She also admitted that sometimes she did take disappointment out on her colleagues. People who had worked with her had reported feeling that she put the blame for her own failings on them which, again, was never her intention. As a partner, she knew this would have to change. The book gave her the opportunity to show people what she was really like as a person as well as a business professional.

She kind of lost me at that point. I'd be working closely with her as the partner supervising the project. I wondered, as I listened to her, how that would go. In the one-way conversation that began the moment we sat down with our coffee, she came across as an actress auditioning for a part based on her in the upcoming *Da Vinci Code* thriller that I would be writing. In my screenplay writing period, I had worked with actors and actresses very much like Victoria. They went out of their way to convince me they weren't just actors. There was so much more to them. Sometimes their self-assessments in the end had proved right. But most often these people merely showed themselves to be insecure, vain, approval-seekers who wanted more than anything else to be

liked, accepted, admired. I had a strong feeling Victoria wanted to be seen as more than an architect. Someone with talents beyond the run of the mill. A principled visionary perhaps, who brought something new and different to her field—like Howard Roark had in Ayn Rand's famous novel about architecture *The Fountainhead*. Roark regarded himself as a singular personality, innovative, uncompromising, a man who stood for the principle he felt every architect should possess: integrity. This would remain to be seen, but my initial impression of Victoria hadn't changed. She was incredibly self-possessed. I wondered as she talked if it was more than coincidence: Howard Roark's friend and architectural rival in Rand's novel was named Peter Keating. That she shared the same last name struck me as more than a little interesting. One day I would ask her about it.

"It's okay," I told Victoria to put her at ease. "My idea is to make you the lead female character in the story. The future of architecture, freeing it from its archaic, male-dominated past. The character who frees her firm to embrace an entirely new kind of architecture."

She was flattered, excited and mystified, as I'd hoped she would be. "I did loads of research before my interview on the idea. What would you think of designing a building that was constructed without concrete, bricks or steel?"

"Are you serious?"

"Perfectly."

"What would it be built from?"

"That's what we have to find out in the course of the story. That's part of the mystery. What is it about Yeager & Wade that's completely innovative? With digital technology, for example, will we even need fifty- and sixty-story business towers in the near future? Already a fast-increasing percentage of employees are working from home. How likely are

they ever to go back into an office? Companies can shave millions off their bottom line. Charles Darwin said the future is about adaptation."

A look of confused fascination crossed her face. "I feel like I've hired someone who's either a madman or a genius."

"Forget thinking outside the box. Maybe it's time to get rid of the box altogether," I said as we stood up to go.

"You're an intriguing person, Aaron Fox." She threw me an appreciative smile. "I think I'll enjoy working with you."

Whether she'd seen the news, knew about the fire at Hugo's and that I was now homeless, I couldn't say. But serendipity must have been in the air. She mentioned, apropos of nothing while we walked up the street to the office, that she didn't know what my current living situation was, and it was none of her business, and maybe unprofessional even to bring it up, but she had a four bedroom designer-built modernist house that backed onto the beach just past where the boardwalk ended east of Kew Gardens, only one of the four bedrooms presently in use. The house was large, architect-built, she reminded me, all the modern conveniences, she joked, letting me see she had a humorous side. She'd only bought the house two months ago. I was welcome to move in anytime. As to rent, I could pay whatever I could afford.

I had stopped taking umbrage at the patronizing starving-artist/charity case insinuation long ago because that's more or less what I was. I let the comment pass. She didn't need to know that there was plenty of cash available to me any time I wanted it in the Villanova mausoleum, but that was a sacred trust, something I would only touch if my physical survival depended on it.

The offer did come with a candid warning. She was ten months into a divorce fight with a bad-tempered alcoholic narcissist. He didn't know where she was currently living, but he was

bound to find out sooner or later. Having someone else in the beach house at night would do wonders for her nerves.

"We could drive into work in the morning if you need to go to the office. Or you could write your heart out at home. Did I say the place backs onto the beach?"

Whatever her real motive was, I told her the offer sounded too good to pass up. But that I needed to deal with some issues where I was currently living first.

"No problem," she said, "the offer is there any time."

Should I have come right out and told her that there was no way I could ever have lived in her house? That I knew the place: directly across the street from the park where my ninth birthday party was held, my friends and I in our bathing suits perched on the lower limbs of a maple tree, smiling happily down at the camera for a photo just before we sat down at the picnic tables for lunch. It was the last picture of Teddy Villanova taken while he was alive, his head thrown back, *laughing his face off* as we used to say in those days.

I told Victoria, when we said goodbye, that I'd think seriously about her kind offer. That I'd get back to her as soon as the issues at my current residence were resolved.

While I waited outside the office for a cab to take me downtown to meet Gary at Richie Havenhurst's condo, I called the hospital and asked to speak with Tilley, if she was available. In a few seconds she came on the line.

"Are you staying out of trouble?" she wanted to know.

"They've found out I'm the Missing Man."

"Who's found out?"

"The police. The bad police."

"The two that gave me their cards that I told you about?"

"The same guys."

"Strangely enough, I was going to call you later. Gary gave me your number. I hope you don't mind."

"No. Not at all."

"Those two have tried to get into Mr. Early's room three times this afternoon. The officers your friend Gary keeps posted outside the room have had to back the bad police off. It's pretty intense sometimes with the threats they make. The guards usually manage to get rid of the two of them, however they're worried about what these superior officers could do to their careers if they want to."

"Have you told Gary?"

"Each time. He's going to deal with it as soon as he gets a chance. –But back to the subject: Have you been staying out of trouble? Don't avoid the topic. Tell me the truth for once, *Missing Man*."

She obviously hadn't seen the news of the fire at Hugo's. The shot of me with him and Case by the ambulance out front of the flaming house.

"All right. A man that I just met this morning, who was printing up some photos for me, was found murdered a couple of hours ago."

Stunned silence on Tilley's end. "Murdered? Why?"

"Because the photos he was printing were of the two bad cops meeting with a criminal named Victor Bruno, who's planning a major crime, which will result in more people getting hurt. I was to pick the photos up this afternoon."

"Just a sec—" She went off the phone to speak with someone.

“Sorry, but I have to go, Duty calls. Take extra good care of yourself, you hear? Will those two bad cops be coming after you, do you think?”

“That’s their plan. Don’t worry. I’ve got Gary. I’ll be okay. Tell me, before I go, how is my friend Early doing?”

“Better and better every day. He’s a strong man that Mr. Early.” She lowered her voice. “I’m afraid that every time I talk with you will be my last, Teddy Villanova.”

“About that,” I said, feeling it was time to explain, but she’d already hung up ...

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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