

Who is Teddy Villanova? –A Serial Mystery: Chapter 12

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



The Green Cloche, Jack Levine (1962)

I came to an hour after the operation. The bullet had glanced off the titanium staple in my left shoulder (inserted there to repair ligaments torn in a high school football injury) before exiting my body past my left shoulder blade. Provided the wound didn't get infected, there was unlikely to be any lasting damage.

Tilley was standing beside the bed staring down at me with a warning frown on her face: to her right Detective Marks, to her left Detective Engels, both with smug grins on their faces as if to say: *Now we've got you, you prick!*

"—I *told* you, officers," she warned them, "he's in no position to talk with you right now, officers."

"We'll be the judge of that," said Marks. "You can leave. This is police business."

Engels put his hands on her shoulders, turning her toward the door. She ducked away from him and returned to the bedside, smiling down at me as she took out her phone, dialled. "*Gary?*" she said in a loud voice tinged with alarm.

Marks instantly red-faced and fuming, Engels tried pulling him away from the bed, but he wouldn't go. He glared at Tilley. "I've had enough of you."

Tilley held out the phone to show them she hadn't hung up, shouting with greater alarm, "I've told them to *auf wiedersehen*, Gary, but they insist on staying!" She offered Marks the phone so he could talk with Gary, but the jig was up. He turned for the door. Engels caught up, warning Marks to cool down. Tilley smiled, threw me a wink, pocketing her phone. "Works every time."

Victoria waited until I'd been released from hospital three

days later to describe the attack. The thief, racing too fast down the stairs from the fifth floor, tripped when he noticed her coming up. Flashlight in one hand, the drawing storage tubes that he'd stolen from Victoria's office in the other, he lost his balance, fumbled the gun, which flew over the railing as the thief did reaching for it, and fell to his death.

The drawing storage tubes found under his body contained near-final drawings and drafting Yeeager & Wade was planning to enter in a prestigious international design competition. It came to light in the police investigation that the thief was an independent contractor, i.e. freelance industrial spy working for one of Y & W's long time arch rivals, who was disqualified from the competition and charged with theft.

Victoria was so shamed, sickened, and guilt-ridden by what she referred to as *The Incident* and by how her drunkenness may have contributed, for the first three weeks afterwards, she would come to the office for a few hours some mornings but would have fled by lunch time, working from home the next few days until she felt she was ready to *face the music* again. No matter how many times I told her the *music* she was afraid of facing was all in her head. Everyone in the office assured her that what had happened had simply been a wrong-place, wrong-time scenario. So she'd had too much to drink? She'd had the good sense to leave the party and find someone to drive her home, hadn't she? Her being drunk had nothing to do with me getting shot. Nor the death of the man who shot me.

Every so often, when the two of us were meeting to discuss matters relating to the book, things like how my research on the company's history was going (very well), whether I was happy with the progress I was making on the story (I was), or if I found the answers to questions I'd asked the other partners were sufficient (they were), Victoria would suddenly go quiet and, in a desperately guilty tone blurt that she'd *always* been an obsessively responsible person, often *way too* responsible. "*My behaviour that night was unforgivable!*" she'd

say quietly, adding in sometimes no more than a whisper, that it had *become her mission* to make up for her thoughtlessness that night by doing everything she could to help me at what she had gathered was *a very difficult time*.

While I let her words hang in the air for a moment (I didn't see that acknowledging them would assuage her guilt in any way), Victoria would bow her head, for a minute or so staring ruefully down at the rubber band she had a habit of twisting in her fingers, and then we would resume discussion precisely where we had left off, as if what had just occurred was a figment of both our imaginations.

Over the following weeks, each of these *mea culpa* moments became slightly less fervent, as if she was gradually putting *The Incident* behind her. Final mention of it came five weeks after I'd moved into the Mont Rémy. Victoria vowed she would never mention *The Incident* again if I left the hotel and accepted her invitation to move into one of the spare rooms in her house, the one that backed onto the beach. "Not a long-term thing of course. It's just there's a residue of guilt that still needs alleviating."

Alleviating? My first impulse was to blow up at her for using her guilt as a threat, a selfish manipulation into getting her way. I needed to tell her that if she mentioned this one more time I was off the book project. My shoulder was healing nicely, the injury hadn't affected my right hand, my writing hand, and I was almost ready to resume playing the piano with my left again. *Grow up!* I wanted to say. *Stop acting like a child!*

But I relented, called off the inner tirade, lightened up and said I couldn't be a part of any *alleviating* since I felt there was no longer a need for any. "Accidents happen," I said. "Let me know when you feel you're guilt free and I'll be happy to consider moving into your house on the beach."

She quickly qualified the moving-in overture by offering an earnest clarification of sorts that working with me at close quarters on the book during the past month, seeing how I had bounced back from the injury with such a positive, resilient attitude had been a big help to her. She was feeling less *oppressed* by the whole thing more and more every day.

"*Oppressed?*" I kidded her. The sarcasm registered. She burst out in a loud, self-deprecating laugh, the apologetic smile that followed giving me an inkling that moving day might not be that far off after all . . .

Days when he was free, Gary would meet me in the hotel café for breakfast, bringing me up to speed on criminal matters, primarily the case Marks and Engels were preparing against me, a pain in the ass, but Gary made it clear that it had to be taken seriously. They'd gone over Gary's head and obtained a warrant for my arrest. On the one hand it couldn't be taken seriously, since the warrant had been made out for *James Castle*, the pseudonym I used writing Richie's books. Plus, no one named James Castle was known to be residing at Hugo's house before or after it burned to the ground.

Still, Gary explained, they were bound to discover my real name at some point and add identity fraud to bolster their case for me having killed Richie over a business disagreement. In the case file, which Gary had seen, they had me driving the car that went off the Keating Channel drawbridge with Richie Havenhurt's dead body in the trunk. Investigators were warned: *The murder weapon is still in the suspect's possession.*

The situation would grow more complicated if Gary were to intervene in some way, Marks would slap charges on him for obstructing an investigation, colluding with a wanted suspect, evidence tampering. Gary's badge would be at stake, in other words. He said he felt confident he could deal with whatever stunts they tried to pull on him. They weren't the sharpest knives in the drawer. But he was a cynical realist. You could

only play games for so long. It wasn't worth fooling around when you were dealing with corrupt front liners. And the higher up you went, the deeper the corruption got. Not to mention the police union. Marks and Engels had their bread buttered on both sides: they were in tight with the leadership there too.

"You'll have to watch yourself," he stressed. "Minimalize your exposure outside the hotel as much as possible. Go anywhere you have to go incognito. Or better yet, disappear. They've got Bruno working with them. And your brother is sniffing around. There are a lot of eyes on the lookout for you right now."

"How to disappear. Any suggestions?"

"Hunter S. Thompson said: 'When the going gets weird, the weird turn pro.' Who do you know who could help you turn pro?"

Leaving the question with me, he headed off to work.

By the time I'd finished my second cup of coffee, a possibility had come to mind.

Melanie Weathers and I had remained friends since high school, where we worked together in the drama club. While I wrote, and did some acting, Melanie was in charge of set design and, as her family owned the city's largest costume house at the time, production wardrobe.

After graduation, rather than attending fashion design school as she had dreamed of doing, she succumbed to pressure from her parents and went to work in the family business. Six years later, when her mother and father died in a freak plane crash while on vacation, she inherited Costume House. With no interest in the business, her younger brother Andrew was so devastated by the tragedy he fled to a Buddhist meditation centre on Vancouver Island. As far as Melanie knew, he was still there.

In the meantime, she had managed to grow the business to the point she handled the costume, wardrobe, wig and accessory needs for a growing clientele of international film, television and stage productions.

I would tell her the truth: that assuming a female identity now and then was going to be required for security purposes, as the book I was writing had to do with a confidential criminal matter. There was no real danger involved, however the police officer I was working with felt a female disguise would guarantee the best anonymity, making both my role in the investigation and the book I was writing about it more interesting.

I called Melanie and broached the possibility. She loved the idea, especially the intrigue of undercover criminal elements. As well, she complimented me for my willingness to illustrate the real-life challenges identity transition presented in our *gender-shifting* times, a movement in which, due to the nature of her business, Melanie was deeply involved. Why didn't I come down to the studio around three that afternoon and we could formulate a plan?

After a partners' meeting later that day, in which Victoria and I delivered a progress report on the book, the partners more than happy with what they'd heard—several of the reluctant partners admitting a sense of excitement at how the project was moving forward—Victoria stopped and took me aside when we were returning to her office, apologizing if she had seemed out of sorts lately.

Vague about what she was referring to, I told her I was sorry to hear that was the case, hoping it wasn't something connected to our working relationship. *Absolutely not*, she assured me, hesitating for a couple of seconds as if thinking about how to explain.

She wondered if I had noticed anything different about her

moods or behaviour when we were meeting. Not that I could think of, I told her, though I mentioned that sometimes she seemed fatigued, lacking in her usual attentive concentration when discussing the book, possibly a bit depressed which, all things considered, was understandable given her regular project work, in addition to helping me with my research on Yeager & Wade's history, the changing world of architectural design, engineering and building practices, plus facilitating my interviews with the firm's clients, past and present, as well as the ninety-six staff, among whom I hoped to find a dozen or so I could use as the basis for characters in the story. She had taken on quite a workload.

Actually, none of that was a problem. She wondered a little nervously if she could be open with me. Of course she could, I told her. Anything she said would remain confidential.

She began by assuring me what was going on with her had nothing at all to do with *The Incident* or the book. On that score she felt things were better than ever between us. What had triggered her malaise, she explained with some uneasiness, was that her estranged, alcoholic husband had taken to stalking her. Innocuously at first, the way she'd been informed stalking apparently always begins. In the past few weeks, however, the man had been drawing nearer: she felt him watching her, following her, closing in on her and was becoming increasingly worried, frightened at times because she knowing him as she did, his moods, his temper, especially if he'd been drinking, which she knew from friends he was, heavily enough that they were alarmed.

One of her closest friends, who had been stalked herself several times and attended a weekly stalking support group, urged her to go online and for her own protection learn about *inflammatory agents*. Victoria did, and took to keeping a container of pepper spray with her at all times. In her backyard she regularly rehearsed using it, pulling the can out of her purse or her coat pocket as fast as possible, before he

could get his hands on her, targeting where his face would be and sending a jet of spray at his eyes. All this so she would be ready should the occasion arise, and Victoria said she was convinced it would.

There were more and more signs of the man's presence around her property every few days, items that her husband knew Victoria would easily recognize. *Mars* bars, his favourite candy, sometimes the empty wrappers, sometimes unopened bars set conspicuously on her back deck. Empty *Coke* cans (he was addicted to Coca Cola, particularly with rum in it). A leather glove from a pair she had bought for him their last Christmas together. His favourite tennis racquet. Torn photographs of the two of them in happier times strewn on her lawn, back deck, on the front doorstep, in her mailbox, under her windshield wipers.

After several of these terrorizing incidents, which is what Victoria considered them,

she called her lawyer, who told her to leave everything in place, take photographs, call the police, say she feared for her life and on the advice of her lawyer she wanted her estranged husband charged with stalking.

The police came to the house, one male, one female. They photographed everything that had been left on the property, instructing her, as her lawyer had, to leave all materials in place on the property so it would appear to her husband that she was ignoring him and not bothered by his stunts. They took a detailed physical description and as much personal information on the man as Victoria could give them, including the fact that her husband was an alcoholic (Victoria had been to A.A. meetings with him before they separated) and when drinking was given to extreme violence.

Three hours later they reappeared, reporting that an arrest warrant had been issued, an all-points bulletin circulated.

Initial efforts to arrest her husband yielded no results as he appeared to be NFA, of no fixed address, but a city-wide the alert was out for the man.

That made sense, according to Victoria. Recently she had heard from mutual friends that he'd lost his job, was living on the street, had no money and seemed desperate enough, if he was drinking, to come after her for some. Or worse.

The officers took down names, addresses and phone numbers of friends and relatives, telling Victoria to remain positive, assuring her that she had done the right thing, that all efforts were being made to track the man down, adding that in most cases, thanks to prompt action on behalf of plaintiffs, *negative eventualities* were usually avoided.

Victoria thanked the officer for the assurance, but admitted her attitude had become one of stoic resignation: "Let him come," her philosophy, a remark the police officer said she quite understood, nevertheless she encouraged Victoria to remain optimistic—and call 911 immediately if her husband made his presence known.

The truth was that Victoria had attended several meetings of a local support group for victims of spousal abuse. The graphic, often gruesome stories related by some of the women (and several of the men) about the violence they had been, and were continuing to be subjected to, had them living in almost constant fear that the next attack would be the last one. The stories convinced Victoria that things had reached a point where she felt the need for more peace of mind than the canister of pepper spray in her purse could provide.

She went out to a firearms store north of the city and acquired a single-shot derringer (a historical item, no license necessary), confiding in me that she would have no compunction about using it if she had to. Other than me, she had told no one about the gun, or about driving to a shooting

range adjacent to the firearms store twice a week to practise using it. The derringer fired a .45 calibre bullet, *capable of killing a person with a well-aimed shot to the general chest area*, the enthusiastic salesman boasted to Victoria ...

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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