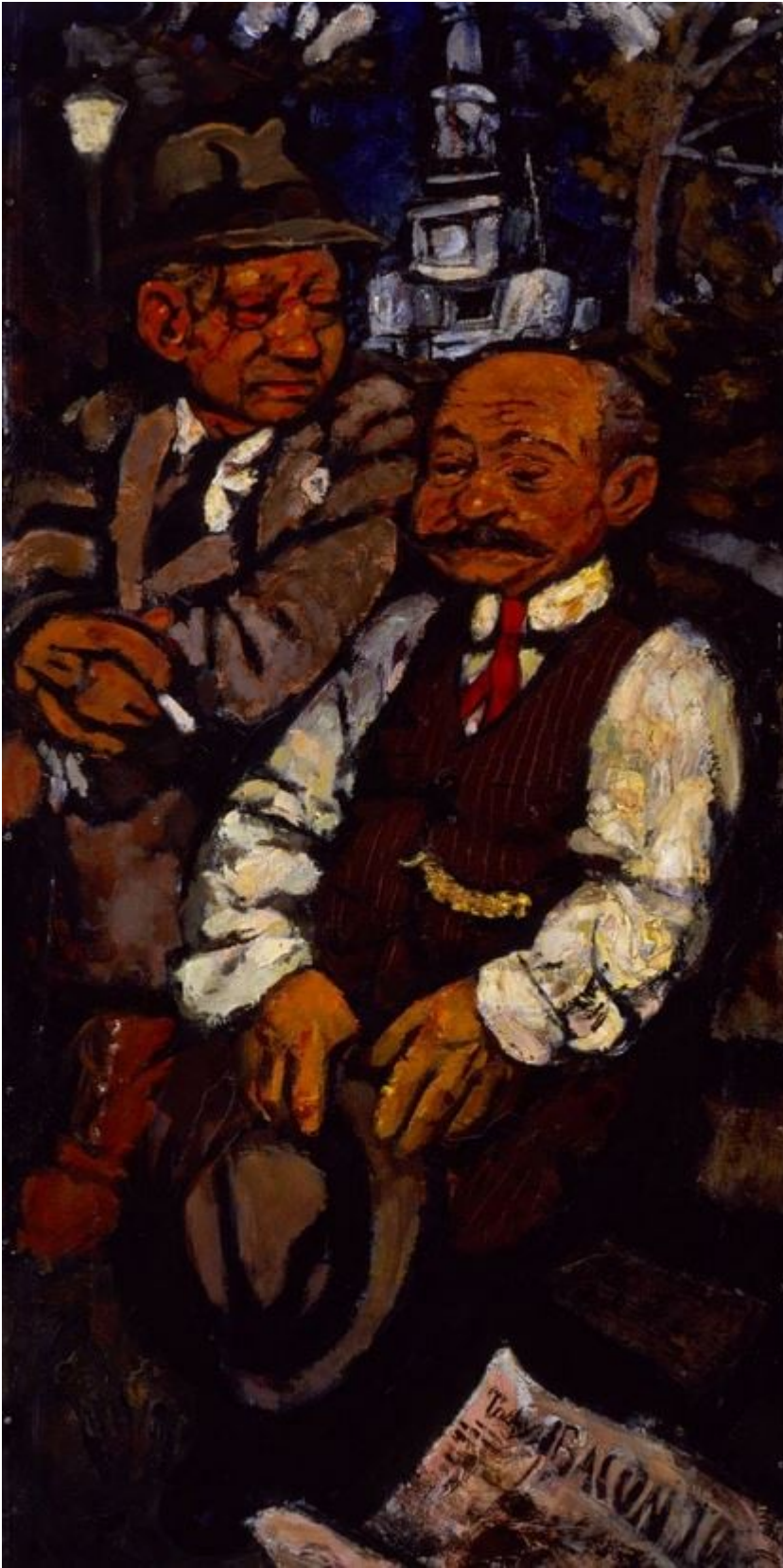


Who is Teddy Villanova? –A Serial Mystery: Chapter 3

Find all available chapters [here](#).

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



Brain Trust, Jack Levine, 1935

All quiet on the Finnish front when Molly and I left the house next morning shortly before nine (she had insisted on staying

over for safety reasons), the pungent aroma of skillet-fried herring, green pepper and onions, Hugo's usual breakfast, wafting into the foyer through the half-open door of his apartment as we went out the front door.

Marti didn't seem to be lurking about as I was sure he would be, bent on retrieving the \$500 he'd seen Gary hand me. But Gary's car was gone, which probably meant he'd taken Marti in for questioning about the break and enter.

Molly kept close to me as we went slowly down the walk, tucking a solicitous hand under my arm as we reached the sidewalk and walked to her car.

"Why would they have been calling you 'Johnny?'"

"His name was on the billboard out front of the hotel. According to Hilario they were looking for *the pianist* and just assumed I was Johnny."

"Will you tell Gary?"

"I will, just so he'll scare Marti with prison if there's another break in."

Though I didn't need her to, Molly grew solicitous again and insisted on holding my backpack while helping me into the car. She jiggled the pack, feeling its weight. "You didn't," she said, handing it down to me.

"I wasn't going to leave it around the apartment."

She got in the car. "Is it really a good idea?"

"People with extreme violence at the top of their option list are after me, Molly. It doesn't mean I'll use it."

"Is it loaded?"

I hesitated. "Hmm," I kidded, "let me check."

“–No!” she stopped me and started the car. “I can swear at your trial that I never saw it.”

I hadn't thought of checking the chamber. I made a mental note to do so at the first opportunity.

We drove down the street to the end of the block, turned west onto Heath, went along a block then turned into Paradise Gardens Cemetery, which the houses on Hugo's side of the street backed onto. Two hundred acres of undulating lawns, towering oak, maple and pine, serenity gardens, statuary, it was Toronto's oldest and most prestigious cemetery, where the city's late and great of the last two-hundred years lay buried.

The sexton's cottage in which superintendent William Early lived abutted a cedar grove just inside the eastern gates of the cemetery. Early, as he was known, had left a note that Molly and I found taped to my door when we returned from the hospital, saying he wanted me to stop by as soon as possible.

Seventy-seven at the time, Paradise Gardens' caretaker for over forty years, a lifelong bachelor, I had known Early since I was a boy. The house I grew up in had backed onto the other side of the cemetery, the place becoming an extension of our back yard. With his white hair (it had always been white), his soft-spoken Jamaican accent and his gentle, easy-going ways, Early was always happy to give my younger brother and me and our friends things to do around the cemetery *to keep us out of mischief*, or offer us worldly advice, or relate a life lesson he thought it would be good for young boys to hear, having no children of his own. Since we walked through the cemetery to get to and from school most days, we saw Early all the time, tending the grounds, preparing graves, scooting soundlessly to and fro on patrol in the battery-powered golf cart we referred to as the “Earlymobile.”

The door to the garage opened as Molly and I pulled up in

front of the cottage. Early came out with a car battery that he carried over to the Earlymobile, its rear hatch open. Molly and I got out of the car. Early lowered the battery into the hatch.

"Sorry to bother you," he said without looking up.

"No bother. Sorry I wasn't in when you came by."

"I tried calling."

"I misplaced my phone."

"Well," he said, standing up, "there was some funny business this morning I thought you should know about."

He bent down again, finished connecting the battery, closed the hatch lid and stood up. He offered Molly a warm smile. Though I had a feeling they might have met before, in case Early didn't recall, I introduced her. Pulling a rag out of his back pocket, he wiped his hands. "I remember Molly," he said, reaching out his hand. "Are you still stock broking?"

"Stocks, still. And still broke," she joked as they shook.

Early chuckled, nodding. "Better that than the alternative, as I always say."

Molly laughed.

"So what's up?" I asked him.

"Well," he said, "on my rounds this morning, about 6:15 I'd say, I noticed a black Lincoln Town Car stopped in front of the Villanova family plot. From where I was standing I had a side view of the Town Car. The rear window, passenger side, was open, the man inside staring at the Villanova mausoleum from the looks of it. He had on a black fedora, and was too far away for me to make out his face.

"I left the cart and headed closer for a better look. He must

have seen me coming. He pulled in his head, the window began to close, then stopped with a few inches to spare. The man's fingers appeared in the opening. He flicked out a business card that fell to the ground. The window closed and the car drove off. Slowly, so I'd have plenty of time to see the license plate, which I thought was odd." He took a business card out of his shirt pocket. He handed it to me. A license plate number was written on the back, on the front a company name: *DELAVANT LOGISTICS*, Victor Bruno, CEO.

"What is that, Delavant Logistics?"

"A trucking company. Down in the Port Lands according to the address."

I left it at that. The name registered with Molly. I passed her the card.

Early scratched his head. "I have to say, the episode was a strange one. I don't think I'm imagining, but it looked to me like the gentleman somehow wanted to be seen, wanted me to pick up that card."

"Knowing you'd show it to me."

"Son of a gun," said Early as it dawned on him. "That's right."

"He knew what he was doing."

"It looked that way to me, once I thought about it." Early paused. "I didn't want to say so, my eyes being what they are, but my first look, I actually thought it might have been your brother."

Molly glanced at me then at Early. "Rumours are going round that he's back in the city. Nothing confirmed yet of course."

"No," said Early, smiling to himself. "It wouldn't be. He's always been a hard one to pin down, that one. Restless. Had to

be on the go. What's the big hurry? I used to ask him. Slow and steady wins the race ... " He thought for a moment then narrowed his eyes at me as if he'd just noticed the bandages. "What happened to your face, son?"

"Bit of a scrape at the club last night. Nothing serious."

"That's not like you."

"Apparently he didn't have much choice in the matter," Molly piped up.

"I see," said Early. "An *unwilling participant*." He nodded, smiling with his usual understanding. "Nice seeing you again, Molly."

"Nice to see you, Mr. Early."

"Can you let me know if this Victor Bruno shows up again?"

"Certainly, my boy."

He climbed into the Earlymobile, turned the key, threw us a wave and zoomed quietly off ...

Molly letting her Irish impetuosity show as we headed downtown, she was all for driving straight to the Port Lands, to Delavant Logistics where we could confront Victor Bruno about the purpose of his visit to the cemetery that morning; about the deliberate dropping off of the business card for Early to find, not to mention the criminal events that had taken place last night.

"We could wangle our way in. I'll distract the receptionist with legalese while you check the room where the man at the

table posing as your brother was sitting. Look for cartridge shells, bullet holes, blood on the floor. It stands to reason, as I see it, that Victor Bruno is your Mr. Big, connected in some way or other to your brother."

"If I didn't have this meeting with Anya I'd be all for it. I think it's better if we wait until I talk to Gary. I'm sure he'll want to be involved, considering the kind of folk we're dealing with."

"Folk?" she laughed.

"I was being ironic."

"Of course you were ... "

Caught in the last of the morning rush hour, it was after ten by the time we pulled into the handicapped parking space in front of my publisher's building. I thanked Molly for the lift. Told her to try, like I was, not to over-think the situation. Doing that with my brother had blown up in both our faces too many times ... we needed to remember that.

She was going to be tied up in meetings most of the day. She asked if I would go to her place at some point before noon and feed Theo her cat, who would be worried that she hadn't come home last night. I would, after my meeting with the publisher. We agreed to stay in touch if anything came up during the day then meet for dinner at *Respighi's*, an old-fashioned Italian restaurant not far from my place where Molly, Gary and I often *reconvened* (one of my brother's malapropisms that we liked to parody) when life became too intense, as it had been for us in the last twelve hours. Top of the list that night would be what to do about the Missing Man. His story on the morning news had caught people's attention. People were following the story. He seemed to have disappeared into thin air.

Molly helped me out of the car, walked with me to the revolving doors and with a gentle *Adios!* saw that I stepped

inside safely.

I was moving too slowly in my injured state for the sweep of the doors. They *whooshed* me around then propelled me unsteadily across the lobby to the elevators where, after a moment to fish my bottle of water out of the backpack to pop another one of Tilley's pain pills, I gave Gary Donovan another try. I'd called him from the car, but was put through to voicemail. I said in my message that it was somewhat urgent. I needed to talk to him about something that happened last night that I was sure could be linked to the pair that Marti had sold my files to. I'd be in a meeting, but I'd watch for his call. The elevator arrived. I went up to the ninth floor.

"You're here, James!" said Madison, the admin assistant jumping up from her chair when I came into the office. "I was just calling you." She removed her headset, stepped quickly from behind the reception desk, waving me to accompany her back to the lunch room. The coffee machine hissing and spitting steam as it finished cycling, she took three cups from the cupboard—looked to me, I nodded, she made it four—and set them on a round tray where there were pitchers of cream and milk, a bowl of sugar cubes, paper napkins and four silver spoons. "Anya wants you to meet her in the boardroom. She's in there now with the police." She removed the steaming carafe and began filling the cups.

"Police?"

"Unh-huh. Detectives."

"How do you know that?"

"Their trench coats."

"What's it about?"

"Don't know. But when they came in, they asked for you."

She finished pouring the coffees, replaced the carafe and picked up a plate of cookies. "Would you mind?" she asked, handing me the plate.

Back to reception then along the hall on the window-side of the office, we entered the open area adjacent to the executive offices, heading for the glass-walled boardroom in the center where I could see Anya sitting across the conference table from two men, both of them wearing trench coats, one green, one dark grey. Madison had been right. They did look like cops.

Questions flew. Why had they asked for me by the pseudonym I was using on the project I was currently writing for Anya, rather than my real name? Did they know my real name? Was this some kind of set up? Had they figured out I was the Missing Man who had flown off the bridge in a Lincoln Town Car and plunged into the Keating Channel? Is that why they were here? I decided that it was best to split before they saw me. Tell Madison I needed to use the washroom and not come back. Explain to Anya later.

But it was too late. One of the detectives had seen us approaching and looked over.

Anya got to her feet as Madison and I entered the boardroom, a pained frown when she noticed my face and the limp. "Good gracious!" she said, motioning me to the chair beside hers. "What happened?"

"Bike accident," I replied. "Wasn't watching where I was going."

"Where do you bike?" one of the detectives was quick to ask.

"Leslie Street Spit." It was true that I biked there, but the question caught me off guard. I should have picked somewhere else. The Spit was adjacent to the Port Lands.

Madison returned to our side of the table after giving the cops their coffees. She set

Anya's and mine down, picked up the plate of cookies which I'd set on the table, started around to offer them to the detectives, but both held up hands, no thanks.

Anya thanked her, waited till she'd put the cookies down and left the room. "This is Detective Marks," she pointed to the man on the left, "this Detective Engels," indicating the man on the right. "I hope I have that correct?" They nodded. "This is the James Castle you were asking for, Officers." She turned to me, a wink that the cops couldn't have seen letting me know how she wanted to play this, waiting while I slipped my backpack off. Without thinking, I placed it in front of me on the table before sitting down. It landed with a hard *Thunk!* I'd forgotten about the gun.

Marks and Engels eyeballed the pack. I picked it up, set it soundlessly on the floor beside my chair. Anya and I sat down.

"I'm sorry to say, James," she continued, "but the detectives have unfortunate news about Richie Havenhurst." She looked across the table.

"Divers found Mr. Havenhurst drowned in the Keating Channel last night, Mr. Castle," Engels informed me.

What?

"According to witnesses at the scene, the car he was driving broke through the barrier arm at a high rate of speed, flew off the drawbridge as it was opening and plunged into the canal."

Richie the Missing Man on the news? Richie who doesn't know how to drive? Who's never even had a license?

"That's terrible," I said, genuinely distressed. Because I was. Stunned. Saddened. Richie had lived a hard life. He was

trying to turn it around, but having a lot of trouble doing so. His own worst enemy, as drug addicts tend to be.

“As to how we came to be talking to you, Mr. Castle, we found your name on Richie’s website. You’re apparently writing a book with him, and Ms. Verhoeven is listed as the book’s publisher. There was no email or telephone we could find for James Castle, so we got in touch with Ms. Verhoeven—”

“I told them,” Anya turned to me, “when we talked on the phone, that you were the ghostwriter of a book by Richie that I’m going to—*was* going to—publish. I said you were coming in to see me today. The officers arrived about half an hour ago,” an apologizing look to me as if to say: *Otherwise I would have phoned you and told you not to come in!*

Marks thumbed back a few pages in his notepad “We’ll get to that, m’am. In the

meantime, I’d like to ask Mr. Castle about a voicemail message he left for Richie at ...” he checked his notepad, “7:45 last evening. Do you remember making that call, sir?”

“I do.”

Marks read from his notes. “You warned him that, quote, *People are onto you. They’ve had enough. You’re a, quote, dead man if you don’t wise up.*”

“‘*Dead man*’,” said Engels. “What did you mean by that?”

“Was it a threat?” said Marks.

“Not at all.”

“‘Wise up’? What were you referring to there—”

“This sounds like an interrogation,” Anya broke in. “Not something that should be taking place in a business office.”

“We’re merely looking for information at this point, m’am. If

Mr. Castle is uncomfortable with a question, he's free not to answer it."

I told Anya I had no problem with the questioning, curious to see where they wanted to go and how much they knew.

"I was referring," I said to Engels, "to the fact that six months ago, Richie accepted fifty-thousand dollars from a wealthy woman named Adele Montclair who thought his *BE REAL* drug education program would help her twenty-year old son Toby, who had failed out of two colleges and one university, was unemployed, living at home and doing copious amounts of drugs. He'd left marijuana behind, moved on to cocaine and was dabbling in heroin, next step opioids. His mother heard about Richie through one of her friends. School boards hired him to go into elementary, middle and high schools and speak about drug addiction. With his manic personality he could put on pretty entertaining and effective performances. He had an electric stage presence that resonated with a lot of adolescents. You believed he'd been through everything he said he had, and survived to tell the tale. He shared his life story, from childhood poverty to a maximum security prison cell, seeing the light, breaking his addiction, saying no to drugs. The program that he built was about helping those who were using drugs to *BE REAL* not just about getting off them, but understanding why they started them in the first place.

"'*DON'T START*' was to be the title of his latest book," Anya explained. "James ghostwrote his first one for him. We distribute them in schools after his presentations, and as trade books. *BE REAL* was a mini-bestseller. Richie has—or had—ideas for a franchise worked out, and was supposed to be getting financing for a chain of *BE REAL* centres around the country. Affordable rehab to help people *STAY REAL*."

"Was any of this going to happen do you think?" Engels asked. "I mean, the guy was a reformed drug addict, from what you say."

"That was the trouble," I said. "The 'reformed' was coming to be a joke because Richie had started using again. In a big way. I knew about it because he'd call me up when he was high, run off at the mouth about things that made no sense, hysterical, paranoid, then out of the blue he'd start crying, wracked with guilt about the way he was deceiving people, letting them down, letting himself down, he was a fraud, he was going to kill himself, he wanted to die from the hypocrisy of it all. He couldn't stop hating himself. He wanted me to tell him how to, but I couldn't. He was giving his performances high, and the money he was receiving from schools, though it was good at fifteen-hundred per appearance, couldn't come close to covering what he needed. He blew through the fifty-thousand in a little over six weeks. And instead of helping Toby Montclair off drugs by having him work on the *BE REAL* program and live a *BE REAL* life, which was what Richie promised his mother he would do, he had him lining up drug deals, Toby sampling the goods more than he should have been, so he ended up hooked worse than ever. He tried to kill himself twice with opioids that Richie had given him. The third time, maybe he won't be so lucky. Anyhow, the fraud was exposed. Talk was going around that someone would try to off Richie. The Montclairs. Drug dealers he owed money to. People he'd stiffed on loans, some of them mob connected. All I was doing was warning him as a friend that things were out of control; that he'd better smarten up soon and take matters in hand, or he'd be a dead man."

Marks hadn't taken his eyes off me the whole time I was talking. I had the feeling he didn't believe a word I was saying. "Did he ever stiff you?"

"Stiff me?"

"You said people he stiffed might want to do him harm. I was asking if he ever stiffed you. Simple question."

"I loaned him money the odd time—"

"Officer Marks!" Anya objected.

Marks ignored her. "Did he ever pay you back?"

"Always."

"This stops right now!" Anya stood up.

Marks glared at me, seething.

"Easy, Stu," Engels cut in.

My phone started ringing in my backpack.

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

Follow NER on Twitter [@NERIconoclast](https://twitter.com/NERIconoclast)