

Who is Teddy Villanova? –A Serial Mystery: Chapter 5

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



Welcome Home– Jack Levine, 1946

A meeting with a prospective client had run late (a pharmaceutical company wanting me to write a nonfiction novel that presented the industry in a favourable light; I said no), so it was after six by the time I left to meet Molly and Gary up the street at *Respighi's*.

I stopped in the foyer when I saw Hugo's door was open, stepped inside to make sure everything was okay. It was and it wasn't.

Worried that Marti would inevitably succeed in stealing his

vintage motorcycle from the garage, Hugo and his Finnish friend Raglan, also in his sixties, that afternoon had somehow managed to wheel the four-hundred pound bike out of the garage, down the driveway to the front of the house, up the four stairs from the sidewalk, up the front walk then up the four veranda stairs, into the foyer, through the door into Hugo's living room, where it now sat on its stand in front of the fireplace.

Both of them had been drinking. Hugo, still perspiring, stood back in underwear and a sleeveless T-shirt, a highball glass chock full of ice and vodka from a bottle of Absolut he was holding, while Raglan, an ice-filled glass of vodka on the floor beside him, also in his underwear and a sleeveless T-shirt, unscrewed the cap, leaned over the open tank to check the gas situation, the inch-long ash on his cigarette wavering like it was about to fall—

“—*BOOM!!!*” Marti's voice exploded behind me.

I ducked out of the way thinking he was coming at me. Hugo dropped his drink, terrified, while Raglan, the picture of calm and composure, looked up from the gas tank.

“About half,” he said quietly, the ash on his cigarette still in place ...

Molly and Gary were having a drink when I arrived at the restaurant. I waved to them as Sal the owner pulled me aside for a word. His pianist Roger had cancelled. Again. He appealed to me. Was there any possibility I could play a couple of sets, nine to eleven? One fifty. Free dinner and drinks for Molly and Gary included.

He complained this was becoming an increasing problem. It was getting harder and harder to find a reliable pianist, let alone one who could play the music people wanted to listen to. I was no Billy Joel *Piano Man* by any means, but I had the kind of touch that kept the music softer than the conversation

level in the room, yet loud enough for people to recognize a tune and hum along to themselves while enjoying their exquisite northern Italian cuisine.

Sal, his wife Rose and I had become friends over the six years I'd been coming to the restaurant. My daily schedule, well, I didn't really have one. But I could pop in at *Respighi's* any hour of the day until closing time, it didn't matter. They fed me, listened to my woes, yet never talked about any of their own. They were caring and parental in a way that people who have never had children sometimes are. In return, I helped them out whenever I could. A proud man, Sal would pay me for playing from the cash register at the end of the night. I would slip it into Rose's hand on my way out, she would return it to the cash register: a pantomime ritual shared by the three of us that was never discussed. Of course I would play.

I joined Molly and Gary, ordered a drink and tried not to look at the empty fourth chair where Richie might have been. He sometimes joined us when we went to *Respighi's*. He loved its Old World charm. He loved Sal and Rosa. Their restaurant settled him right down. It let him be *Richie the Normaloid* as he called himself, not Richie the drug addict ex-con whom Gary had found out from undercover was into Victor Bruno for over a hundred- thousand, drugs and gambling. "I'm talking to Bruno about it tomorrow morning."

That caught my attention in view of what I had been through with 'Mr. Big' Bruno the previous night. I asked Gary if I could tag along. I wanted to ask Bruno face to face how Richie Havenhurst ended up dead in the trunk of one of his Town Cars."

"I have enough right now I could arrest him on suspicion," Gary offered.

"I wouldn't," Molly said. "We need Bruno circulating to lead us to your brother. He's choreographing his re-entrance, so

let's play along. He's here. We just can't see what rock he's hiding under."

Rosa brought out our dinner, Sal uncorked a bottle of Chianti and filled our wineglasses, commiserating at the unfortunate news about Richie. Rosa crossed herself while offering a benediction in Italian. We raised our glasses and toasted.

We talked while we ate, conversation revolving around the prospects of catching whoever killed Richie. Bruno, or one of his crew for the drugs-gambling debt? A disenchanted private client using the *Be Real* anti-drug program claiming it failed, so he wanted his money back—to buy a fresh stash of drugs?

The other topic was my brother of course. Why he would be coming back. What he would be up to, what his new venture could involve. He was an ex-con now. It would be impossible for him to return to the investment business with a criminal record. What would he use for money to rise from the ashes of ignominy like a phoenix and fly again?

Gary shrugged. "He's going after the Fund in my opinion."

Molly agreed. "He'll need a lot of cash to start his new venture with what he'll have to pay surrogates to trade for him. But who's going to lend him that kind of money? The Fund is obviously going to be in his sights. If it isn't already. Why else would someone be staking the place out as Early has reported?"

The "fund" they were referring to was one my brother and I started thirty years ago to memorialize our childhood friend Edward "Teddy" Villanova at my ninth birthday party. My mother had arranged for six of my friends and my two younger brothers to go for a swim down the street at Balmy Beach, masks and snorkels, splash fights, two mast-less windsurfing boards to paddle farther out, then up the hill to the two picnic tables where lunch was laid out, my mother supervising one picnic table, her friend Jackie the other.

I remember in all the activity as I was putting condiments on my second hotdog that it had been about ten minutes since Teddy had gone down the hill to the public bathroom on the boardwalk. Jackie, at the head of our table, had noticed too.

She shouted to my mother that Teddy had gone to the bathroom by the boardwalk but hadn't come back yet. She was going down to check.

There was no sign of him in the bathroom. Jackie questioned the girl who ran the snack bar beside the canoe club, who said she *had* seen a boy fitting Teddy's description. About ten minutes ago he had come into the snack bar holding the hand of an older man who didn't act like he was the boy's father. He ordered the girl to make a chocolate fudge ice cream cone, forcing the boy to take it as they left, heading west on the boardwalk. "I remember watching. Something didn't look right—"

Jackie borrowed the phone and called 911 to report a child had just been abducted.

With the police having no more to go on than the snack bar girl's statement, the investigation stalled and never got going again. Police put out appeals to anyone who might have been on the boardwalk at that time of day and seen a man walking in a westerly direction holding the hand of a nine-year old, blond-haired boy eating an ice cream cone, but there were only crank callers. The city was terrified, the Beach area, a close-knit family neighbourhood, devastated. This had never happened before that anyone could remember.

My mother went into what I remember as a suspended state of animation. She couldn't talk, wrung her hands, wept with her head bowed. Her friend Jackie, whose table Teddy had been sitting at, found herself in the same condition, though unlike my mother Jackie was an alcoholic who, as my mother had once said not disapprovingly, was able to drink her sorrows away.

My brothers, my friends and I didn't talk about it. We avoided

the topic. After all, nothing had come out that Teddy was dead. He was just *missing*, an idea we used to tranquilize our real feelings. We were horrified and afraid. I'll never forget the feeling, almost sick to our stomach at the thought that we too could be so randomly taken. The city passed an ordinance: children were forbidden on the boardwalk unless accompanied by someone over sixteen.

At three o'clock in the morning six nights after Teddy's disappearance, guilt proving too much for her, my mother tried to kill herself using razor blades. It was my brother and I who found her lying face down on the basement floor beside the laundry room. There was blood, I'll just say that. My brother and I had no idea what to think, especially when we saw that my grandfather's two Gladstone leather suitcases were lying open beside her—the "secret suitcases" we knew she kept in a padlocked cupboard under the basement stairs, the door to which now stood open.

The suitcases were packed with neatly strapped bundles of money, dozens of bundles, big denomination bills, 50s and 100s, thousands of dollars, maybe more. In a state of shock from the bloody scene around us, we closed the suitcases, locked them with the key attached to the handle then hid them in a closet further along the basement where we kept our sports equipment. My brother went upstairs to wake my father. I went back and stood beside my mother. I remember wondering, without any feeling of one sort or another I was in such a confused state, if this was the last time I would ever see her. Lying on the basement floor. Bleeding to death ...

My brother and I rode our bikes over to see Early first thing the next morning. I explained how we'd found our mother and the secret suitcases, asked him if he would mind holding the money for us until things sorted themselves out. He counted up the bills, savings bonds and other "securities" underneath the cash, which made for a grand total of \$383,000, a sizeable fortune in those days Early informed us. He said he had no

problem safeguarding the money, but stipulated that the suitcases could only ever be opened in the presence of both my brother and me. Our younger brother would have to be present as well. We agreed. Early hugged each of us, told us we had done the right thing, we could stay with him any time if we needed to. He then read a passage from the Bible on hope for my mother's recovery.

We didn't see my mother for nearly two years. Our grandmother came to live with us. Life carried on, the most noticeable difference being that the house was much quieter. The yelling had stopped.

She appeared in the kitchen one day when my brothers and I came home from school in early June. With a blank expression on her face, she looked hesitantly over at us as if trying to remember our names ... then turned back to the sink and continued washing dishes. Her cousin my Aunt Mary explained that she'd had electro-shock therapy in the hospital. There would be things she wouldn't remember. But not even her children's names? I asked. Of course she remembered a day later. She wore long-sleeved shirts and blouses, and silk scarves around her throat from now on.

Nothing was ever said by the adults in the family circle about what caused her to *get sick*, as we'd been told, what she was sick *with*, or what she did and where she lived during her nearly two-year hiatus as our mother. It was as if the event had never happened. As if it was all in our minds. *The less said about it the better*, I overheard one of my uncles tell one of my aunts shortly afterwards. That was that.

My mother never mentioned the secret suitcases afterwards. My brothers and I came to the conclusion—unbelievable as it seemed for someone so completely obsessed with money before she went to the hospital—that she must have forgotten about them, along with the \$383,000. Where on earth would she have come up with a fortune like that I wanted to ask her,

especially when I knew my father, who had what was known in those days as a "good job," made less than one-tenth of \$383,000.

The suitcases remained with Early. He agreed to continue as administrator of what we decided should be called the Fund. Only the three of us knew about the Fund. And ever would, so Early said, otherwise there was bound to be trouble. When it came to large sums of cash, they were the root of all evil in families.

There was never any mention of the Fund between the three of us for nearly four years, when we felt enough time had gone by since Teddy's disappearance to ask Early if we could use money from the Fund for the erection of a smaller-sized granite mausoleum in Paradise Gardens. There were several dozen of them around the cemetery property with the names of the city's oldest families carved on them. Teddy loved the mausoleums at Paradise Gardens. He always wanted to own one, a place where he could go with his friends and enjoy complete privacy. Our mausoleum would be that place. We wanted *VILLANOVA* carved on the granite lintel over the door, as family names were on many of the other mausoleums. Early thought the idea was a good one, found a space up a rise of lawn across from the water fountain that received the afternoon sun. We agreed Teddy would have loved it.

Teddy's parents decided once the *VILLANOVA* memorial was completed that it had become just too hard on them living without Teddy, their only child. They badly needed a change of scenery. They put their house up for sale, their plan to move to Vancouver, where Teddy's mother had family. They were getting rid of virtually everything they owned. They had kept Teddy's bedroom exactly as it was the day of my 9th birthday party. That was going to be the most difficult thing to get rid of. What should they do with his things?

My brother and I talked to Early and decided that they

wouldn't have to get rid of a thing. Early would help us dismantle the room and move all its contents to the newly-built mausoleum. Furniture, rugs, pictures, books, clothes. Early, quoting the old English poet Marvell, felt it would be the *fine and private place* Teddy always hoped for.

He ran a power cord inside the mausoleum so the lamp beside Teddy's bed and radio worked. His bed was made up exactly as he left it, his pyjamas laid out, his slippers on the floor beside the bed, a well-thumbed copy of *Galaxy Science Fiction Magazine* sitting on his pillow. Everything would be ready for him when he returned, as all the boys at my birthday party that day were as sure as I was that he would.

Molly was beat, and Gary had done a double shift that day. They passed on dessert, but opted for coffee and liqueurs to keep me company before I hit the piano. The later-night regulars were coming in, a tony but unpretentious crowd filling the tables in the main dining room adjacent to the bistro where we were having dinner. The piano, a rare brown walnut Steinway sat on a raised platform at the front of the room, a spotlight on the pianist, another on the microphone beside the piano that could be turned on if Sal had booked a singer.

As to the gentleman paying early morning visits to the mausoleum, the three of us settled on my brother being the one Early had been noticing. The man always returned to his car and left quickly whenever Early approached, so he was never able to get a good look at his face.

It stood to reason. With donations in memory of Teddy accumulating over the years, always in cash, as we wanted the Fund to remain private, and the projects we undertook all ones we thought Teddy would have approved of. Early made wise investments for us several times a year on the advice of a friend of his who worked in a bank, his latest account statement showing that the Fund continued its upward growth

and stood at an incredible \$4.2 million, a sum many times greater than we could ever have imagined, such was the impact of Teddy's story on people when they heard it, and the various projects that we were developing in the name of our friend Teddy Villanova.

We agreed that the scent of four-million in cash would be irresistible to my brother, who after all was a partner in the Fund, and so would have received a copy of the account statement through his lawyer. There was no doubt in our minds that he would make a play for the cash. As Molly pointed out when we got up from the table a few minutes before nine, my brother had burned too many bridges. Without the Fund he'd have no hope of rising like a phoenix from the ashes of his notorious past.

Gary drove Molly home. I stayed at the table having my standard pre-performance coffee and a snifter of warmed Drambuie until Sal looked over, smiled and gave me a thumbs-up that it was time.

The highlight of the evening—there was always a highlight of the evening, such was the nature of *Respighi's* clientele—occurred toward the end of my first set. A man on the tipsy side laughing mischievously sidled up to the piano, held out a \$20 bill and said it was mine if I could play *Ob-La-Di, Ob-La-Dah* by the Beatles next. I took the money, said I'd be happy to.

Extremely pleased with himself, the man returned to his table. He was with a woman who seemed to be his wife, and another couple. Mr. Ob-La-Di, looking cockier than ever, reached a hand across the table and shook hands with his friend.

At the end of the song, I paused to have a sip of coffee.

I noticed the man who'd won the bet stand up, gloating, teasing, slapping his pal on the shoulder as he left to go to the washroom. At which point his friend got up, crossed the

floor and leaned down to have a word.

"Did my friend over there," he pointed to his table, "give you \$20 to play that last song?"

"He did." I took the bill out of my breast pocket and handed it to him.

"No, keep it," he said, pushing my hand away. "Here's fifty for your trouble. I just bet him a hundred you'd be playing it again ..."

Hugo's door was open a crack when I got home. There was gentle snoring. I stuck my head in. Riley was asleep sitting up with his back against the *Vincent*, a cigarette between his lips that had gone out, the long ash still in place. Hugo had passed out in his armchair, still in his underwear, a protective hand over the trigger of his double-barrel shotgun, a chain around his waist attached to the motorcycle's frame. It wasn't going anywhere without him.

With Marti in custody overnight on break-and-enter charges, I flopped into bed with all my clothes on. I was done—

Until from somewhere in the recesses of sleep I heard the distant ringing of a phone. Everything inside me screamed *NO!! DON'T ANSWER IT!!*

I stirred, rolled over and one-eyed the time on my clock radio: *12:30*. I'd been out for barely an hour. I took a slow deep breath, reached over and picked up.

It was Gary. Somebody had broken into Early's cottage. The place had been trashed. Early had been shot.

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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