

Who is Teddy Villanova? –A Serial Mystery: Chapter 9

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



At the Precinct –by Jack Levine, 1981

Someone shook me awake. Gary, saying my name. Not loud. Firm. “For your own good,” he said, shaking me until I opened my eyes.

Hilario, arms crossed, standing at the foot of the bed with a look of fatherly concern on his face. Moving quickly when he saw me slowly trying to sit up, reached down, put his hands under my arms to steady me.

“Not too fast, my boy. Not too fast ... ”

Roland, head of security, who had helped the taxi driver put me to bed, leaned down to hand me a cup of coffee. Black, dark roast, not too hot, just what the doctor ordered.

Gary gave me a minute while I sipped. “What was the name of that birder you were picking up photos from this afternoon?”

My thoughts cloudy, clearing slowly, it took me a minute and more sips of coffee before I remembered. Soreness in my shoulders and hips from when I'd fallen in traffic, no other damage otherwise, or so it seemed, I noted the time as I fished in my pants pockets for Cavendish's card.

2:25. I'd slept for nearly seven hours ...

We arrived at the gallery just before 3:00, Gary keeping me with him while he questioned the woman who discovered the body, Geoffrey Cavendish's assistant, Clare. Traumatized, hands shaking as she dabbed tears from her eyes with a handkerchief, she was having trouble holding herself together. She apologized for being a wreck. Gary told her not to give it a thought, asked her gently how things had unfolded.

She was the only person in the office besides Geoffrey, his other assistant had called in sick. Clare had gone for lunch at 12:00, the usual hour. Geoffrey was working on a job in the developing room when she left. He'd asked her to bring him back a ham on rye on a sesame bagel and a Snapple from the delicatessen down the street.

When she returned to the gallery, she couldn't believe her eyes. The place had been destroyed, offices, gallery,

furniture, photographic equipment, Geoffrey Cavendish beaten to death in the display gallery, a blood-smeared telephoto lens lying on the floor beside his body. It was so gruesome, she said, her voice breaking, that she vomited up her lunch.

The questioning carrying on, I peered around the ransacked studio. There was a strong smell of gasoline. All the doors of cupboards and filing cabinets stood open, their shelves bare, thousands of photographs, negatives and strips of film strewn all over the gallery floor, burnt black, wet, still smouldering. The perpetrators had apparently doused everything with gas before setting the place on fire.

The smell of smoke had alerted Julia, the woman in the office next door. She phoned 911 then went at the fire with the gallery's extinguishers plus the three she brought from her own office to keep the flames from spreading elsewhere in the building before the fire department arrived.

Gary excused Clare to go next door with Julia, brought me over to Cavendish's body. Had an officer pull back the tarpaulin for me to identify him as the man I met taking pictures in the cemetery that morning. This, so Gary had instructed me, the formal reason for my being at the scene of the crime.

It was horrible. Cavendish's face had been worked over cruelly with the telephoto lens until it was a bloody pulp. Yes, I told Gary, revolted by the sight. Despite the blood, I could see this was the man I had talked to at the cemetery, Geoffrey Cavendish. I handed Gary the business card he'd given me.

As I turned away, I noticed something: a half-smoked, plain end cigarette on the floor close to Cavendish's knee. I pointed it out to Gary, who crouched down, then kneeled for a closer inspection.

He took a Kleenex out of his pocket, leaned right down, put the tissue over the burnt end of the cigarette and with his thumb and forefinger carefully picked it up.

Back on his feet, he turned to me, holding out the Kleenex so I could have a close look at the partially-smoked cigarette: a spot of blood on the paper, close to a half inch in diameter, a fingerprint visible in the dried blood—

A sound of boisterous voices behind us entering the gallery. Marks and Engels arriving on scene.

Gary carefully wrapped the Kleenex around the cigarette, slipping it in his shirt pocket.

Across the way, I noticed the red light on over the darkroom door. Gary did too, nodding toward it—then suddenly reached behind me, opened my backpack, took Lisi's towel-wrapped gun out of the towel so that in the event Marks and Engels found me, I wouldn't be caught with the weapon that had murdered Richie Havenhurst. Dropping the towel in the backpack, he tucked the gun behind him in his belt.

Into the darkroom I went.

I took a quick look around, crouched and hid under a developing table in the darkroom's red safelight as Marks and Engels joined Gary.

“—They told me you two had already been here.”

“That's right. We found evidence the old guy was shooting kiddie porn.”

“Kiddie porn?”

“That's right. Looked from the photos we saw he was blackmailing somebody.”

“Whoever it was must have come to the gallery, set fire to the evidence.”

“Kiddie porn?”

“Mixed in with all the other photos dumped on the floor and

set fire to. Between

the water and fire extinguisher foam they were pretty much destroyed. We bagged some of them anyway.”

“You bagged burnt evidence?”

“With that kind of thing, where there’s smoke, there’s fire, Gary. It makes sense the perv would have kept copies of what he had for sale—for a pretty penny too.”

“That’s why we came back. Check the darkroom for negatives.”

“Why didn’t you check when you were here before?”

“Slipped our mind in all the commotion.”

“This is still a hot crime scene. You’re not checking anything. Get me the photos you found and let me have a look. Maybe there’s something to it.”

“Oh, there’s something to it. This guy was a serious pedo, Donovan.”

“I’m told he did wildlife photography.”

“The wild part’s right.”

They snickered.

Gary let the subject drop. “Who was first on the scene?”

“Stu and I. We were in the area.”

Marks must have noticed the *IN USE* red light above the darkroom door. “That wasn’t on when we were here before. He stepped toward the door—”

The handle rattled. I watched it open, the light spread, they were coming in.

Gary slammed the door shut. I could hear defiance in Marks’

breathing. A teeth-clenched *Fuck*.

"We'll check back with you later," Engels said evenly. He and Marks left.

I stayed under the work table for five minutes or so until Gary came in and gave me the all clear. He helped me look through the photos that had been torn off the drying lines and tossed on the floor by whoever killed Cavendish. The photos from this morning had to be somewhere.

They were. We found them underneath a door that had been ripped off a supply

cabinet and thrown on the floor. Six glossy 8 x 10-inch black and white close-up photographs of Bruno, Marks and Engels standing together in heated discussion from the looks on their faces in front of the *VILLANOVA* mausoleum. Good old Cavendish had made sure to get the name in the shot.

Gary returned the gun to my backpack. He would have lost his job if he'd been

caught with it. I thanked him, his usual humble shrug in return as he walked me to the fire escape at the back of the building.

I slunk up the alley to the street. Subtlety not something you found in the Marks/ Engels playbook, there they were, two guys in ball caps, longish hair and handlebar moustaches wearing dirty windbreakers and beaten-up running shoes. They couldn't have looked more like plainclothes detectives on stakeout if they'd tried, both smoking, sipping their take-out coffees while sneaking furtive glances at Cavendish's gallery across the street, from which Gary had warned they would be expecting me to emerge at any minute. A last look before turning to go, I noticed the cigarette Marks was smoking. What we used to call a *deadhead*: no filter.

My call to Molly as I headed for the subway was about to go to voicemail when she picked up.

“What a horror show.”

“You warned me.”

“I never imagined anything like this from that mental case. Are you in one piece?”

“More or less.”

She fell silent. “I’m afraid to ask—”

“A fire, water and smoke damage trifecta. It’s likely I lost everything. I’m at ground zero, as they say.”

A hitch in her throat, I could hear her holding back tears.

“Sorry to tell you.”

“You’ve got nothing to feel sorry for.”

“Well, I do actually. Somebody took care of that nice birder fellow Cavendish—”

“My God, why?”

“He was printing pictures for me of Bruno and the dirty cops casing out the mausoleum. I was to pick them up this afternoon. Someone beat him to death with one of his lenses then set his gallery on fire.”

Her voice wavered again. “The poor, poor man, what a tragedy.”

“One consolation, and it could help take these guys down when all is said and done. Gary brought me with him to Cavendish’s gallery and we managed to retrieve the implicating photos.”

“That’s something, I suppose. Look, I’m going to have to return to the battlefield. Things have been harried around here in the last couple of days. The hedge fund market is yo-

going dangerously, plus the large leveraged buyout on which I'm lead counsel for the buyers has fallen through because the sellers changed their minds at the last minute. In any case, it goes without saying you can live at my place for as long as you like.

"Can you speak for Tomcat Sawyer?"

"I think I can. Listen, before I go, can I have your permission to open an envelope your creep of a brother popped up in *Starbuck's* and handed to Lynne yesterday? He'd swapped the homeless street-person look for a navy blue, Savile Row suit with white button-down shirt, burgundy tie and black loafers. And real or fake, the full-beard was gone."

"Has she filed a stalking complaint?"

"She has, but it won't do much good. He's in a different get-up every time he appears."

"Permission granted. Let's see what he has to say."

"Your name's handwritten on the front of the envelope in a hasty scrawl." She paused, opening it. "It's an expensive, cream-colored note card, his first, middle and last names embossed in black at the top. Written in black fountain pen part way down the page:

"Can we talk?"

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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