

# Danny Casolaro: 64 Stories, Part 1

by Christian Bell

1

In the weeks before his death, Danny Casolaro told everyone he knew, don't believe a suicide. I won't kill myself. If I die, it's because they killed me. They're calling me and threatening me. Odd calls in the middle of the night for months. I can't sleep. I'm getting too close. I'm going to expose them once and for all. The "they" he referred to was always vague. Casolaro would tell you, it's all vague, I'm working on the details. Slit wrists, hanging in the shower, a balcony jump—don't believe it, it's not me. If you hear I'm dead, it was no accident. My sister Lisa killed herself and it devastated the whole family—I could never do that. A running car in a closed garage, pill overdose, driving off a cliff—I didn't do it. If you find a note, I didn't write it.

2

Casolaro liked to drink coffee. A cup before bed, he claimed, calmed him, the caffeine having the opposite effect at nighttime, though in his last months, sleep was difficult. He'd start his day with some light calisthenics, a shower, his housekeeper Olga brewing coffee in a French press, usually a dark Sumatra/ Kenyan blend. He'd drink that with breakfast, head to a local café. The bustle of people, the smell of brewing coffee, fresh bread and pastries made his brain percolate. Things became clearer. New ideas, the connections made sense.

3

Days before he died, Casolaro called his friend Bill, lied to him. I'm writing an article for *Time* about the whole matter. It's going to be big. The whole thing, it's going to be out there, it's going to be

revealed to everyone and that's that. What whole thing, Bill asked. But Casolaro dodged—Bill always knew him as vague, circling. Time Warner, they're footing the whole thing. Jack Anderson is working with me on it. Big advances. I'm just finishing up details and, man, this's going to change things. He was a bit frantic, like he'd had too much caffeine, like he was running out of time.

After Casolaro's death, Bill made some calls, found out the whole thing was bogus. No article for *Time*, no financing, nothing. Bill has always found this puzzling—Casolaro was given to exaggeration, a bit overecstatic about conspiracy details he uncovered, but he wasn't one to lie about something as concrete as an article deal.

4

Casolaro's father was an obstetrician. Danny remembers him being visibly shaken sometimes coming home from work. He wouldn't eat, would sit in a corner, a newspaper open before him but Danny could tell his eyes weren't scanning the words. Birth defects, stillborn births, maternal deaths: the tragedies he faced. He didn't talk about it. Sometimes, the child inside was almost like a monster, killing the mother trying to live, break free of the womb. Other times, it was the opposite: the mother was a monster, killing its child within. One or the other, intentional or not, rebelled from symbiosis. One of his own children, born after Danny, died from a heart defect just days after being born.

5

Danny learned that Mary Wollstonecraft, mother of author Mary Shelley, died after giving birth to her daughter. He could imagine the husband's and the midwife's devastation, even if maternal death was common then. Mary Shelley's husband, poet Percy Shelley, died by drowning, age 29, either by, take your pick, accident, suicide, or murder. Percy met his doppelganger soon before, Danny later read, completely enthralled, and believed that was an omen of impending death. He escaped not one but two shootings in the days before his

death. A family friend snatched Percy's heart from his funeral pyre, gave it to Mary, who kept it and was buried with it.

6

Casolaro got word about Oliver Stone's *JFK* film project just before he died. Kindred spirits, he thought. This whole thing's coming down, he confided to a friend, we're living in a time of justice and reckoning, revolutionary times, a time of truth. In the future, they'll be looking at that colossal wreck, the lone and level sands stretching far away. We're plunging deeper and deeper depths, charting new levels of the ocean. The governments of the world will be held accountable to the people. The meek, indeed, shall inherit the earth (though Casolaro wasn't given to reciting the Bible).

7

Often when he was alone, Casolaro would hear strange sounds. The humming and whirring that a computer might make. At home, different hotels in different cities. He'd be going over his notes, working on his book when he would stop his own noises of pen moving across paper, the click-clacking of the typewriter, and hear the sound. I'm just hearing stuff, he thought, maybe there's something wrong with my ears, maybe it's mind residue from *Computer Age*. Sometimes in a hotel room, paranoid and running low on sleep, he'd throw down his pen and move his ear against the wall, up and down, left and right, a spider fleeing an incoming boot.

The sound gained in strength as he got closer to the truth, closer to his death. The phantom computer seemed to be calculating more equations, algorithms—perhaps it was artificial intelligence, gaining in sentience. He had to abandon a strategy he'd developed—listen to music on headphones—because he was afraid he wouldn't hear someone coming to kill him.

He'd lie awake at night, still hearing the humming and whirring, the

ongoing tick of the clock marking time, propelling him into the future.

8

He dated a woman named Sara in May, three months before his death. Japanese dining, a performance of *Twelfth Night*. He would tell his dates about his work. Most of the details and implications would fly over their heads, or they'd think he was a dreamer, working on fictions, ideas. His last date challenged him, said that it was impossible for the U.S. government and corporations to be involved in a far-reaching conspiracy. He was paranoid, a lunatic.

Believe what you want, if it helps you sleep at night, he told her. The paranoid, as Burroughs said, is the man in possession of the facts.

I'm not an idiot, she told him, but I think you're deranged. You look like a wild-eyed zealot when you talk about this.

We all gotta serve somebody, it might be the devil, it might be the Lord, as Dylan said, you got to believe in something, he said.

Though he was still friendly with most of his ex-girlfriends, he never talked to her again. Just as well—he was getting closer and closer. He didn't need a doubter within his circle. Soon, he told himself, soon, things are going to change.

Even though he continued dating, many lonely days and nights followed. *Out of the day and night / A joy has taken flight.*(1) No one to pull his heart from the fire when he died, keep it for her remaining days.

I'll wash up to shore, once this is all said and done, I'll be someone else.

*(1) From Percy Bysshe Shelley's poem, "A Lament"*

9

The Octopus was the name Casolaro gave his conspiracy. A multi-tentacled conspiracy involving the highest and deepest levels of government and enterprise. BCCI, October Surprise, Iran Contra, Mossad, Pan-Am 103, Wackenhut, British Intelligence, Inslaw. Covert intelligence operatives, high powered intrusive computer software, money and power. It started a decade or so before, but that may have just been a surfacing period: the framework is probably decades old, reaching back to Watergate, JFK, RFK, MLK, Area 51, the Nazis; maybe even centuries old.

It was a monster that lived in the vast oceans. Every now and then, he found, it would surface, reek havoc, then disappear again, draw in some unsuspecting victims it would drown and feast on. Like most deep sea monsters, it left mostly anecdotal not empirical evidence of its existence, mostly bloodied corpses of victims washed up on shore. It was difficult to get on photograph, the clues it left were cryptic.

I'm going to be the one who gets that photograph, he said, I'm the one who's going to expose it to the world. Right now, it's surfacing, but soon it will disappear, probably for a long time. This is the time to get it. While it's above the water.

Casolaro didn't see the Octopus was merely using him. His notes and files weren't words and ideas but mere ink stains secreted by the creature itself, regurgitated scribbles that had been told countless times, a colossal wreck shattered so finely that its facts could never be reassembled.

10

Before Casolaro left for Martinsburg, Olga, his housekeeper, tried

helping him with his things. A briefcase, which she watched him shove full of papers. She tried lifting it but it was too heavy, hurting her shoulder and elbow.

What do you have in there, she asked.

Everything, he responded. All of my papers.

He said he was off to meet the last piece of the puzzle, a source that would help pull everything together. He looked tired but hopeful, she recounted, almost like a little boy on Christmas morning, awake to open gifts before sunrise. He was often like that, she said, but in the last days, he was frazzled, tired, a bleeding man still hopeful, stumbling along even though he's been wounded.

She feared for his life. More phone calls. We will cut him up, feed him to the sharks. Another: drop dead. Another: silence, just music in the background. Stop calling, she shouted into the phone. More calls followed, waking her in the middle of the night. No voices, no music, just silence.

The phone rang and rang into the night. She sat huddled in her bed, refusing to pick up, afraid to move. He had mentioned the word "Octopus" to her before, but didn't elaborate. Madness, she thought.

11

Casolaro was in a motel outside Tampa when the Gulf War started. The guys from CNN, hunkered down in a Baghdad hotel, reporting as the bombing ensued. He went back through his notes: Saddam Hussein, George Bush were common names. Arms went to Iraq and Iran. Even the chemical weapons they were afraid would be unleashed on the soldiers. It was suspected that Hussein even had a copy of the PROMIS software, possibly from the CIA, most likely the Trojan Horse variant so the government had an inroad on Iraqi

intelligence.

This has the tentacles of the Octopus all over it, he thought, as he watched the continuing live coverage between flag-waving bookend graphics advertising the war, the firm-standing generals addressing a gaggle of reporters live from the Pentagon, as aerial bombardment and incoming missiles played in seemingly continual loop, as words like "sortie," "scud," and "smart bomb" infiltrated his mind, the jargon of armed advertising.

12

Casolaro suffered many odd coincidences. They seemed to accelerate in his last weeks. An FBI agent knocked on his door, was looking for a man named Clifford. Sorry, wrong house. In a restaurant, he started talking to a guy nearby, who just happened to be Special Forces, a fact that he was willing to make public.

He was in a hotel in Richmond and, in the lounge, there was a guy that looked just like him. His double. The guy was even wearing the same color shirt.

He was in line at the Department of Motor Vehicles, discovered the guy in front of him also had the last name Casolaro (no relation though). Not a common name. The guy seemed to shrug it off, say, that's sure funny.

He was in a supermarket checkout line, a guy comes up to him, puts his arm around him. Hey, Hector, how are you doing? Hector?, he said. Yeah, come on, Hector Cesario, don't play games, my man. No, you have me confused with someone else. I'm Danny Casolaro. The guy stepped back, looked him up and down, shrugged his shoulders. Man, I'm sorry, I thought you were Hector. He disappeared into the produce section.

13

At Casolaro's funeral, a man in a trenchcoat and another decked out in full army uniform approached his coffin, placed a medal on the lid. The soldier gave a salute. The two men walked away. His family, already upset and in mourning, were baffled. They didn't recognize either man—both had just shown up, were in continual motion performing their deed, and left. Danny had never served in the military. The medal was buried with his coffin.

A family friend later told them, perhaps it was a secret nod to Danny's work, from good people from within the government too afraid of their lives to go public. Perhaps thanks for your service, for fighting in the long war against evil.

14

Wherever he went, Casolaro dragged along his research. An extensive collection of typed pages, newspaper clippings, handwritten notes stuffed in an bulging accordion file which he then stuffed into a briefcase. Friends said the notes were a mess, but Casolaro was a mad maestro, able to make sense of them.

These notes stayed with him. Placed in the trunk of his car. Tucked under his arm as he went to a bar, a restaurant, to meet a source. The notes were going to be a book, a series of articles, his magnum opus, the essential work that defined his life.

Friends asked him if he had other copies. No, he said, except a few pages here and there. If the heat is on me too much, he said, maybe I'll send them to Illyrian College. It was a joke no one got.

He went to Martinsburg with them. When his body was found, they were gone, never to be found. The police searched nearby dumpsters, canines covered a mile long stretch of nearby highway. Nothing.

15



When he was able to sleep, Casolaro had a recurring dream of falling from a labyrinthine cruise ship into deep dark waters. The deck pool was full of ex-girlfriends, a party of leisurely conversation and laughter. The lower cabin hallways were dark, full of his contacts, unknown agents stalking him. Voices pushing him in different directions. He found himself running through the mazes, searching for light, stairways leading up. He'd be up on deck at night, out of breath, and he'd tumble over the side. Flailing in cold, heavy waters that sucked him under, struggling to surface as he drowned, the moonlight through the liquid filter fading away. The sense of a massive creature underneath, lurking, waiting.

16

Casolaro had written extensively in creative forms, many poems and short stories, and a novel called *The Ice King* that was about mountain climbing. He collaborated on a film, "To Fly Without Wings." A friend of his said, he wasn't an investigative reporter—he was a poet.

There was some indication he was working on the Octopus book from a novelist's point of view. That it wasn't investigative, but fiction.

He liked the construct of fiction for explaining conspiracies, the weaving of fiction and truth to flesh out the story, make the edges smooth and round, eliminating inconsistencies and the random, realizing metaphors, making what could be called a juicy coherent story. A picture, a film, a consumable product. Fiction explaining the truth, even if that truth was essentially a fiction.

He knew that people might hate him for doing so, for making such a dangerous theory palpable, digestible to the masses. For perpetuating conspiracies as master plans designed to explain everything.

But the closer he got, the less he could count on fiction. Too close to the truth, he couldn't dissociate, or maybe he was just a character in a larger fiction.

17

Casolaro's death was ruled a suicide. Before he died, he said, if I end up dead, don't believe that it was suicide.

Casolaro's body was found naked in a hotel bathroom. His former girlfriends claimed, he disliked being seen in the nude; he'd even wear a towel leaving the bed because he didn't want to be seen naked.

Casolaro's death was ruled a suicide. The day before his death, he hit on several women in the hotel's lounge.

Other than the messy bathroom scene, the rest of Casolaro's hotel room was found to be tidy, untouched. Bed crisply made, not a piece of trash on the floor or dresser. His friends and family note that Casolaro was untidy, left wreckage in whatever room he was in. His pants were found neatly folded on the bed.

Casolaro's death was ruled a suicide. The day he left for Martinsburg, he stopped by his insurance agent's office, paid his home insurance premium.

Casolaro's suicide note referenced God. Casolaro wasn't religious, rarely talked or wrote in religious terms.

Casolaro's death was ruled a suicide. He met at least two of the sources he had planned to in Martinsburg.

Casolaro's suicide note was only 19 words long. Casolaro was known for verbosity in writing.

Casolaro's death was ruled a suicide. His friends, family, and people he encountered in Martinsburg said he was always generally upbeat, even when things weren't necessarily going in his favor.

Casolaro was found with 12 slashes to his wrists, some deep enough to hit tendons, none of them appeared to show any hesitation. His family and ex-wife said that he was afraid of needles and his own blood.

Casolaro's death was ruled a suicide. One medical examiner said, no person could've withstood the pain of the deep incisions and continued.

18

You will read all of this. It will provoke your interest, fire your outrage. Then, you'll abruptly stop. Too much. It makes your head hurt. This is how these things go. This is how most of the populace is conditioned to accept agreed upon facts and not look for other truths.

19

Not long before his death, Casolaro saw the movie, *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*. Alone, popcorn and soda during the day, scattered attendees in a sticky floor theater. He liked the film's premise of battling for the future, negating the conspiracy of computers that had taken over the world. There were parallels in his own struggles: fighting a shape-shifting all powerful force, working within a world that disbelieved the truth.

The end: drowning the cyborgs in a lake of molten steel to rewrite the future. This is how you kill the Octopus, he thought, it has to be drowned in fire. When he left the cinema, in the second before he turned his car's ignition, he feared it blowing up in a ball of fire.

20

Casolaro met with one of various book publishers, pitched his book idea. His standard proposal: "This story is about a handful of people who have been able to successfully exploit the secret empires of espionage networks, big oil, and organized crime. This octopus spans the globe . . . to control governmental institutions in the United States and abroad."

The editor said, that's kind of vague, sounds like any run-of-the-mill conspiracy, can you give me more detail.

Well, it's kind of complicated. Really, you have to consume the thing in its entirety to appreciate its complexity, just how far and wide it goes. October Surprise, CIA, BCCI, Iran-Contra, PROMIS, maybe even JFK, Watergate—

That's pretty far reaching. You've got just about everything possible there.

It is fairly far reaching, that's the point of the book. All of these things, they are interrelated. I've got tons of notes. Been working day and night for years on this and I'm close. I've—

Mr. Casolaro, don't take offense, but this is, well, this is sort of skimming crackpot lore. We get lots of ideas for alien conspiracies, the Illuminati—

I don't sleep at night. This stuff—I get threatening calls in the middle of the night. Weird coincidences. If you looked at what I have—

But it didn't progress. More details, he thought, and someone will take it. He had phone calls to make, people to meet.

21

A phone call: we will make your life eternal hell, you'll be tied to a

rock for carrion birds to devour your insides; magically, we'll keep remaking you, so that the birds can do it, again and again and again; we'll kill your son, we'll kill your siblings, we'll kill your friends; you want a monster, we'll give you one, wrapping its tentacles around you, smothering, poisoning you, dragging you into the ocean, drowning you forever. The phone went dead.

Casolaro hung up the phone, placed his face in his hands. What have I done, he thought, what madness is this that I've unleashed?

22

About a year before his death, Casolaro dated a woman named Olivia. She played the viola, was a member of a symphony. Like him, she had a sister who committed suicide. A fraternal twin, a severed bond that she said felt like it was cut by a jagged knife deep inside her. Once, she played him a sad viola solo she had composed in her sister's memory, in a room lit by candles, sharing a bottle of syrah. I was in the midst of a year long depression when I wrote this, she said, a dark and lonely place. Perhaps it was too much wine but it made him cry.

Along with classical pieces, she could play the viola solos in The Who's "Baba O'Riley" and Kansas's "Dust in the Wind." He saw her perform in a symphony once and, while impressed by the overall performance, was disappointed that she was one of many instruments, one sound blended in with a multitude.

23

Upon occasion, Casolaro bumped into other conspiracy theorists, people working on books. The JFK assassination, the Illuminati, Skull and Bones, Area 51. Even someone whose work involved uncovering that the world was being controlled by a race of alien lizard men who were disguised as humans. Once he attended a conspiracy convention, hoping to network, get more information. There were people dressed as Lee Harvey Oswald, posing for

pictures holding a fake rifle and militant communist periodicals. Others wore JFK masks, dressed as aliens; even one person was decked out in full military uniform, wearing an Oliver North mask. He listened to them talk: it was a hobby for them. Something to do, something to collect. They weren't investigators but fans of other people's theories. You could buy trading cards, comic books, t-shirts. I have real information, he thought, I've done the investigative work. I get threatening phone calls.

He abandoned the convention, went to the hotel bar. Drinks, conversation with the woman tending bar. Investigative work, doing your own thing.

24

The deeper he went, the more involved Casolaro became with shady figures. Nichols. Riconosciuto. Turner. He banked on them for information. They were inside figures with deep connections to conspiracy events. People that did the government's dirty work, ran weapons and dealt drugs, broke countless laws. His friend Bill told him, you're in dangerous territory with these people. They'll string you along and then cut you loose.

He told Bill that Nichols had told him, if you keep investigating, you will die. I worry that he's stringing me along, telling me things that I want to hear, forcing me to identify with him.

25

Within a year before he died, Casolaro learned that he had multiple sclerosis. Very early stages, starting with some general weakness, some double vision. He kept it hidden, only told a few people. He was upset, envisioning himself physically and mentally deteriorating slowly over time, unable to continue his investigations. Also, his love life would suffer, he'd become unattractive, not able to perform, as his body turned on itself, made him a prisoner.

His physician told him, we can mostly control it now, with a proper regimen. You can live for a long time like you always did. And medicine will keep improving as you age. This seemed to calm his fears.

His physician confirmed that, yes, the disease was much more common in women than men, and there's no real sign that it's hereditary. There might be some environmental factors but we're not sure.

So, he asked him, it's random, coincidence, no real reason? His physician shrugged his shoulders.

26

One night over beers, his friend Bill looked through his collection of notes. Typed pages with handwriting on the margins and blotches of white-out. Lined loose-leaf pages, some with neat almost mechanical handwriting, others with furious cursive scribbles, words written at odd angles. Cocktail napkins with notes, crude drawings of basic geometric shapes. Newspaper clippings, some with particular words circled in pen, some held together with tape. Bill was stunned by the volume, hundreds of pages, the chaos of the collected archive.

How you can get a conspiracy out of all this, just by looking at this stuff as a whole, I don't get it.

There's an order here, Casolaro said. It might not look like it but there's an organization to it.

It's an overload, is what it looks like. It's like someone tried to overwhelm you with information just to keep your wheels spinning. So you'd never get to the true answer.

It feels like that sometimes. He took a drink of beer. My ex-wife

once said I wasn't a detail person. Here's evidence otherwise.

27

Toward the end, Casolaro went by the name Cesario as an alias, the person someone confused him with once. He dropped the Hector, because he didn't see himself as a Hector, and just went with Cesario. Checked into a hotel with it, talked to some leads using the name. It was a moment of panic when he was in the hotel parking lot, thought someone was tracking him; the first name that came to his mind.

After checking in, he sat on the edge of his room's bed, thought, this is dumb, now I'm paranoid. But he repeated the name a few times. Cesario, Cesario, Cesario. He remembered the supermarket incident, but the name was familiar in some other context. Cesario, Cesario, Cesario. Now, I'm like the people I'm investigating, he thought. False names, double lives. A knock on the door made him jump. But it wasn't his door, rather the one across the hall.

28

When he was in Martinsburg, Casolaro thought he should send his notes to Bill. Just drop everything in a FedEx box and have them delivered for safekeeping, pick them up later. After meeting the Iranian, he got a little spooked. The guy was repeating certain words. Octopus, tentacles, prey. He knew stuff about Inslaw and PROMIS, details that were recurring in his notes. He was familiar with Nichols. Told Casolaro this is the kind of investigation where you end up dead, where your friends and family end up dead too. More and more lately people were telling him, you're going to end up dead.

We will cut you up and feed you to the sharks.

Casolaro decided to hold onto his notes. I'm being paranoid, he thought. The notes—I need them for the investigation. I would



be—I would be like an octopus without tentacles, he thought, without them. In his room, he went to the desk, opened the file and pulled out a handful of papers, had an idea, began scanning for patterns.

29

One morning, Casolaro woke, looked into his bathroom mirror with double vision. An early symptom of multiple sclerosis. Two Casolaros in two mirrors, living identical lives. Somewhere, he thought, they split along the fourth dimension; one of them ceases to be Danny Casolaro and goes off into the ether, becomes some sort of phantom that haunts the shadows of this world. For a moment he felt nauseous, as he could feel the duality split at his eyes. He sat on a closed toilet and waited for it to pass. Two of me and I could finish the investigation, he thought, be in two places at once. If one of me was killed, I could still carry on.

30

One of Casolaro's contacts, over sushi and plum wine, said, would your Octopus exist if you did not write things down, collect notes, make connections, give it a name?

Of course it would, he said. Maybe it just would not be called "The Octopus" because that's what I named it.

But you would consider the act of writing, collecting, connecting the dots—these are acts of creation, no? Your Octopus is a conceptually realized product, wouldn't you agree, an order created out of what could be seen as chaos, parts that would exist by themselves but not as one unit.

The contact was supposed to have information on Hughes Aircraft, but was elusive. Philosophy over facts.

You have no way of knowing that every piece of information that you

juxtapose with the next is true or false, do you? And even if it were all true, not every piece has to be necessary to make this concept true. Some pieces are more necessary than others. This is something wholly new. Another investigator might come up with a different concept, his own story to tell. It's interpretation. One of perhaps infinite.

Casolaro's mind drifted away from the conversation to his briefcase of notes. He could envision them in his mind. He was thinking of possible connections, things that might be missing.

31

After his sister Lisa's death, Casolaro's father said to him, in a certain light, you look almost like her. As much as you could expect from a brother and sister. More so than your other siblings. The facial bone structure, the eyes. It's uncanny.

Casolaro didn't know what to do with that. I miss her, too, Dad, is all he could come up with. Later, he looked at himself in the mirror. He couldn't see any resemblance.

32

Casolaro was talking with his friend Bill once about the evolution of conspiracies. Over the years, they've gone from outright killing people through stabbings, explosions, and rifle shots to mysterious though explainable causes of death to staged suicides to assassinating someone's character or reputation. I think we're in the last stage.

Deaths create martyrs and leave lots of messy questions. Destroying someone's reputation will stop them from becoming a martyr; there will be no questions because there won't be anything to ask. It leaves the person humiliated, the destroyed having to live a neutered existence. This is probably worse than death itself. The media can be effectively manipulated to do all your work for you. If

you're a part of the conspiracy, you make some calls, mail some evidence, and sit back and watch it unfold.

If you die at the hands of the conspiracy, he said, you become part of a lore. A collective storytelling that mixes fiction and fact, tangible evidence and interpretable evidence. Basically, you get devoured by the conspiracy and become a part of how its story is told. You become a piece of information.

What happens if you expose the conspiracy, Bill said. What if you're the one that lays out the truth, and everyone sees it as irrefutable, and you've basically changed the course of history through your exposure?

That never seems to happen anymore, does it?

