

Danny Casolaro: 64 Stories, Part 2

by Christian Bell

33

On the morning of August 10, 1991, Danny Casolaro was found dead in his hotel room bathtub in Martinsburg, West Virginia. Naked, with twelve slashes to his wrists. Blood on the wall and floor, a scene that made one of the housekeeping staff faint. Paramedics found a beer can, a half-full bottle of wine, two garbage bags, and a standard straight razor.

A detail revealed later: several towels were found on the bathroom, looked as if they had been used to wipe up blood, someone doing so using their foot, according to one of the housekeeping heads at the hotel. The blood smeared in a trail, leading to the disposed towels. These towels were thrown away.

The death was ruled a suicide. A Martinsburg undertaker embalmed Casolaro's body that night, before Casolaro's family had been notified of his death—a crime in West Virginia.

Some of his fingernails were broken--no one looked under his fingernails for residue or skin fragments, any sign of a struggle. No bath water sample was taken. A bruise was found under the top of his head that could have induced moderate hemorrhaging.

His briefcase and accordion file of notes on the Octopus, including the related manuscript that he was working on, were not in the room. They were not in his car. The immediate area was combed. Nothing.

The Octopus descended into the waters, its prey left spent, washed

up on shore. No photographs, only anecdotes, a fluid story.

34

You'll see something in the news and feel it's not quite right. You'll grow angry, frustrated; you'll turn to this because it makes sense, it forces a framework on it even if you can do nothing about it. You will find comfort in these ideas, in these narratives. Someone out there, you'll think, can scratch my itch. Someone out there understands the way I think.

35

His suicide note read, "To my loved ones, please forgive me—most especially my son—and be understanding. God will let me in." Uncharacteristic for Casolaro because he was given to wordiness, and he wasn't religious, rarely mentioned God in any personal way.

His brother Anthony said he could imagine his brother working on his suicide note for months, collecting ideas and thoughts, writing and rewriting. It's just the way he was. He was a bit of a wreck, he said, a bit chaotic at times, but even if he did do it—hard to even think, given who he was and what happened to our sister—he would've mentioned something about his work. He was obsessed with it. It was everything he was doing right before he died.

His ex-wife said, I'm trying to think of him talking about God, about getting into heaven, and I just don't recall it. Not something we talked about together or with our son really. He might've said vague stuff like, thank God for this, or God willing I might be able to do such and such. I wouldn't characterize him as an atheist. But he wasn't religious. I'm not sure he even owned a Bible.

36

The flip side of the story—the narrative of accepted truth—is that Casolaro committed suicide in his hotel room. He used a straight razor to slash his wrists. There were partially consumed containers

of alcohol in the bathroom; he was found to have alcohol and traces of painkillers and antidepressants in his system.

He left a suicide note, an analysis of which showed it was in his handwriting. There was no forced entry to the room, no signs of struggle.

The bartender at the hotel lounge, one of the last people to see him, recalled that Casolaro seemed depressed, he didn't seem like a happy person.

His investigative notes were gone, but who can say what a depressed person who becomes a suicide would do with his personal belongings. If he killed himself, is it inconceivable that he would also destroy his life's work?

37

In Martinsburg, Casolaro happened to meet the guy staying in the room next to him, Mike Looney. The two had drinks in the hotel lounge the night before Casolaro was found dead. I'm supposed to be meeting a source at nine, Casolaro said, but I'm getting the impression he's standing me up. He left Looney at the bar, said he went to make some calls. Came back, told Looney that, I think I got blown off.

Casolaro talked to Looney about his work in mostly vague details, saying he was doing a criminal investigative story. He mentioned a book deal might be in the works.

Looney recalled him being a bit frayed, a little frantic. He scribbled stuff on cocktail napkins as they talked, almost like messages were being sent to his head as they talked and he had to transcribe them. He seemed like an odd person, a mad scientist type perhaps, but he seemed to have a good streak to him.

Looney seemed visibly shaken when he was informed that he was probably the last person to spend time with Casolaro. He tried not to contemplate the idea that perhaps Casolaro was murdered while he was asleep in the next room. The other possibility, that he killed himself, was no comfort either.

38

Casolaro had difficulties separating reliable information and sources from the unreliable. He collected a lot of garbage: Illuminati theories, the Christic Institute, even stuff from Lyndon LaRouche surrogates. He was a garbage collector, a sponge, collecting every tidbit he could get to work into his theories. Nothing was too preposterous, it seemed, if he could gain anything from it.

39

Olivia the viola player learned about Casolaro's death a few weeks after it happened. She couldn't fathom his suicide. She replayed their conversations over in her head, their shared horror over their sisters' suicides. Maria—the pain revisited, the jagged knife within, twisting, a corkscrew of misery, joined by Danny. Her dreams of teeth pulling, dismemberment returned. She'd awake, unable to fall back asleep, and instead played sad notes on her viola deep into the night. A new song didn't find her.

In the days after she found out she performed in two concerts, thought about how she was becoming surrounding by death, her playing mechanical, her music absorbed by the symphony.

40

Casolaro's papers were tossed into a dumpster 20 miles away from where he died. The briefcase and accordion file opened, the papers loosened from their collection so that they'd be scattered, their order destroyed. Black garbage bags piled on top, seeping brown liquids ruining the papers, ink bleeding away.

Casolaro's papers were locked in a large metal box. They were taken on a cruise ship, dropped over the side in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean where they plummeted for hundreds of feet, a sinking stone that curious fish poked as it descended and finally rested on the ocean floor. There, one flake at a time the metal corrodes. Eventually it will be absorbed by the ocean.

Casolaro's papers were taken to the Pentagon, placed in a sublevel archive of lore. The heartbeat of apocryphal tales, the epicenter of conspiracy theory. Something held so that it can never be seen, only exist in the world's collective imagination, keep the conspiratorial waters flowing. The archive chamber initiates the whispers.

Casolaro dropped his papers in a FedEx box the day before he died, shipped them to his friend Bill. But they never arrived, were lost in the company's system. They sat in a holding room buried in other packages for one year and were destroyed.

Casolaro's papers were placed in a vehicle minutes after he was slain, driven east to a point along the Atlantic Ocean. A small island connected to the mainland, a secluded beachfront traveled only during the day by intrepid tourists. Under the moonlight, they were placed on the beach and doused in gasoline, set ablaze. Crackling flames near rotting fish carcasses, washed up seaweed and shells. The molecules of paper and ink burned away into the atmosphere. The remnants were covered with sand.

Casolaro's papers ended up at a library of a large Midwestern university, stored in a closet with other peculiar items that somehow ended up there. It sits in a plain brown box, unopened, the university's address typed neatly on the mailing label with no return address. There is no trail of how they arrived there. There is no record of them even existing.

In the weeks after Casolaro's death, his housekeeper Olga grew afraid that she would also be killed. She answered some of the police's questions. She told them about the phone calls. But they didn't talk to her much—their minds were already made up. She insisted that she knew Danny for a long time and that she just did not see him as someone who would kill himself. This did not seem to concern them. Why would he kill himself, they asked, not, it doesn't make sense.

A week after his death, the phone calls started again. Silence on the other end of the phone. She stopped answering the phone. She changed the number. Soon she left the house, moved far away from Arlington. Still the sound of the phone ringing scared her. Still silence on the other end or a wrong number or crank made her think of Danny who never returned, the Octopus he talked about, made her fear that even years later someone would come kill her too.

42

After Casolaro's death, Bill tried to synthesize the information that Danny had given him. But Bill was being stonewalled wherever he turned. He managed to contact some of Danny's sources but got nothing, they would barely acknowledge Danny's existence. The massive amount of investigative work and notes—Bill had no hope of recreating it, didn't have the know-how or stomach for retracing his steps.

Bill wasn't buying the suicide verdict—Casolaro had primed him before he was found dead that if he did indeed die, that it was at the hands of those he was investigating. He told an investigator this. The man just nodded his head, eyes glossed over, taking no notes.

He inquired about the *Time* article but found that wasn't even true—he wasn't sure why Danny lied to him on this. Perhaps it was some sort of coded message.

43

In some of Casolaro's surviving writings, he demonstrated a fascination with artificial intelligence, most notably with the idea that, sometime in the mid-21st century, technology would surpass the human brain, eventually become sentient, create their own thoughts and ideas.

He wondered how this would affect human conspiracies. Would computers be able to interpret them, deconstruct them, use quantifiable facts to hold people accountable? Would they create their own conspiracies? Or would the future intelligence be borne without skeptical thoughts about conspiracies, the product of current conspirators working diligently to save themselves from the future?

44

We will cut you up and feed you to the sharks: a line from a threatening phone call Casolaro had received. In Casolaro's surviving notes, he had written it more than once. He appeared to be fascinated with the threat, a trait of his that his ex-wife described as morbid curiosity when something truly frightened him. She said he was afraid of drowning, of the ocean and the creatures that lurked in the seas, which was probably why the "Octopus" name for his conspiracy fit well.

45

Anthony was startled seeing doubles of Danny after his death. A person driving behind him, cloned from his brother's driver's license and implanted into that car's driver seat. A day after his funeral, a man leaving an all-night diner. They were popping up everywhere, mocking his death. Some replicant virus, gone into hyperdrive to spread confusion and misery.

46

Tidbits of information gleaned from conversations with Casolaro

swirled in Bill's head. Inslaw. PROMIS. Data mining. The CIA. Manipulation of world markets. Iran Contra. IBM. Project Echelon. The Mossad. Lockheed Martin. October Surprise. Back door espionage. The NSA. BCCI. Shadow government. The World Bank. The JFK assassination. Caribbean islands. The flow of global information. The catalyst of major world events.

The Octopus was certain corporations and certain elements of government intertwined, Danny had said, vague and ridiculous but that's the way it's supposed to be so you never catch it, never pin it down, and you just give up, turn your mind off because it sounds preposterous.

Bill spent a day or two writing down the names, the information, drawing lines of connection, erasing and writing different names in different places, drawing new lines. The paper he was writing on looked like abstract art, a crinkled ruin that in places looked like someone was trying to clean up stains. He looked at it, thought, this is the culmination of death, as his friend was gone, this is the rest of us trying to make sense of it, as Casolaro was buried in the ground.

He gave up. This is not a place I should be, he thought. He set fire to the paper in his kitchen sink. The burning embers blackened, the mass turning into itself, disappearing into many chaotic points.

47

Casolaro's son visited his father's grave once, on his birthday, and was beset by curiosity seekers, those who found his father's grave a tourist attraction. Four people, all male, probably in their early thirties, quickly deduced he was Danny's son.

What was he like as a person? Do you think he was murdered? Are there any more clues? Have you taken up the conspiracy investigation?

Interrupted in mid-thought concerning his father, he walked away from them. They followed, crossing through other people's graves, until he reached his car and drove away.

It wasn't enough that he was dead. It wasn't enough that he moved, changed his phone number, lived as quiet and unintrusive life as possible. His father told him once, I should never have gotten involved with this. It's a debilitating disease, a stain that can never be washed away.

In the mirror, his son could see his father in his face more and more as the years passed. With me forever, he thought.

48

There will be a phone call placed, a letter sent. An anonymous posting on a message board, a cryptic e-mail that will be processed as spam. Someone with a vested interest will program a computer to fish for a new Casolaro, find the right person, lead them to investigate. Probe for specific characteristics: intelligent, obsessive, defiant. Resurrect the Octopus investigation so that it can be discredited, the new conspirators can work free, moving in a cloud of uncertainty and cynicism. When the time was right, this new person would be sacrificed, using whatever method was in vogue: radiation poisoning, suicide by gunshot, automobile accident, suicide by prescriptions pills, drowning.

49

Casolaro didn't actually die but was kidnapped, brainwashed. His mind completely reformatted, like a computer hard drive, sent back out into another part of the world as someone else. New memories, new personality, new person. The scene in Martinsburg was a staging, the dead body Casolaro clone probably a homeless person, someone who was fresh at the morgue.

50

If you stand at the shore line long enough, things will wash ashore. Fragments of sunken boats, dead cephalopods, human corpses or extremities. It could take eons, but mathematically, at some point, it'll come. You can seek it out and find out, but eventually, it will find you.

51

The man who was Casolaro now wanders the streets of Prague, holding a job doing menial labor. He spends his idle time at a café near his apartment, looking into his coffee, hearing dishes and cups clanging together, having the vague sense that something isn't right, chalks it up to man's existential dilemma, trudges to work through soupy morning fog.

52

About a month after Casolaro died, Bill went with some members of the Casolaro family to Martinsburg to claim Danny's car and personal items. While they waited at the police station, two men who said they were detectives came in, asked questions about the Casolaro case. They said they were investigating the murder of an Alan Standorf earlier in the year. Standorf—the name sounded familiar to Bill. Then he recalled that it was one of his sources from within the government. Danny hadn't mentioned that he'd been killed. The coincidence at the police station startled Bill. He had trouble sleeping for several nights. He found that for months after, he was on high alert, listening for other connections, patterns, wondering when it would all circle back to him.

53

Years after Casolaro's death, a man searches the Internet on conspiracies, comes across Casolaro's story. He reads it, intrigued, searching deeper and deeper for more details. He orders a book. He finds a discussion group, joins it. He starts compiling his own notes. He gets into lengthy discussions with some members in the group. He starts turning his notes into a book. One of the group

members asks him repeatedly for a face-to-face meeting to discuss ideas. Concerned, he disengages from the group. Work on the book fades.

54

There's a man on the National Mall in DC handing out literature on Danny Casolaro. He's there among the activists, peace and anti-immigration and anti-tax and anti-everything-you-can-imagine. He hands out a crudely printed pamphlet detailing the Casolaro story and the Octopus. People pass him by, tourists and workers, unconcerned about what he has to offer. Other activists drown his voice out advertising their causes. The Washington Monument looms over him in the background. At the end of the day, his feet are sore and his voice is lost.

55

Late at night near the end of a fall semester, a student intern at a large Midwestern university is combing through a closet, dusting off items covered in dust just to see what's there. Professors and assistants are closing things up, students are packing up their dorms after finishing exams, outside snow is falling on brick walkways. He picks up a package in a plain brown box, blows at the dust that is maybe one-quarter of an inch thick, turns his head as it comes back in his face. The university's address in typed letters. What could be inside, he wonders. He closes up the closet, walks the empty hallway. The package is in his hands. His thoughts change to his upcoming English Literature exam: Shelley, Tennyson, Byron, can he remember who's who?

56

Near Christmas 1992, not long after Bill Clinton won the presidency, Bill thought about Casolaro, how he might've felt about the election. Perhaps a new era of daylight was emerging. More investigations into Iran Contra, October Surprise, and maybe, someone out there could push the Octopus line and vindicate Danny, get to the truth.

Then the pardons came. Astounding and flagrant. Then Clinton's pledge to not investigate further, to extend a reconciliatory hand, to let bygones be bygones. Even more astounding. Danny would say, the Octopus just got away, it just submerged again. But it'll be back because it wasn't killed.

57

A dozen years later, Olga was living in Central America. Remote village, no phones, a new identity. She was still afraid that they would come to kill her. Under her bed, she kept a gun. She would wake up at nights, sweating, thinking that a phone was ringing. But there was no phone. In her mind she could see Danny walking away that last time, his briefcase clutched in his hand, walking to his death.

58

On the fifteenth anniversary of Casolaro's death, Bill pondered his friend and the case again, after what seemed like years of not giving it much thought. On a pad of paper he jotted down notes, tried to recreate some of those he had discarded years ago. After a few minutes, his energy was gone, his thoughts drifted elsewhere. A true disservice to you, he whispered, I should've stuck with this before, made what I'd known public.

There were other books out there about the case, and on the Internet there were many sites that mirrored each other word for word the same passages of text related to the case, no one coming to any new conclusions that made sense. He could've been another voice among many, the hints of truth that circle but never hit. He also thought, I could've become Danny Casolaro, he had thought, picked up his case and explored this thing to the ends of the earth.

59

Olivia, now married, was traveling with her husband, making their way to Ohio. They reached Martinsburg of all places, late at night,

looking for a place to stay. Cell phone calls to various places, only the Holiday Inn, the former Sheraton where Danny was killed, had a room available. In her mind, she talked herself into it. It's only a hotel, she said, sterile rooms made for sleeping and bathing, and it was a different place now, many years have passed, everything redone. At the front desk, the receptionist, a scruffy headed male who looked no older than 20, checked them in, the last room they had. Room 517, he said, handing her husband two card keys.

She trembled. No, she said, looking down at her feet, I can't do this. Her husband said, what do you mean, this is all there is. She said, no, I can't, and walked away. He knew better than to say anything. They drove silently through the night as she held back tears wondering why, even in a new life, death kept following her.

60

In a dark motel room in a God-forsaken strip of America a man who's not Casolaro sits. The monster has chased him here. The stunning coincidences, the phone calls, the look-alikes, the poorly lit meeting places, the scribbled notes under doors. The man is unfamiliar with Casolaro but he's hit upon a similar line of thought, similar obsessions, a similar distrust of the narrative that's been feed to him. There's nothing but to sit there, still, listening to the sounds of footsteps and parking lot cars and doors opening and closing and waiting for when the door opens and light bursts through and destroys him.

61

On the last night of his life, Casolaro opened the door to his hotel room. In that brief moment of darkness, the hall lights gave the room the light of dawn. For a second, it looked like home. He thought he heard something sliding on the carpet. A brief moment of, something's not right. But he rationalized it was his mind, or a sound fragment from elsewhere.

The door would shut for the last time. The details of what's to come were already in place. Inside his next life awaited him.

62

One season Internet rumors abound that Casolaro was alive, that he had faked his death to work on his investigation. Now, his investigation supposedly complete, he was returning, ready to present his findings to the world, a press conference scheduled for May 17. Whispers in the dark corners of chat rooms and message boards and Facebook and MySpace pages. Then, as the date approached, the details dissipated into multiple stories, new rumors. Casolaro wasn't actually alive, but someone else had picked up the reins of the investigation. A grand jury was about to indict someone high up in the government. Or, it was all a publicity stunt, fake news set up to promote a new book or movie. The day came and nothing happened. People began to notice. May 17, 5/17, 517—the hotel room number where Casolaro died. Filed under the “Casolaro Resurrection Hoax.”

63

One day an official that no one can seem to photograph, remember his name, identify exactly what he does decides there are certain goals that need to be met, certain strategies that need to be employed to achieve certain ends. He'll talk to someone else who will say, there is an apparatus in place, a system that will do what you need it to do. Chuckles about law, oversight, accountability. There's money to be moved, people to be removed. We can operate in secrecy, sovereign borders of nations are only guidelines to be adhered to. Does the administration support such operations? Neither confirm nor deny.

64

After years of trying not to think about it, Bill started having dreams: there was no conspiracy, is what they told him. Repeated over and over, as if a wire had been connected to his head, data streams feed

to him while he slept. His mind broke everything down, recalculated suspicious elements to plain coincidence, a stilted point of view. Danny committed suicide; he must've been unbalanced, evidenced by spending a good deal of his life tracking down something elusive. The mind links together things it wants to, creates conspiracies out of missing spaces, coincidental links. Yes, that's all it is, he thought. Newly dumb, brain reformatted, air had more oxygen, food tasted better, sleep like stepping off a boat, floating in a gentle river.

Then the phone rang. Cesario, a smoky voice said. The line went dead.

