

MARY McGRORY

Post 8/18/91

Summer Of the Octopus

ONE THING in the sad murk is clear: Before he died, Danny Casolaro saw an octopus. He told his friend Bill Hamilton about it. The tentacles reached into all the scandals we are grappling with in this summer of conspiracies unlimited.

The body of free-lance writer Joseph Daniel Casolaro was found in the bathtub of a West Virginia motel on a week ago Saturday. His arms were slashed. Martinsburg police pronounced it a suicide and proceeded to embalm the body with extraordinary haste—before they got around to notifying Casolaro's family, which finally heard the news last Monday.

His brother Anthony, an Arlington physician, doesn't believe it was suicide. Nor does anyone who knew him—or talked to him in his last days. One reason for the skepticism was the initial report that some wounds were jagged and supposedly self-inflicted with a broken beer bottle found next

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to the tub. A crime reporter—Casolaro was a correspondent for Washington Crime News Service—would have known better.

But it was Casolaro's temperament and prospects that argue even more strongly. He was a happy, outgoing, gregarious person, the kind who cracks wise with secretaries and waitresses and endears himself to children. The day before he died, according to the Martinsburg Morning Journal, he told a Pizza Hut waitress that he liked her brown eyes, that he was a member of the Edgar Allan Poe Society. He quoted "The Great Gatsby" to her.

He told his brother, his girlfriend, Hamilton and others that he was on the point of cracking the case that had absorbed him for a year. He had begun investigating the Inslaw case, a tangled affair of government perfidy and international intrigue that has been in litigation since 1983. In his explorations, he found out about possibly related scandals—BCCI, S&Ls, Iran-contra, the "October surprise"—but until two weeks ago, he had found nothing about Inslaw. Then, he joyfully told friends, he hit bingo. One more interview and the case was cracked.

Suicides do not tell their intimates within days of taking the hemlock that they are "ecstatic" or "euphoric," Casolaro did. Nor do they attend family birthday parties, as Danny Casolaro was planning to do hours before he died. The last known call he made was to his

mother in Fairfax. He told her he was on Interstate 81 in Pennsylvania. He would be late, but he was headed home. A manic-depressive might then kill himself. Nobody ever suggested that Danny Casolaro was one.

All the circumstances beg for disbelief, none more than a supposed suicide note. "I'm sorry, especially to my son"—from a man who lived by words—just doesn't ring true. Casolaro wrote a novel, a children's book. His prose style—at least as displayed in an outline he submitted to Little, Brown of a book he proposed to write about the octopus, called "Behold, a Pale Horse"—is on the florid side. Such a terse farewell, unless composed or dictated at gunpoint, is entirely unconvincing.

Subsequent reports about a second note, a razor blade in the tub and Casolaro's financial problems don't end the mystery.

The man who could have resolved the Inslaw case, Dick Thornburgh, resigned as attorney general to run for the Senate in Pennsylvania on the day the West Virginia police came forward with their autopsy. Excess was the hallmark of Thornburgh's farewell ceremony: an honor guard, a trooping of the colors, superlatives from subordinates. William P. Barr, his deputy and possible successor, spoke of Thornburgh's "leadership, integrity, professionalism and fairness"—none of which Thornburgh displayed in his handling of Inslaw.

Although the case involves the alleged theft of computer software by the Justice Department in the time of Ed Meese, Thornburgh took

it to his bosom. Bill Hamilton, a perfectly nice midwesterner who owned a Washington firm called Inslaw, had invented Promis, a software especially adapted to crime statistics, which he sold to Justice. The second year, Justice stopped making payments. Hamilton and his wife, Nancy, believe that cronies of Meese were given the franchise to sell around the world. Promis has turned up in Canada and Pakistan. The link with the "October surprise" is Earl Brian, a former Reagan political associate who allegedly paid off the Iranians to keep the hostages until after the 1980 election—and allegedly was paid off himself with huge profits from Promis.

Thornburgh refused to discuss the Inslaw case with the Hamiltons or their counsel, Elliot Richardson. He did not answer Richardson's letters. He did not return his phone calls. He refused to receive his distinguished predecessor. The Hamiltons have been to court many times. Judges have recused themselves. Witnesses have disappeared or recanted. The man who knows the most, Michael Riconosciuto, was picked up in Washington State on drug charges and is in jail. What was merely sinister has now turned deadly.

Thornburgh calls Inslaw "a little contract dispute" and refused to testify about it to the House Judiciary Committee. Richardson thinks it could be "dirtier than Watergate" and, as a victim of that scandal, he should know.

Thornburgh's conduct is the most powerful argument for believing that Danny Casolaro really saw an octopus before he died.