

1—An Introduction

Wallace Boyer (☉ *Car Salesman*): Like most people, I didn't meet and talk to Rant Casey until after he was dead. That's how it works for most celebrities: After they croak, their circle of close friends just explodes. A dead celebrity can't walk down the street without meeting a million best buddies he never met in real life.

Dying was the best career move Jeff Dahmer and John Wayne Gacy ever made. After Gaetan Dugas was dead, the number of sex partners saying they'd fucked him, it went through the roof.

The way Rant Casey used to say it: Folks build a reputation by attacking you while you're alive—or praising you after you ain't.

For me, I was sitting on an airplane, and some hillbilly sits down next to me. His skin, it's the same as any car wreck you can't not stare at—dented with tooth marks, pitted and puckered, the skin on the back of his hands looks one god-awful mess.

The flight attendant, she asks this hillbilly what's it he wants to drink. The stewardess asks him to, please, reach my drink to me: scotch with rocks. But when I see those monster

fingers wrapped around the plastic cup, his chewed-up knuckles, I could never touch my lips to the rim.

With the epidemic, a person can't be too careful. At the airport, right beyond the metal detector we had to walk through, a fever monitor like they first used to control the spread of SARS. Most people, the government says, have no idea they're infected. Somebody can feel fine, but if that monitor beeps that your temperature's too high, you'll disappear into quarantine. Maybe for the rest of your life. No trial, nothing.

To be safe, I only fold down my tray table and take the cup. I watch the scotch turn pale and watery. The ice melt and disappear.

Anybody makes a livelihood selling cars will tell you: Repetition is the mother of all skills. You build the gross at your dealership by building rapport.

Anywhere you find yourself, you can build your skills. A good trick to remember a name is you look the person in the eyes long enough to register their color: green or brown or blue. You call that a Pattern Interrupt: It stops you forgetting the way you always would.

This cowboy stranger, his eyes look bright green. Anti-freeze green.

That whole connecting flight between Peco Junction and the city, we shared an armrest, me at the window, him on the aisle. Don't shoot the messenger, but dried shit keeps flaking off his cowboy boots. Those long sideburns maybe scored him pussy in high school, but they're gray from his temple to his jawbone now. Not to mention those hands.

To practice building rapport, I ask him what he paid for his ticket. If you can't determine the customer needs, identify the hot buttons, of some stranger rubbing arms with you on

an airplane, you'll never talk anybody into taking "mental ownership" of a Nissan, much less a Cadillac.

For landing somebody in a car, another trick is: Every car on your lot, you program the number-one radio-station button to gospel music. The number-two button, set to rock and roll. The number-three, to jazz. If your prospect looks like a demander-commander type, the minute you unlock the car you set the radio to come on with the news or a politics talk station. A sandal wearer, you hit the National Public Radio button. When they turn the key, the radio tells them what they want to hear. Every car on the lot, I have the number-five button set to that techno-raver garbage in case some kid who does Party Crashing comes around.

The green color of the hillbilly's eyes, the shit on his boots, salesmen call those "mental pegs." Questions that have one answer, those are "closed questions." Questions to get a customer talking, those are "open questions."

For example: "How much did your plane ticket set you back?" That's a closed question.

And, sipping from his own cup of whiskey, the man swallows. Staring straight ahead, he says, "Fifty dollars."

A good example of an open question would be: "How do you live with those scary chewed-up hands?"

I ask him: For one way?

"Round-trip," he says, and his pitted and puckered hand tips whiskey into his face. "Called a 'bereavement fare,'" the hillbilly says.

Me looking at him, me half twisted in my seat to face him, my breathing slowed to match the rise and fall of his cowboy shirt, the technique's called: Active Listening. The stranger clears his throat, and I wait a little and clear my throat,

copying him; that's what a good salesman means by "pacing" a customer.

My feet, crossed at the ankle, right foot over the left, same as his, I say: Impossible. Not even standby tickets go that cheap. I ask: How'd he get such a deal?

Drinking his whiskey, neat, he says, "First, what you have to do is escape from inside a locked insane asylum." Then, he says, you have to hitchhike cross-country, wearing nothing but plastic booties and a paper getup that won't stay shut in back. You need to arrive about a heartbeat too late to keep a repeat child-molester from raping your wife. And your mother. Spawned out of that rape, you have to raise up a son who collects a wagonful of folks' old, thrown-out teeth. After high school, your wacko kid got's to run off. Join some cult that lives only by night. Wreck his car, a half a hundred times, and hook up with some kind-of, sort-of, not-really prostitute.

Along the way, your kid got's to spark a plague that'll kill thousands of people, enough folks so that it leads to martial law and threatens to topple world leaders. And, lastly, your boy got's to die in a big, flaming, fiery inferno, watched by everybody in the world with a television set.

He says, "Simple as that."

The man says, "Then, when you go to collect his body for his funeral," and tips whiskey into his mouth, "the airline gives you a special bargain price on your ticket."

Fifty bucks, round-trip. He looks at my scotch sitting on the tray table in front of me. Warm. Any ice, gone. And he says, "You going to drink that?"

I tell him: Go ahead.

This is how fast your life can turn around.

How the future you have tomorrow won't be the same future you had yesterday.

My dilemma is: Do I ask for his autograph? Slowing my breath, pacing my chest to his, I ask: Is he related to that guy . . . Rant Casey? “Werewolf Casey”—the worst Patient Zero in the history of disease? The “superspreader” who’s infected half the country? America’s “Kissing Killer”? Rant “Mad Dog” Casey?

“Buster,” the man says, his monster hand reaching to take my scotch. He says, “My boy’s given name was Buster Landru Casey. Not Rant. Not Buddy. *Buster.*”

Already, my eyes are soaking up every puckered scar on his fingers. Every wrinkle and gray hair. My nose, recording his smell of whiskey and cow shit. My elbow, recording the rub of his flannel shirtsleeve. Already, I’ll be bragging about this stranger for the rest of my life. Holding tight to every moment of him, squirreling away his every word and gesture, I say: You’re . . .

“Chester,” he says. “Name’s Chester Casey.”

Sitting right next to me. Chester Casey, the father of Rant Casey: America’s walking, talking Biological Weapon of Mass Destruction.

Andy Warhol was wrong. In the future, people won’t be famous for fifteen minutes. No, in the future, everyone will sit next to someone famous for at least fifteen minutes. Typhoid Mary or Ted Bundy or Sharon Tate. History is nothing except monsters or victims. Or witnesses.

So what do I say? I say: I’m sorry. I say, “Tough break about your kid dying.”

Out of sympathy, I shake my head . . .

And a few inhaled later, Chet Casey shakes his head, and in that gesture I’m not sure who’s really pacing who. Which of us sat which way first. If maybe this shitkicker is studying me. Copying me. Finding my hot buttons and building