

# Rant

Written by Chuck Palahniuk

## 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 godawful 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. Antifreeze 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 rapport. Maybe selling me something, this living legend Chet Casey, he winks. Never breathing more than fifteen inhaled any minute. He tosses back the scotch. "Any way you look at it," he says, and elbows me in the ribs, "it's still a damn sweet deal on an airplane ticket."

## 2—Guardian Angels

**From the Field Notes of Green Taylor Simms (Historian):** The hound dog is to Middleton what the cow is to the streets of Calcutta or New Delhi. In the middle of every dirt road sleeps some kind of mongrel coonhound, panting in the sun, its dripping tongue hanging out. A kind of fur-covered speed bump with no collar or tags. Powdered with a fine dust of clay blown off the plowed fields.

To arrive at Middleton requires four solid days of driving, which is the longest period of time I have ever experienced inside an automobile without colliding with another vehicle. I found that to be the most depressing aspect of my pilgrimages.

**Neddy Nelson (Party Crasher):** Can you explain how in 1968 the amateur paleontologist William Meister in Antelope Spring, Utah, split a block of shale while searching for trilobite fossils, but instead discovered the fossilized five-hundred-million-year-old footprint of a human shoe? And how did another fossilized shoe print, found in Nevada in 1922, occur in rock from the Triassic era?

**Echo Lawrence (Party Crasher):** Driving to Middleton, rolling across all that fucking country in the middle of the night, Shot Dunny punched buttons,

scanning the radio for traffic reports. To hear any action we'd be missing out on. Morning or evening drive-time bulletins from oceans away. Gridlock and traffic backups where it's still yesterday. Fatal pile-ups and jackknives on expressways where it's already tomorrow.

It's fucking weird, hearing somebody's died tomorrow. Like you could still call that commuter man, right now, in Moscow, and say: "Stay home!"

**From DRVR Radio Graphic Traffic:** Expect a gapers' delay if you're eastbound on the Meadows Bypass through the Richmond area. Slow down and stretch your neck for a good long look at a two-car fatal accident in the left-most lane. The front vehicle is a sea-green 1974 Plymouth Road Runner with a four-barrel carb-equipped 440-cubic-inch, cast-iron-block V8. Original ice-white interior. The coupe's driver was a scorching twenty-four-year old female, blonde-slash-green with a textbook fracture-slash-dislocation of her spine at the atlantooccipital joint and complete transection of the spinal cord. Fancy words for whiplash so bad it snaps your neck.

The rear car was a bitchin' two-door hardtop New Yorker Brougham St. Regis, cream color, with the optional deluxe chrome package and fixed rear quarter-windows. A sweet ride. As you rubberneck past, please note the driver was a twenty-six-year-old male with a nothing-special transverse fracture of the sternum, bilateral rib fractures, and his lungs impaled by the fractured ribs, all due to impact with his steering wheel. Plus, the boys in the meat wagon tell me, severe internal exsanguination.

So—buckle up and slow down. Reporting for Graphic Traffic, this is Tina Something...

**Echo Lawrence:** We broke curfew and the government quarantine, and we drove across these stretches of nothing. Me, riding shotgun. Shot Dunnyun, driving. Neddy Nelson was in the backseat, reading some book and telling us how Jack the Ripper never died—he traveled back in time to slaughter his mom, to make himself immortal—and now he's the U.S. President or the Pope. Maybe some crackpot theory proving how UFOs are really human tourists visiting us from the distant future.

**Shot Dunnyun (Party Crasher):** I guess we drove to Middleton to see all the places Rant had talked about and meet what he called "his people." His parents, Irene and Chester. The best friend, Bodie Carlyle, he went to school with. All the dipshit farm families, the Perrys and Tommys and Elliots, he used to go on and on talking about. Most of Party Crashing was just us driving in cars, talking.

Such a cast of yokels. Our goal was to flesh out the stories Rant had told. How weird is that? Me and Echo Lawrence, with Neddy in the backseat of that Cadillac Eldorado of his. The car that Rant had bought for Neddy.

Yeah, and we went to put flowers and stuff on Rant's grave.

**Echo Lawrence:** Punching the radio, Shot says, "You know we're missing a good Soccer Mom Night ..."

"Not tonight," says Neddy. "Check your calendar. Tonight was a Student Driver Night."

**Shot Dunnyun:** Up ahead, a sliver of light outlines the horizon. The sliver swells to a bulge of white light, a half-circle, then a full circle. A full moon. Tonight we're missing a great Honeymoon Night.

**Echo Lawrence:** We told each other stories instead of playing music. The stories Rant had told, about his growing up. The stories about Rant, we had to piece them together out of details we each had to dig up from the basement of the basement of the basement of our brains. Everyone pitching in some memory of Rant, we drove along, pooling our stories.

**Shot Dunnyun:** The local Middleton sheriff stopped us, and we told him the truth: We were making a pilgrimage to see where Rant Casey had been born.

A night like this with everybody in town asleep, the little Rant Casey would be ham-radioing. Wearing his headphones. As a kid, a night like this, Rant used to turn the dial, looking for traffic reports from Los Angeles and New York. Listening to traffic jams and tie-ups in London. Slowdowns in Atlanta. Three-car pile-ups in Paris, reported in French. Learning Spanish in terms of neumático desinflado and punto muerto. Flat tires and gridlock in Madrid. Imbottigliamento, for gridlock in Rome. Het roosterslot, gridlock in Amsterdam. Saturation, gridlock in Paris. The whole invisible world of the traffic sphere.

**Echo Lawrence:** Come on. Driving around any hillbilly burg between midnight and sunrise, you take your chances. The police don't have much to do but blare their siren at you. The Middleton sheriff held our driver's licenses in the beam of his flashlight while he lectured us about the city. How Rant Casey had been killed by moving to the city. City people were all murderers. Meaning us.

This sheriff was boosting some kind of Texas Ranger affect, plugged into and looping some John Wayne brain chemistry. Boost a drill sergeant through a hanging judge, then boost that through a Doberman pinscher, and you'd get this sheriff. His shoulders stayed pinned back, square. His thumbs hooked behind his belt buckle. And he rocked forward and back on the heels of his cowboy boots.

Shot asked, "Has anybody been by to murder Rant's mom yet?"

This sheriff wore a brown shirt with a brass star pinned to one chest pocket, a

pen and a folded pair of sunglasses tucked in the pocket, and the shirt tucked into blue jeans. Engraved on the star, it said "Officer Bacon Carlyle."

Come on. Talk about the worst question Shot could ask.

**Neddy Nelson:** You tell me, how in 1844 did the physicist Sir David Brewster discover a metal nail fully embedded in a block of Devonian sandstone more than three hundred million years old?

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