

Storylandia

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Dead End

AUTHOR'S PREFACE

Joy Chevern and Rodney Bauman. Their names have been and still are a staple of TV news, talk shows, blogs, and the information networks of both the left and right wings. Writers of made-for-TV movies and PhD theses have all tried to lock down their motives. The only conclusion would-be scholars and Hollywood's dregs can agree on is that Rodney and Joy have managed to force the entire world to redefine crime and culture.

This is a risky statement to make at the start of such a book, but I honestly do not know if I have anything new to offer the nation's conversations on who these people were and what their crimes mean for the future. Instead my only goal is to attempt to pierce the mind of Rodney Bauman, using everything I could piece together from records, interviews, and other sources. With *Dead End*, I am not trying to make yet another entertainment commodity out of their notoriety, but rather, in spite of my lack of a

graduate degree, to make an academic effort to simply understand *why*. This may seem like a thankless and perhaps even pointless quest, but I have been fortunate enough to enjoy the full cooperation of Bauman himself and the people who know him.

1

“I want to be famous.” When he was a child, these were the only words Rodney had in mind whenever a teacher or relative would deploy the dreaded “What do you want to be?” question.

Rodney tightly held on to that answer through his childhood, even though he had learned by experience that “What do you want to be famous *for*?” would follow.

To that inquiry, he had no reply, stock or otherwise. How was he supposed to know why and how this ambition crawled its way into his very being like starving bacteria? The exact moment of infection was a perfect mystery even to him. Yes, his parents had the standard issue 9-5 office jobs, which slowly seeped like a poison fog into every aspect of their lives smothering books and politics and vacations as viable topics of conversation, but it was not only all that. The dull anxiety that he might have to share in their fate—auctioning off the better slice of his life just to help make a handful of rich people he’ll never meet slightly richer—only kept the disease nourished.

He actually pitied his peers who squealed to anyone within earshot that they wanted to be policemen and firemen and doctors. Rodney was precociously beyond such things. Policemen and firemen and doctors never become famous, Rodney instinctively knew early on, unless they mess up or go

crazy and kill somebody, and not always even then. He only had respect to spare for the occasional quiet, pompous kid who, with the sort of rabid confidence that can only spring from a near total absence of self-esteem, would declare that they wanted to be President. For the most part, Presidents, especially the Nixons, all have guaranteed fame.

There was one little problem that threatened to damn Rodney: there was absolutely nothing remotely exceptional about him. He kept noticing this rupture in the grand design since that apocalyptic December evening when he forgot half his lines and dropped the other half like dumbbells during Ms. Deming's eighth-grade production of *We've Always Lived in This Castle*. Since first grade he was a clockwork B-C student, too much of a fuck-up to crack even the lower ranks of the preppy academic aristocracy while too terrified of punishment to dive into the colorful delinquent community. Nor was he a natural leader. Long ago, he resigned himself to the inescapable fact that in classes and for the rest of his life he would only surrender his opinion when attacked head-on by the natural alpha human. In fact, if he ever did have a truly useful talent, it was detecting with fine canine senses the faintest trace of coming responsibility and escaping from its unwholesome presence.

Rodney could not sing—it was beyond him much the same way nuclear physics is beyond a cat—and lacked the patience to even try to tame a musical instrument. Besides, just thinking of performing in front of a crowd only made him envision rioters in the French Revolution gleefully popping off heads like bottle caps. Athletics was simply not an option, most of all because hours of grueling, self-inflicted physical torture seemed too high a price to pay.

Having no knack for humor, he was totally dependent on overspiced sex jokes and glib lines cribbed from late night sitcoms to stay interesting to his friends. Ideas for stories and novels eluded him or ended up resembling whatever he last read and liked to the point of artless plagiarism. Several times in junior high he did dedicate his life toward becoming a filmmaker, but for all his trouble only earned the requisite promises of support from the adults who must have felt they had the obligation to do so in any case, at least until the next faddish dream came along.

The most backing in his life plan Rodney ever received was not from his parents or relatives or friends, but from the small city that had been his home all through childhood. Named Dead End as if part of an elaborate practical joke, the city once had a reputation as an economic and social hub back when Adolf Hitler was still just an international eccentric, but it had never quite recovered from a post-Eisenhower economic downturn. The scars were still visible in the form of abandoned office buildings and department stores, still bearing on their faded bricks the ghost-gray imprints from their 1950s signs. The occasional restaurant or antique store would appear on the first floors of these buildings, feeding selfishly on the commercial carcasses like maggots, until their own brief two-year-at-most lifespan was finished. Once the name of Dead End actually was an earnest description: during the early nineteenth century, when the city was developing, a major highway that once wended through the state abruptly stopped there, but Rodney's eighth-grade English teacher always insisted that the name really came from the newborn city's exceptionally high suicide rate.

The terminally humorless always pushed to

change the name. Their natural leader was the local evangelical, the Rev. Lou Meredith, who had capped off a career built on the backs of the perpetually offended by opening up the ostentatiously named Patriot University, an institution of higher learning for those who didn't believe in institutions of higher learning. Rev. Meredith reigned from up high like a feudal magnate, gently yet righteously encouraging theater owners not to screen films that failed to pass the most rigorous cultural and political screening tests and intervening from time to time to stop the city from evolving anything that resembled a halfway decent night life. The only bars tolerated were in brand-name chain restaurants. For Rodney, the Dante-esque price of failing to even get a slight grip on a fame-making career would be a life spent back there, under a regime as harsh as it was bland.

By the time he entered high school, the expected teenage anxieties, even the inconvenience of realizing that he was gay, were all drowned out by the horror, growing fatter year by year, that he would have to live forever with this particular itch. Luckily, he found himself on the road to Damascus during his junior year in high school, seventeen minutes into Algebra II class. Motivated by a higher force than adolescent ennui, Rodney began assessing himself in his notebook with the penetrating efficiency of a bureaucratic agency, taking careful stock of his skills and his flaws. Most importantly he realized that he was: 1) a slightly-above-average writer, 2) somewhat skilled at pestering people who didn't want to talk to him, and 3) exceptional at pleasing authority figures and kowtowing before authorities and those at the top of his school's caste system. His final conclusion was only the first step: he would work to become a famous

American journalist.

From there and into his college years, Rodney could walk with the confidence that at one time he feared he would never know. He even shocked himself by actually being quite good at this vocation while paying dues at the university newspaper. Interviewees were disarmed by the casual bashfulness Rodney retained from childhood and were quite often deluded into believing that they were volunteering information as a personal favor. With surgical expertise he cut out fragments of information from the longest and most tedious of meetings and speeches, the only useful skill school had perfected in him. Soon enough Rodney wrapped himself every day in fantasies of future interviews with the most influential of politicians and the most worthless of celebrities. Most precious and thrilling were the waking dreams where he himself was interviewed; his own opinions, no matter how trivial or absurd or objectively false, were written down and processed for mass consumption. Such daydreams crowded out his occasional and trifling fantasies of love and sex (but mostly sex) by roughly a five to one ratio.

On one level Rodney knew that he was naïve to anticipate such success, an unpleasant reminder enforced by the old adults in his life who talked from their scripts about the “real world,” but on another he felt it was as simple as any true matter of justice. Although he never really spent any real thoughts toward God’s existence or lack thereof, he sometimes entertained the idea that the universe was so much more than just the end result of a series of cosmic accidents. Sometimes he even felt deep to his core that whatever the driving force of existence was, it would never be so petty as to give him an appetite that could