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Casey Affleck

T A K I N G T H E L E A D

Cotton button-down shirt by **Giorgio Armani**. Cotton-wool coat by **Narciso Rodriguez**.

late in America's second century, Jesse James achieved near-mythological status. Handsome and charming, he was a gentleman—as gentlemanly as someone who robbed trains and killed people could be. He was a controversial hero. His legend was romanticized and then immortalized in comic books and newspaper clippings; he was America's Robin Hood. And whether out of admiration or fear, everyone, everywhere, knew who he was.

On April 3, 1882, Robert Ford shot Jesse James in the back with a single bullet. Ford later re-enacted the assassination, onstage, more than 800 times, and posed for photographs as "The Man Who Killed Jesse James." Before that, no one knew who Robert Ford was. In the new film *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford*, Brad Pitt plays Jesse James. Robert Ford is played by Casey Affleck.

"Who?"

"Ben Affleck's brother."

"Ohh."

This is one of the commonest responses if, in conversation, the name Casey Affleck comes up. The other is:

"I love him. That dude's great."

The brothers Ben and Casey Affleck have been acting in films for essentially the same amount of time—fifteen years. Yet Casey remains best known for the parenthetical addendum that often follows his name: (Ben Affleck's little brother). But, being the lesser-known Affleck has its advantages. The world has come to know Ben as a *celebrity*—for his Leading Man looks, for blockbusters like *Armageddon* and *Pearl Harbor*, and for his tabloid-friendly relationships, most notoriously with JLo. We've come to know Casey, if we've come to know him at all, as, well, an actor. He is rarely in the press and, whether by choice or taking what he could get, has opted for smaller films.

While Ben may be more famous, it could be said that it is cooler to like Casey. He's like the underground version of Ben, who can look almost presidential onscreen and off. Casey is slither, scruffier, scrappier. At 32, he still looks like a kid brother. He's Prince Harry to Ben's William.

Casey is in maybe seven scenes of *Good Will Hunting*, the 1997 film that made both his brother and childhood friend Matt Damon, Golden Boys, yet somehow those scenes are your favorite. His shit-talking, loogie-hawking Morgan, who just wants to eat his goddamned double burger, brings to life some of the film's most memorable and quotable scenes. Who knows how many times an appropriately placed "I swallowed a bug" has cut short an awkward conversation? The same thing happens in Steven Soderbergh's *Ocean's* films—*Eleven*, *Twelve*, *Thirteen*. The dimwitted Mormon Virgil Malloy manages to shine, especially with mustache, amid a near-blinding constellation of movie stars.

This fall, Casey stars in two big studio films: the aforementioned *Jesse James*, and *Gone Baby Gone*, his brother's directorial debut. Casey doesn't think, or feel, or act like someone who stars in movies. He is, after all, a guy who got married in a pair of shoes from Payless and lived in his grandmother's apartment while attending Columbia University. He really hates doing interviews. He said so, maybe forty times, during our conversations. But he seems to be good-natured about doing what he doesn't like. At one point, when my tape recorder broke, he fixed it, and said, "I'm gonna regret that aren't I?" He banged the recorder against the table when he said anything he didn't want on the record, so those sentences, when listened to afterward, sound something like, "And then we did [*bang bang bang bang bang*]." Meanwhile he grinned mischievously over a margarita big enough for a small bird to bathe in.

Instructed by publicists, actors being interviewed can be understandably guarded and will commonly regurgitate platitudes. Affleck will say whatever he wants. When tossed a pre-canned question, he tears off the lid and holds it over you, until it drips with sarcasm on your head.

"I never get recognized," he told me. "When I've had a hard day, people give me change on the street." Casey is, without a doubt, a smartass of the

first order. He's the type of guy who says he doesn't smoke—while smoking. When asked what excites him, he said, "People," then, three well-calculated beats later, finished, "with plastic surgery." When he was five, he nearly had to have an arm amputated. About this he said, "The doctor operated for six hours and saved my arm. I mean, I can't speak for my arm. It might have rather been set free." He said he and his brother don't have matching tats, as in tattoos, but "matching tits."

He will not talk candidly about his personal life. "Look at Paul Newman, Robert Redford, Jack Nicholson—they never did that shit. People didn't know anything about their fucking lives. They saw their movies, but there were never, like, interviews about their personal lives, and it was easier for them to get parts," he said, smoking a Camel Light. "If you become too much of a character offscreen, it seems, it's harder for people to believe you as any character other than that, onscreen." He made reference to his brother, Ben. "I feel like it only hurts you. Look at my brother, for example. Everyone knew who he was because he bought Bentleys and dated JLo, and people didn't want to see his movies because they'd rather just read about him in *US Weekly*. And that was really hard for him. He couldn't do period movies 'cause people were like, 'This isn't that guy. This is Ben Affleck.'"

Casey grew up outside of Boston, in Cambridge, and enjoyed a typical boyhood, which produced the typical stories: he broke an arm jumping from a porch to a clothesline, never making it to the clothesline, and nearly had

to have it amputated. He broke the other attempting to dunk a basketball by jumping off a milk crate—he wanted, he said, to "be like Mike." He used to breakdance, too. "I could pop and lock, moonwalk, headspin, windmill, and freestyle like Crazy Legs himself. I can't touch my knee now." One of his first jobs was selling hotdogs outside Fenway Park. He is a big Red Socks fan. He thinks

his childhood pet dog might have been suicidal; it always stood in the middle of the street. His mother was a Harvard-educated schoolteacher. His parents are now divorced. He maintains close relationships with both of them.

Casey attended high school at the Cambridge Rindge & Latin Schools, a public school a few blocks from Harvard University, where there might have been something in the Mountain Dew. In addition to Casey and his brother, the school has produced Matt Damon, Patrick Ewing, and the kid who played Vinnie on *Doogie Howser M.D.* When Casey was a freshman he played on the baseball team, but he was small—5'1"—and rode the bench. He signed up for a musical in the school's drama program. The prospect of spending the summer rehearsing with twenty or so girls, he said, was appealing. "I went to the rehearsal and they played two notes and were, like, 'Which one's higher?' And I'm, like, 'Uh, the second one?' And they're, like, 'OK, you're tone deaf.' So all my solos I had to lip synch." This sparked an interest in acting and, with the help of his mother's friend, a casting director, he and his brother did local commercials and were extras in films.

Following his brother, Casey moved to Los Angeles after high school. After a series of too many auditions for shows like *Saved by the Bell*, he auditioned for a film that Gus Van Sant was casting. After seven callbacks, he won the part. (He says he got it only because he was from New England, where the story takes place.) The film, *To Die For*, released in 1995, was a brilliant black comedy starring a then relatively unknown Nicole Kidman. Casey and Joaquin Phoenix, who were 17 and 18, respectively, at the time, played two lost high-school punks, as vulnerable as they were precocious. It was on the set of this film that he met two very important people in his life: Phoenix, who has since become one of his best friends and whose younger sister, Summer, Casey married last year; and Van Sant, who later directed *Good Will Hunting*.

Casey became close with Van Sant and, with him and Matt Damon, wrote 2002's *Gerry*, a minimalist, art-project of a film that, with next to no dialogue, tells the ultimately tragic tale of two friends (played by Damon and Affleck) lost in the desert.

More recently, Casey played a sorry sack of a writer on the verge of an emotional breakdown in the Steve Buscemi-directed *Lonesome Jim*. "I'm



Cotton T-shirt by John Varvatos.







a writer," his character says. "And a dog walker. *Aaaand* I work part-time at an Applebee's." The film, which also stars Liv Tyler, features some classic comedic moments. "Like four people saw that movie," Casey said.

He is a man of opinions and convictions. He fidgeted during our interview—with a peppermint wrapper, a cigarette, the tape recorder, and he doodled unremarkable squiggles and lines on a paper menu. He wrote the word "Luddite" when he spoke about cell phones. "I think it will be like the cigarette industry twenty years from now; the people who make BlackBerries and cell phones knew all along it caused brain cancer," he said. "If you talk on your cell phone for two fuckin' minutes you get dizzy and your ear gets hot. A few years back I threw my cell phone in the Hudson River and I was like, 'I'm never gonna get another one,' and the next afternoon I was in Midtown trying to find the Sprint store."

Most significantly, Affleck is a hard-core vegan. He's done PSAs for PETA, one of which was so graphic it was banned. But he said he doesn't want to be a spokesperson. "I believe veganism can be beneficial for the individual and the world, and of course the animal, but belief is like laying in the dark with someone and telling them you love them and hearing nothing back. So I've never had the confidence to get on a soapbox and tell someone else what to do."

Casey's turn as Robert Ford in *The Assassination of Jesse James* is commanding. Ford was a very strange guy. He was both naive and calculating, a seemingly simple man with crazy eyes and complex demons. It could easily be argued that it's Casey's best performance yet. You know an

WHEN I ASKED HIM THE ULTIMATE, CLICHÉD, PRE-CANNED QUESTION—"WHAT DO YOU DO ON YOUR TYPICAL WEEKEND?"—THE ACTOR RESPONDED, "I JUST TRY TO FIND ANYONE WITH A TAPE RECORDER WHO WILL TALK TO ME. YOU KNOW, DRUM UP SOME PRESS. GO TO THE FARMERS MARKET, HAND OUT FLYERS FOR MY MOVIES."

actor has done a damn good job when you've just watched Brad Pitt's beautiful manface for two and a half hours and somehow, days later, Casey's is the one that won't leave you. "People are gonna walk out when Brad Pitt dies," he said. "They're gonna be, like, 'Fuck, *that!* I came to see a *Brad Pitt* movie!'"

He uses humor and self-deprecation to diffuse the reality that maybe, between this and his other forthcoming film, he could be The Leading Man that they're talking about.

In *Gone Baby Gone*, which is based on a book by Dennis Lehane, the author of *Mystic River*, Casey gets to play the tough guy. As a private investigator searching for a missing child in one of Boston's seediest neighborhoods, he yells a lot and shoots people. His brother directed the film. "It was like working with someone you'd done a thousand films with. Like figuring out who's gonna set the dinner table or something," he said. "Ben took to directing really well. He's a natural leader. People almost always like him within the first two minutes of meeting him. And he learns really,



really fast." Casey said that Ben won the respect of cast members Morgan Freeman and Ed Harris. "To see them look to Ben for direction was really impressive." There were humorous moments, too, depending on which brother you ask. "Ben made me jump off a 60-foot cliff into a quarry full of 500-year-old black water, old shoes, car fenders, and corpses. Twice. Then he cut it out of the movie." He said so in an accent that is far from Boston.

"I had a Boston accent when I was younger. Now nobody asks if I'm from Boston. People ask me what country I am from. My voice is a weird disaster." His voice, which is both low and high at the same time, is hoarse, uneven, all over the place. It's sometimes hard to understand. His eyes, which are green, no blue, no gray, always look a little stoned. When we met, his brown hair was split in two by a stripe of blond, the residual effects of a month-old Mohawk. You get the feeling he does stuff like grow a Mohawk just to amuse himself.

You get the feeling he found this—his response to another pre-canned question—particularly amusing. He wrote, in an e-mail:

"Tom Cruise and I were horse-riding in the Appalachians on a misty August morning. A hawk had been following us since dawn. We reached a clearing above the tree line—denuded, lunar, serene, airless. I could hear Tom pull at the atmosphere for oxygen. We stared out across the twisted landscape. After a moment, he spoke. He didn't look at me. He didn't turn. They were the first words either of us had uttered in days. He said, 'Being a leading man...you get to be in more scenes.'"

In a more serious tone, he told me, "If being a 'leading man' has some significance beyond that, then I am not exactly that. I don't think I have the qualities that people call 'leading man.' I don't think I have them because I am not even sure what they are. And that's OK with me because if I have been able to play a few 'leading man' parts while not myself possessing those 'leading man' qualities, then I have achieved something," he said.

He then returned to form. "I would rather be a round peg in a square hole than a square peg in a round hole. The latter is stuck while the former can pop in and out and go back and forth and do it all. I want to have a peg that can change shape and get in as many holes as possible."

When I asked him the clichéd, ultimate pre-canned question—"What do you do on your typical weekend?"—the actor responded, "I just try to find anyone with a tape recorder who will talk to me. You know, drum up some press. Go to the farmers market, hand out flyers for my movies." ☒

