

ABSTRACT

WILLIAMS III, FRANK LEON. Knots. (Under the direction of Wilton Barnhardt.)

Knots is a screenplay that tells the story of Joel Greer, a witty yet underachieving English teacher bumbling his way toward his thirties. One day, Joel returns home to find a wedding invitation in the mail. The invitation turns out to be to the wedding of Vanessa, the ex-girlfriend for whom he still pines some two years after their break-up. After much internal debate, Joel convinces himself that attending the wedding would be the mature decision, one that will show the woman who always doubted him that he has finally matured. However, Joel quickly comes to regret his decision, as through a series of unusual circumstances, he is thrust into spending the eve of the wedding with Neil, Vanessa's husband-to-be. While Neil appears perfect on the surface, it does not take long for his unexpected intentions for the evening to emerge. Over the course of one night, as Joel struggles with whether or not to try and thwart Neil's plans, he comes to understand love, relationships, and what it's like to finally grow up and move on.

Knots

by
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BIOGRAPHY

Frank Leon Williams III (Lee) was born and raised in Fredericksburg, Virginia. Lee received his Bachelor of Arts degree in English in 2003 from East Carolina University in Greenville, North Carolina. Knots will mark not only the completion of his first screenplay, but also the completion of his Master of Arts degree in English from North Carolina State University in Raleigh, North Carolina. After graduation, Lee plans to work in higher education or media while continuing to write screenplays.

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FADE IN:

INT. HIGH SCHOOL CLASSROOM--DAY

The classroom is an institutional blanket of white. It is sparsely decorated save for a few generic "Achieve" and "Dedication" motivational posters. Florescent lights beat down upon bored students seated at too-small desks.

The room is silent. One student doodles a sunflower on her notebook while another plays Tetris on his cell phone under his desk. The others stare blankly towards the front of the room.

Crickets.

At a lectern stands JOEL GREER (28) clad in a short-sleeved white shirt and a relatively cheap looking tie. He appears bookish, but not quite nerdy; the outfit making him look more like a door-to-door Mormon than the head of a tenth-grade English class. He emits a blank stare right back at the students that perpetuates the silence filling the room. In Joel there seems to be no manner of teacherly authority or poise.

Joel grips his copy of Animal Farm and starts to speak.

JOEL

So...

More silence

JOEL (CONT'D)

Thoughts?

Nothing.

A loud merengue ringtone explodes from a cell phone.

Instead of scrambling to silence it, a heavily made-up girl in the middle of the room actually answers the phone and engages in a brief conversation before hanging up.

Dumbfounded, Joel merely looks on.

JOEL (CONT'D)

We good to go, now?

No response.

JOEL (CONT'D)

So, before we get started, what are some impressions of Orwell's work?

No volunteers.

JOEL (CONT'D)

Alright. Anna, since you were so chatty just a second ago, what did you think?

ANNA

Ummm. I didn't like it.

JOEL

Okay, what didn't you like?

ANNA

I didn't buy it.

JOEL

You didn't buy it?

ANNA

No. They were talking pigs. It was distracting. Too far-fetched.

JOEL

Yes, there were some talking pigs. But they represent something else, something bigger. Which is called?

More silence.

STUDENT #2

Make believe.

JOEL

No, not make believe. It's was one of your vocabulary words.

Nothing.

JOEL (CONT'D)

Allegory. Anyone remember allegory?

STUDENT #3

Like "click" or "buzz" right?

JOEL
 What? No, that's onomatopoeia.
 Come on, we went over this.

Finally, a hand raises in the back of the room. JENNA (16), a frizzy-haired blonde speaks through a mouthful of braces.

JOEL (CONT'D)
 Jenna, yes?

JENNA
 I thought the spider died at the end and gave her babies to the pig.

JOEL
 No, Jenna, that's Charlotte's Web.

JENNA
 Yeah. That was sad.

JOEL
 Yes, it was. But completely unrelated. So--

A stocky redhead in a football jersey speaks up

STUDENT #4
 Which does the pig herd the sheep in?

JENNA
 That was Babe.

STUDENT #5
 Awww. I love Babe!

STUDENT #6
 (imitating)
 "Please don't eat me..."

The class laughs

STUDENT #7
 "That'll do, pig."

More laughter, they all laugh, save for Joel.

Nervous, sensing that he's losing them quickly, Joel fumbles through his notes.

JOEL
The, ummm...

Looking out on the class, Joel sees the blank faces, the bored stares. For him, time is moving in slow motion.

JOEL (CONT'D)
So, the character of Squealer. He--
More fumbling through notes.

JOEL (CONT'D)
He, um. Squealer--
DERREK, a jock type with a shaggy haircut speaks up.

DERREK
They call Dylan's mom Squealer too.
His almost identical friend, seated behind him, and apparently named DYLAN, quickly flicks him in the back of the ear.

The class laughs, that is, once again, everyone besides Joel.

DYLAN
But she's not a fucking pig like yours!

The class "Oooohs" and hisses at the comment.

JOEL
Jesus! Easy on the language. This is an English class not a prison yard. Now can we actually have a constructive discussion? Just once? Maybe?

The class calms down.

Joel takes a breath and refocuses.

JOEL (CONT'D)
Thank you. Now, what I was trying to get at was how Squealer symbolizes the role of--

A bell RINGS.

The class swiftly packs their bookbags and are on their way out the door without so much as another glance at Joel.

Joel does not move from the lectern. He simply stands still, gazing out at the now empty classroom.

INT. DON PANCHO'S MEXICAN RESTAURANT--NIGHT

Straw sombreros, marracas, grainy black and white photos of moustachioed men on donkeys, standard Mexican restaurant fare.

Joel enters and makes his way to a small table in the bar area where WES (28) sits alone, devouring ravenously, a glistening slab of nachos.

Wes is neatly dressed, still clad in his French-cuffed shirt and conservative tie. Despite his professional attire, premature paunch, and thinning hair, Wes still shows remnants of frat boy charm and mischief.

Joel seats himself across from Wes, who gestures he help himself.

JOEL

No. That's quite all right. But thank you for waiting for me.

WES

Sorry man. I was starving. It all smelled so good. I'm weak.

JOEL

You're married. Married men aren't supposed to be hungry.

Joel scoops up some sour cream and guacamole and then gingerly eats it.

JOEL (CONT'D)

You're supposed to be well fed and apple-cheeked. I'm supposed to be starving. I don't own pots and pans, remember? I still drink Kool-Aid.

WES
(swigging Dos Equis)
It's killing me, man.

JOEL
What is?

WES
Meredith took the meat away.

JOEL
What meat?

WES
(angrily)
All of it! One of those flaky
skanks she works with showed her a
video on YouTube of some chickens
in cages, you know, all crammed in.
So not only did I come home to an
earful of how terrible that is, but
I also get the surprising news that
we are now vegetarians. They're
chickens, that's what happens to
them!
(swigging)

So, I'm now sentenced to an
indefinite period of Tofurky and
fake Italian Sausages. Do you know
what meatless sausage tastes like,
Joel?

JOEL
I can't say that I do, Wes.

WES
Good man. You stay pure that way.

JOEL
Well can't you just cook your own
meat if you want some? Just throw
it in a pan. She doesn't have to
eat it.

WES
Joel, I didn't get married to cook
my own dinner.

Pause. Wes shovels in another handful and licks his fingers.

WES (CONT'D)

Plus, she won't let it touch the cookware. Or enter the house.

JOEL

I see.

WES

Ah, fuck it. She'll be pretending to care about something else by the end of the month. Last month she wanted a Sudanese baby. That passed. I just need to ride it out.

A waitress approaches, Wes gives her the "another round" gesture.

WES (CONT'D)

So what's new with you?

JOEL

Oh, you know, still expanding young minds. I think I'm really starting to get through to them.

WES

Really?

JOEL

No, not at all. They don't give a shit. Which, in turn, makes me not give a shit.

WES

Oh come on. I'm sure you're doing great.

JOEL

No, I'm pretty sure I'm a shitty teacher, Wes. The evidence is all there.

The waitress arrives and places two Dos Equis in front of Joel and Wes.

WES
(through a full mouth)
Teen ass.

JOEL
Excuse me?

WES
Come on, it's gotta be nice looking at that all day. Cheerleaders, field hockey players. I used to drool over that shit. The skirts! It's amazing how mature teenage girls look these days. Meredith says it's all the growth hormones they pump into meat. Makes the tits grow younger. You can catch a charge real easy these days. I'm just throwing that out there.

Joel glares at Wes.

JOEL
I'll keep that in mind.

WES
Please. If you were married and worked in an office full of paunchy fifty year old men named Robert and Randy like I do, maybe you'd appreciate your surroundings a little more. Plus, who else do you have to think about in that department?

JOEL
You know, I really don't want to have this conversation right now. I'm fine with where I am. I'm busy. It wouldn't be fair for me to try and commit right now. And-

WES
Okay fine. Fair enough. New topic.

The two are silent for a few seconds.

JOEL
(abruptly)
So, does Meredith still talk to
Vanessa much? I mean, I'm just
curious. I haven't been good with
keeping in touch. Been so swamped
and all--

Wes has stopped chewing. He slowly takes a swig of his beer.

JOEL (CONT'D)
I mean, you know, just asking. I
hope she's doing well. I'm sure
she's great. Why wouldn't she be
great. She's--

Joel realizes something is amiss with Wes.

JOEL (CONT'D)
What? What's that look? You
stopped talking. And eating.
Something's always wrong when you
stop doing one of those two things.

WES
I didn't tell you. I should have--

JOEL
What? What didn't you tell me, Wes?
What should you have told me?

WES
She's with someone.

Silence, save for the CLATTER of a waitress dropping a tray
somewhere beyond the kitchen doors.

JOEL
Well, that's to be expected. It
has been almost two years. It'd be
kinda pathetic. I mean, I've been
dating. Some.

Joel nervously takes a drink.

JOEL
I mean, that's fine. I'm fine.
Yeah, great. Good for her, good--

WES
It's pretty serious.

JOEL
How serious?

WES
They're getting married in two
months.

Joel glances off into the distance of the restaurant. He feigns watching the baseball game on the television over the bar.

Quickly, he turns back to Wes.

JOEL
Good for her! That's great. She's
a catch. I mean, I should have
known she wouldn't be on the market
long. Someone was going to scoop
her up, right?

WES
Totally. She's aces, man. You
know that.

JOEL
So, who exactly did scoop up her
up?

WES
He's a good guy. His name's Neil.
I mean, I know you probably think
he's a prick right off the bat. As
well you should, that's natural.
But I'm telling you Joel, he's a
solid guy. You'd probably like
him. When me and Meredith were
driving to visit her parents we
stopped and stayed the night with
them. And I'll tell you, he knows
how to entertain. If I were a
chick, I'd blow him.

JOEL

Thank you, Wes. Because that's exactly what I want to hear about my ex-girlfriend's fiance, that my best friend would blow him. Glad to hear that. I can be completely comfortable with the situation now.

WES

Joel, come on man. I know it's never easy news to hear. Remember when Shelly Stevens got engaged like two months after we finished college? I was a mess. All I could think about is how I would never be able to call her again at three in the morning and stumble over there just to violate her and leave. And look at me now...

Joel glares at Wes who has four empty beer bottles and a near cleaned plate of nachos on the table in front of him and a blob of guacamole on the side of his face.

JOEL

I think my situation is a little different, Wes. She was my girlfriend. The only girl I've ever loved. Not some bar tramp you used to sleep with on the weekends.

WES

Neither here nor there. My point is, this news is always like a kick in the nuts, no matter the circumstances. But you gotta move on. You're a smart, single, good looking guy. The legs of the world are spread open in front of you.

Staring at the television again, Joel nods and turns back to Wes.

JOEL

That's right. You're right. Plus, her and I never would have worked out in the end, anyway.

WES
Not at all. Recipe for disaster.

JOEL
Too different. Night and day.

WES
Exactly.

JOEL
Good for her. And...Neil.

WES
Good for them!

Joel picks up his beer and raises it.

JOEL
To Vanessa and Neil.

Wes raises his as well.

They clank bottles

WES
To the soon to be happy couple.
And to Joel and the single life.
May you not take that for granted.

JOEL
Cheers to that.

Both men take deep swigs from their longnecks.

JOEL (CONT'D)
Neil. I hate that name.

WES
Sounds kind of gay doesn't it?

INT. JOEL'S APARTMENT--AFTERNOON

The door to the apartment eases open and Joel enters, with a messenger bag slung over his shoulder and a newspaper and a bundle of mail in his hands.

The apartment is modest but not small, unorganized but not dirty.

Various books and magazines are scattered about the coffee table. The walls are lined with full DVD and book shelves.

Framed movie posters--Bullit, Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, Rear Window--adorn the walls.

Joel plops down on the couch and raises the remote. The television that dominates the far wall comes to life. On it, spoiled reality show teenyboppers shop for prom dresses.

Joel picks the mail bundle off of the coffee table and sorts through it--electric bill, student loan bill...suddenly Joel stops at a rectangular, beige envelope.

He studies it for a few beats.

On the envelope his name and address is written out in black, flowing calligraphy. Slowly, because he already knows what it is, what it has to be, Joel begins to open it.

JOEL

(reading)

"Mr and Mrs. Nathaniel Dean
cordially invite you to attend the
marriage of their daughter, Vanessa
Elaine to Neil Wyatt Reid on the
afternoon of--"

Joel's voice trails off until he eventually stops reading and merely stares at the invitation.

He stands and walks to one end of the apartment and then, as if realizing he wasn't actually going anywhere, walks back and returns to the couch.

INT. JOEL'S APARTMENT--LATE AFTERNOON

Pacing around the apartment with the phone to his ear, Joel talks to Wes.

JOEL

Yeah, it's right here. My name's
all nice and cursivey on the
envelope and everything.

INT. WES'S OFFICE--LATE AFTERNOON

Wes sits hunched over a large desk, shouting into the speakerphone at Joel.

On the computer screen in front of him, Wes manipulates what appears to be a stock portfolio while at the same time arranging his fantasy baseball lineup.

WES

Well, I must admit, I did not see this coming.

INT. JOEL'S APARTMENT--LATE AFTERNOON

Still pacing

JOEL

Is this some kind of cruel joke or something? Who invites their ex to their wedding? What kind of sadistic shit is this?

Joel paces over to the fridge, takes out a beer, opens and takes a quick pull.

JOEL (CONT'D)

Are you fucking with me? Because that would be a really shitty joke, even for you.

INT. WES'S OFFICE--LATE AFTERNOON

WES

No, I swear. I've got nothing to do with this. I wish I'd thought of it, but I'm clean on this one. Listen, it's a nice gesture. You should be flattered. It means she thinks of you as being completely mature and comfortable enough with the situation to attend her big day.

Wes slaps his desk and grimaces in frustration at something on the monitor and takes a long gulp from his coffee mug.

WES (CONT'D)

I mean, she's completely wrong, but it's good for you that she's thinking that way.

INT. MUSIC STORE--DAY.

Joel talks on his cell phone while flipping through used CD's, picking them up and cursorily examining them then putting them back.

JOEL

Well, I'm not going. That would be ridiculous. Who goes to their ex's wedding.

INT. HEALTH CLUB--DAY

Wes talks on the phone while walking on a stair climber. He seems to be focusing less on the exercise or the phone conversation than on the ass of an attractive blond using the machine in front of him.

WES

Mature people, Joel. People who know how to put the past behind them and be happy for that other person.

INT. JOEL'S CAR--LATE AFTERNOON

Joel talks on the phone while he sits in bumper-to-bumper traffic in his nondescript Intrepid.

JOEL

I don't know if I can be happy for her? Am I even capable of that? I like to avoid super-awkward situations when at all possible. I have enough of those without purposefully walking into them.

INT. WES'S KITCHEN--EARLY EVENING

In his kitchen, Wes wears a tacky apron while chopping vegetables. His wife, MEREDITH (26), pretty but severe, wears a matching apron as she grates cheese by Wes's side.

WES

Look, Meredith and I will go and send your regards. I'll even make some shit up and say you're spending the weekend with your hot, super-successful new girlfriend.

INT. GROCERY STORE--EARLY EVENING

Joel pushes a cart up the frozen food isle. He loads TV dinners into the cart by the handful without even examining their contents.

JOEL

You don't think that might be a little far-fetched? I guess I could see that.

EXT. WES'S KITCHEN--NIGHT

Assembly line style, Meredith rinses the dishes and hands them to Wes who lazily loads them into the dishwasher while talking.

WES

No, you're right. She'll know that's bullshit. But I'll think of something. Look, just mark the little RSVP card "no" and forget about it. Move on like it never happened.

INT. JOEL'S KITCHEN--NIGHT

Joel stands by his microwave while talking. He pulls a TV dinner from it and nearly drops it because of the heat.

JOEL

You're right. I do actually have a date this weekend.

INT. WES'S LIVING ROOM--NIGHT

Wes sits on the couch with the remote in one hand and cell phone in the other. Meredith sits next to him reading the newest US Weekly.

WES

There you go! See, what did I tell you? What's his name?

INT. JOEL'S LIVING ROOM--NIGHT

Joel sits on his sofa eating the TV dinner over the coffee table. He speaks through a mouthful of mashed potatoes. The phone sits on the table as well, Joel now using speakerphone.

JOEL

Funny. I met her at work. She's a Spanish teacher. We have cafeteria duty together.

WES

(speakerphone)

Well, is she Spanish? Country's a third hispanic, yet all my Spanish teachers were fat white ladies. I never understood that.

JOEL

Yes, actually. She was born in Colombia. It's an incredible story actually. Her family--

INT. WES'S PATIO--NIGHT

Wes sits at a patio table underneath a large umbrella, holding an unlit cigar.

WES

OH! Gold mine! Let me tell you something, Joel. Now, I don't know this from firsthand experience, unfortunately. But I've heard good things. They're a fiery people. That's all I'm saying.

(MORE)

WES (CONT'D)

So, you know, be on the lookout for that. But listen, I gotta run, *Men in Trees* is coming on. I expect a full update. Hard evidence if possible.

INT. JOEL'S LIVING ROOM--NIGHT

JOEL

It's just a casual dinner. But I will keep that in mind.

INT. TORINO'S RESTAURANT--NIGHT

JOEL and LARA (mid 20's) are seated at a table. Lara is strikingly attractive with light olive skin and dark wavy hair. They are both dressed nice but casual, clearly striving for that "I don't want to look like I'm trying too hard to look good" look.

Their meal is finished and their plates have been cleared away. All that is between them is a near empty bottle of red wine. A glass sits in front of each of them. Joel's is empty while Lara's is almost full.

Laura is laughing.

JOEL

Seriously, what's that kid's deal?

LARA

I know! He just sits over by the lockers and glares out through the hair covering his eyes.

JOEL

Yes! Everyday I expect for him to pull like a live kitten out of his lunch bag and just chomp the head off right there. Use the blood as war paint.

Lara puts a hand over her mouth and giggles, as if to avoid spitting out the mouthful of wine she just took.

JOEL (CONT'D)

I'm serious! Every time the kid reaches into that army coat, I swear I almost take off into a full sprint.

She continues laughing.

JOEL (CONT'D)

I'm sorry. That was terrible. We're terrible. Awful role models.

Lara's laughter fades but her smile does not. Her eyes linger on Joel.

She looks down at her watch.

LARA

Wow, I can't believe it's almost eleven.

JOEL

Seriously? Well, we'd better get going before they start sweeping around us.

LARA

So, if you're up to it, I have a brand new bottle of wine at my place just begging to be drunk.

JOEL

Well, if it's begging...

INT. LARA'S APARTMENT--NIGHT

The wine bottle is now empty. Lara and Joel are both seated on the sofa but the mood appears to have changed considerably since dinner. Joel is slunk back in his seat, purple lips, teeth, and all. Lara sits a considerable distance from Joel on the couch, her body language unfavorable.

Joel is talking, his words cumbersome and partially slurred. Lara looks bored and slightly creeped out.

JOEL

I mean, there's so many reasons why I shouldn't go. But my friend Wes says I should. You know, to like, show her I'm okay. And I kind of think he's right but at the same time I don't know. It'll be awkward. And I hate awkward situations. Don't you? Aren't they the worst?

LARA

Sure are.

JOEL

She's a good girl though. You know? And I hope she's happy and I'd like to show her that I hope she's happy.

Joel pauses and looks down at his wine glass. He sees that there's only about a sip left and knocks it back.

JOEL (CONT'D)

I just thought it would be me. You know, making her happy.

(Pause)

But hey, let's have another. I know you're hording another bottle...

LARA

Joel--

JOEL

No, no. Don't you trouble yourself I'll go fetch it. Just give me--

LARA

Joel, I think it's time--

But Joel is already in the kitchen. He walks back with a bottle of red wine and attempts to open it as he walks.

LARA (CONT'D)

You know, Joel I've got all these papers to grade tomorrow and a test to--

JOEL
Nonsense. If I could just get this
damn thing--

Joel violently yanks at the opener, prying the cork loose and sending a current of red liquid cascading down upon Lara's lap as well as her sofa and white carpet.

Lara GASPS while Joel stands holding the suddenly empty bottle, a trickle still falling from it.

JOEL (CONT'D)
Oh God. Let me help--

Joel half-staggers closer to Lara to help.

LARA
Get out.

JOEL
No. Let me.

LARA
Leave!

JOEL
You betcha.

Joel sheepishly sets the empty bottle on the coffee table and slinks out the door.

INT. JOEL'S APARTMENT--LATE NIGHT

Staggering slightly, Joel enters and nearly trips over his coffee table.

He tosses his keys onto the coffee table and makes his way over to the sink where he fills a cup of water and drinks it down in three gulps. He fills the cup again and walks to the sofa and plops down.

Joel plugs his cell phone into the charger, lays it on the table and hits speakerphone. He lays back, closes his eyes and lets his messages play.

AUTOMATED VOICE

First message. Received at 8:09
p.m.

WES (MESSAGE)

"Hey buddy. Just wanted to see how
the night went. Hopefully you
won't be hearing this until
tomorrow morning--"

Joel reaches over presses "7."

AUTOMATED VOICE

This message has been deleted.

Joel sips his water and turns on the television. On the
screen, the cast of "Saturday Night Live" is bowing and
waving good night.

AUTOMATED VOICE (CONT'D)

Next message. Received at 8:54
p.m.

A FEMALE VOICE starts to speak.

VANESSA (MESSAGE)

Hey Joel--

Joel bolts upright.

VANESSA (MESSAGE) (CONT'D)

It's Vanessa. I've been meaning to
give you a call but I've been so
busy. And I guess now you know why
I've been so busy. Kind of crazy.
But, I hope you got the invitation
and I hope you can make it. I
mean, I know we haven't talked
since, you know, that one night. But
you're a really--wow, this is weird--
and, despite everything, you're
really special to me. I'd like for
you to be there. It would mean a
lot. Neil's a great guy and I want
you to meet him. I even want you to
come to the rehearsal dinner.

(MORE)

VANESSA (MESSAGE) (CONT'D)
You can ride down with Wes and
Meredith. I mean, if you want to.
Listen to me, making your plans for
you. You're a big boy...

Wide-eyed and still, Joel stares at his cell phone. On the screen, a picture of Vanessa smiles back at him, indicating the missed call.

VANESSA (MESSAGE) (CONT'D)
You know, I always...

Again, she hesitates.

VANESSA (MESSAGE) (CONT'D)
I always thought that--

Suddenly, Vanessa's voice is cut off.

AUTOMATED VOICE
Press 7 to delete this message.
Press 9 to save--

Joel flinches when the message cuts off,

JOEL
(to the machine)
No! Don't do that!

Joel quickly presses "9."

JOEL (CONT'D)
You always thought? Always thought
what?!

INT. WES'S LIVING ROOM--LATE NIGHT

Wes sits on the sofa in his spotless, Pottery Barn-perfect living room. He wears flannel pajama bottoms and faded Redskins t-shirt.

Joel sits next to him holding the cell phone as the message finishes playing over the speakerphone.

AUTOMATED VOICE
Press 7 to delete this--

Joel saves the message and sets the phone on the coffee table.

WES

I can't believe she left a message.
This changes things entirely.

JOEL

What? How so?

Meredith walks into the room carrying a bowl of chips and salsa.

She places them on the coffee table and shoots Wes, and especially, Joel a look that indicates she is not at all happy to be having company at this hour.

WES

Thank you, baby. You're the best.

Meredith does not acknowledge the comment, silently breezing out of the room and up the stairs.

WES (CONT'D)

(yelling)

I love you!

WES (CONT'D)

Well, for one, it shows emotion, vulnerability. She cared enough to not only call but to explain why she called and to tell you to come to the wedding. As if an actual invitation wasn't invitation enough. I'm gonna be honest with you, Joel, this one has me baffled.

JOEL

Well, I'm still not going. It's too weird.

WES

You're going.

JOEL

What? No. Why would you say that?

WES

Because look at you, Joel. It's almost two in the morning and you show up just because she left you a message. As much as it might kill you to go, it's going to kill you even more not to go. You're going to be calling me all weekend, asking for details, asking me if I think you should have come. And frankly, I don't feel like dealing with any of that. So buy a suit, buy a gift, and book a room, because you're going to that fucking wedding because you have to. Now mark "yes" on that little RSVP card that I can see sticking out of your pocket, send that fucker off in the mail, and let's go watch the only girl you ever loved get hitched!

JOEL

But what about the message?

WES

Forget about the message.

JOEL

But you just said it changed things. That it showed emotion.

WES

I see that look in your eyes and you're thinking that it meant something. But remember, my friend, she's getting married--to someone who isn't you! So before those emotional wheels start turning in that little head of yours, think about that. And if she has something monumental to tell you, like this infamous message has led you to believe, then she will tell you in person.

Nearly out of breath from all the convincing, Wes takes a long swig of beer. Suddenly, Joel stands.

JOEL

You're absolutely right. I'll go.
It's the mature thing to do.

WES

That's it!

They both sit back down. Slowly, Joel picks up his cell phone and opens it. He stares at it for a few seconds and begins to play the message again.

VANESSA (MESSAGE)

Hey Joel--

Wordlessly, Wes snatches the phone from Joel's hands, deletes the message and sets the phone back on the table.

JOEL'S P.O.V: INT. RECEPTION HALL--NIGHT

The reception hall appears long and narrow, slightly askew. It looks like a hallway viewed through a peephole.

Various wedding attendees line either side of Joel, dressed in their formal attire.

They stare at Joel as he walks towards the end of the hall where a blurry white figure is barely visible.

BRIDESMAID #1

Joel! So good to see you. We're
so glad you're here.

She hugs him and kisses his cheek, leaving dark red lip marks.

BRIDESMAID #2

Wow. You look great Joel. Did you
lose some weight?

VANESSA'S MOM

Joel, we've missed you so much.

She embraces him.

MALE ATTENDEE

Hey buddy. Nice tie!

He pats Joel on the back.

VANESSA'S DAD

Joel, I always thought it would be you.

Joel moves closer to the end of the hall. It is now clear that the figure is Vanessa. She is wearing her wedding dress, her hair and makeup pristine. She beams at Joel.

He moves closer.

VANESSA

Joel. You're really here. I need to tell you something.

Vanessa moves closer to Joel. She slides her arm around his waist and presses her lips close to his ear.

VANESSA (CONT'D)

I think that--

Before she can finish speaking she gradually starts to be pulled away, as if being moved by some unseen force.

Joel watches as she floats backward.

Just as she slips into the darkness, a tuxedo clad arm with a shimmering gold watch adorning its wrist is glimpsed, pulling Vanessa with it.

INT. WES AND MEREDITH'S CAR--DAY

In the backseat of a pristine luxury SUV, Joel's head snaps forward, bringing him out of his slumber.

It is unclear whether or not the abrupt end of the dream or the arguing going on in the front seat is what wakes him.

WES

It's off! I promise you. I unplugged it.

MEREDITH

How do you know? You never unplug it! How many times have we had this argument?

WES

Plenty. It's becoming a personal favorite of mine. Right up there with "stop pissing on the toilet seat" and "use a coaster." I don't see why you're yelling at me, anyway. You used it last.

MEREDITH

Actually, I didn't. Someone needed to do a "quick once over" on his ties. I swear to God, Wes, if I go home to a pile of smoldering ruins you're getting divorced.

WES

Well I'll already be homeless, so that's one step ahead of the game, right?

MEREDITH

Asshole. I'm calling Jess to run over and check.

WES

You do that.

Awkward silence.

Joel stirs, causing Wes to glance in the rearview mirror.

WES (CONT'D)

Good afternoon, Mr. Greer. About an hour and some change left. You excited?

JOEL

I'm nauseated.

MEREDITH

Yeah, your driving sucks, by the way. You're swerving.

WES

I was avoiding a pothole! Do you want bad alignment? Cause I can just hit them head-on for the rest of the drive.

Another squabbling match threatens to ensue but Joel cuts it off.

JOEL

It's not the driving. I'm just nervous. Do you think--

WES

You know what? I'm just going to turn the music up because if I have to hear more of this shit from you in addition to my wife accusing me of being an involuntary arsonist, I'll probably end up jerking this thing across the median and into a fucking semi.

The MUSIC grows louder as Joel lays his head against the window and stares out at the interstate zooming by.

INT. MERCER SUITES LOBBY--DAY

The automatic doors slide open to reveal a bright, marble lobby with lush green plants scattered everywhere.

Meredith bristles in first, carrying only her designer handbag slung over her arm. She is followed close behind by Wes, who is struggling mightily with both her three bags of luggage as well his overnight and garment bags.

A few paces behind them is Joel. He carries only a small duffle bag and a tattered garment bag.

He walks hesitantly, nervously aware of his surroundings. He cranes his neck and looks around nervously.

They make their way to the front desk where a smiling, grey-haired male CONCIERGE greets them.

Wes relieves himself of the luggage, collects himself and steps up first.

WES

Reservation for Daniels. Dean-Reid wedding.

The man types a few keystrokes and looks at the monitor in front of him.

CONCIERGE

Alright, Mr. Daniels. You will be in room 517. Here is your key and here is your gift basket.

He reaches behind the desk and produces, not a mere gift bag full of sample toothpastes and bagged pretzels, but an actual basket brimming with mini-bottles of wine and mini-boxes of gourmet chocolate. All of the contents are centered around a commemorative wine glass that reads "Neil and Vanessa" with the date of the wedding etched below.

MEREDITH

Oh, how beautiful!

WES

Damn. Is that a mini can of caviar? Joel, your girl sure knows how to accommodate.

JOEL

Wow. That's not excessive.

CONCIERGE

Can I help you, sir?

Joel steps up to the desk.

JOEL

Yeah. Reservation for Greer. Joel Greer.

The concierge types away at the computer, stares at the screen and furrows his brow.

CONCIERGE

I'm sorry, sir. I don't see a reservation under that name. Is it possible it's under another name?

JOEL

No. I just have the one.

CONCIERGE

I don't see it.

JOEL

Well, can I get a room?

CONCIERGE

I'm afraid not. We're booked solid through the weekend.

JOEL

Well what am I supposed to do? I confirmed this room like three weeks ago.

CONCIERGE

I can refer you to some other hotels.

WES

You can stay with us. We'll get a cot brought up. No big deal.

Meredith shoots Wes a not-at-all-subtle dirty look and elbows his ribs.

JOEL

No. I don't want to do that. I'll just go somewhere else.

WES

No, you won't. I'm not going to exile you all the way across town.

JOEL

Wes-

WES

Joel. It's settled.

Wes looks to Meredith who is in the beginning stages of a pout.

WES (CONT'D)

It's settled. Now let's all go to *our* room.

As Wes gathers up the mountain of luggage and Meredith storms off a few paces ahead, Joel hesitates and turns to the desk attendant.

JOEL

Any chance I get one of those baskets?

CONCIERGE
One basket per room.

JOEL
Right.

INT. HOTEL ROOM--EVENING

Joel and Wes rest propped up on the bed, all ready to go except for their jackets. They watch the news and sip wine directly from the mini-bottles. A BLOW-DRYER is heard from the bathroom.

JOEL
I should have brought a date.

WES
Well, be glad you didn't. Because we'd be waiting even longer. Plus, she'd have to sleep in the tub.

JOEL
I'm gonna look like an asshole. Rolling in there like a third wheel. That's not exactly going to scream "I'm doing great."

WES
You'll be fine. Hey, who knows, maybe you'll meet someone here. Stranger things have happened. That'd be a story for the grandkids, huh? "How'd you meet grandma?" "Well, son, I was moping around drunk at my ex-girlfriend's wedding, ran into your grandma and wound up banging her in a custodial closet..."

They both chuckle and stare ahead at the local news on the television. On it, a blonde haired anchorwoman with red, pouty lips and perky breasts straining against her suit-jacket talks about a rise in local car thefts.

JOEL

Like her! I want to find a girl
like her. She looks...smart,
but...severe, totally down for a
trip into a broom closet. I like
that. That's what I need!

WES

Absolutely. Kind of like Meredith.

JOEL

You said it.

WES

(sipping)
Indeed I did.

JOEL

Ah, what the hell am I talking
about? A girl like that would chew
me up and spit me out.

He sips wine.

JOEL (CONT'D)

You think she gets a lot of
prisoner mail? I hear that's like a
huge problem for female news
anchors--

Meredith emerges from the bathroom, purse in arm, scowl on
her face.

MEREDITH

Stop laying around! Let's go.
We're going to be late.

JOEL

Lying around.

WES

Yes, dear.

Joel and Wes hop off of the bed and throw their jackets on.
On his way out the door, Joel takes one final swig from the
mini-bottle and sets it on the table by the door.

INT. RECEPTION HALL--NIGHT

The ballroom is nothing like it was in Joel's dream. There are tables topped with white linen table cloths and floral arrangements, four buffet stations, and a sea of revelers. The scene looks more like a state fund raiser than a rehearsal dinner.

The trio enters the room, with Joel, hesitant and slump-shouldered, once again lagging a few steps behind.

WES

This is big time. Where's the bar?

They spot a line formed at the far end of the room and Wes takes off for it.

Joel files in line behind Wes and Meredith, glancing around nervously. He focuses in on faces, but so far none are familiar.

Wes returns with two beers and a glass of wine.

He hands Joel a beer.

WES (CONT'D)

Cheers.

They both take a sip.

WES (CONT'D)

Now is this so bad?

JOEL

It's kind of weird but not nearly as mortifying as I expected. I don't see anyone I know. That's good.

WES

You're unbelievable. Let's go grab a table. It's open seating.

Wes grabs Meredith by the hand and darts off.

INT. RECEPTION HALL--NIGHT

Joel walks quickly carrying two drinks. He keeps his head down and his walk brisk, obviously avoiding eye contact and confrontation. More than a few guests look at him suspiciously as he weaves his way through the crowd. He quickly locates Wes and Meredith's table and sits down.

JOEL

I'm okay.

WES

I didn't ask.

JOEL

I'm just saying.

WES

Sure. You seen Vanessa yet?

JOEL

No. I think she's surrounded by that mob over there. She's busy, I don't want to force an encounter.

WES

Well, you're going to have to sooner or later.

JOEL

I know. I'm gonna hit the men's room first.

WES

Hey--

JOEL

What?

WES

This time, try not to walk there like you just stole someone's wallet.

JOEL

Right.

Joel starts to walk, at first, just as he did coming back from the bar, then slows down, straightens up, and raises his head. Despite his efforts, he's still walking fast and nervously.

As he turns the corner into the hallway where the bathrooms are located, a female voice calls out to him.

VANESSA (O.S.)
Are you hiding from me, Greer?

He stops dead in his tracks.

VANESSA (O.S.) (CONT'D)
That walks looks a little brisk.

Slowly, Joel turns around.

VANESSA (28) stands a few feet in front of him. She is wearing a sleek black dress that clings tightly to her slender body. Her dark brown hair cascades down upon her tan shoulders. She smiles warmly at Joel and brushes a strand of hair from her eyes, her giant engagement ring sparkling in the light.

Joel takes a few steps toward her.

JOEL
You sure know how to draw a crowd,
Dean.

VANESSA
It's your last night to call me
that, you know.

JOEL
Oh, is that what all this is for? I
thought this was the swingers
convention. Am I in the wrong
place again? Damn! I always miss
them.

VANESSA
Shut up and hug me.

The two embrace and allow it to linger what seems like a second too long.

Joel closes his eyes and breathes in the scent of her hair, then quickly steps backward.

JOEL
You look...nice.

VANESSA
Oh, just "nice"? That's sweet.

JOEL
Yes. I'm going to keep it at "nice." I don't want anything going to your head.

VANESSA
Well, you look "nice" too.

JOEL
See, unfortunately for me, "nice" is more than generous.

VANESSA
Glad to see your sunny attitude has stayed intact.

JOEL
I like to stay consistent.

They both laugh and exchange an uneasy glance.

JOEL (CONT'D)
You know, I'm really disappointed to see how much you guys skimmed on this event. Only one chocolate fountain? I'm slightly disgusted.

VANESSA
(laughing)
Is it obnoxious? Please say no. Please tell me I'm not "Pretentious Wedding Girl."

JOEL
Honestly?

VANESSA
Yeah...

JOEL
No. It works. You pull it off
well. Style points.

VANESSA
(relieved)
Thank you.

JOEL
So when do I get to meet the
Mister?

VANESSA
Whenever I find him. He's a hard
one to keep track of. Last I saw
him he said something about going
to change. Honestly, I think he's
more nervous than I am but he'd
never let it show. That's how Neil
is.

JOEL (CONT'D)
Well, I'm sure you'll keep him
together. Calm him down. That's how
Vanessa is.

VANESSA
Of course.
(pause)

VANESSA (CONT'D)
This is a really sappy vintage
Vanessa thing to say but I'm glad
you're here. I can't even explain
why I wanted you here but I really
did. And I'm glad you made it.

JOEL
Well someone has to be the one who
laughs when you trip walking down
the aisle tomorrow.

Vanessa lightly punches Joel on the arm.

VANESSA
Don't even joke about that. You
know that's my worst nightmare.
I've had this reoccurring dream--

A MALE VOICE sounds over the PA system from the other room and interrupts them.

MALE VOICE

Attention. Would Neil and Vanessa please make their way into the ballroom to say a few words.

VANESSA

Oh shit! I have to find Neil and get in there. Find me later, please. I really want to catch up.

Vanessa turns and breaks into a fast walk towards the ballroom.

JOEL

Vanessa!

She stops and turns around.

JOEL (CONT'D)

You know what, fuck it. Let it go to your head. You look amazing.

She smiles and it hard to tell from this distance but she appears to blush a little.

VANESSA

Thanks.

Vanessa disappears around the corner.

INT. MEN'S BATHROOM-NIGHT

Joel breezes through the door and takes a spot near the middle of a long row of urinals and looks at himself in the mirror, adjusting his tie with his free hand.

From a closed stall behind him he hears a MAN talking on a cell phone in a hurried, hushed tone.

MAN ON PHONE

I'm not bluffing. Not at all. I'm dead serious. In fact, I think you're the one bluffing.

(MORE)

MAN ON PHONE (CONT'D)

Well, look this thing is starting in like two minutes, so I've to got to run. But I'll call you in a couple of hours and we'll see just who's bluffing.

The man steps out of the stall and slides his phone into his pocket. He is clad in a crisp, grey suit, perfectly tailored with french cuffs and gold cuff links peaking out from the sleeves. His sandy brown hair is perfectly parted to one side. Around his neck is a maroon tie, with peacocks.

He freezes when he sees Joel, but Joel, strictly following male bathroom etiquette, does not look up to examine him in the mirror. He keeps his eyes down and focused on his business.

The man slowly walks to the sink, where he begins to wash his hands, periodically glancing at Joel.

Joel finishes, flushes, and zips up. He saddles up to the sink next to the man, still not making eye contact.

Finally as he is washing his hands, Joel looks up. The gazes of the two men meeting in the mirror. They notice the ties.

JOEL AND MAN

(simultaneously)

Nice tie.

JOEL AND MAN (CONT'D)

(simultaneously)

Thanks.

Awkward laughter

MAN ON PHONE

That was my buddy on the phone. Just then. We got this bet going. Just a stupid bet...

JOEL

(puzzled)

...yeah...

They both reach for the hand towels at the same time. Joel pulls his hand back and let's the man go first. On the man's wrist a thick, gold Rolex is noticeable.

The man hastily dries his hands and scurries for the door.

MAN ON PHONE

Good call with the tie. Nice to meet you.

And with that, he is out the door.

JOEL

(to himself)

Did we meet?

Joel stares ahead into the mirror.

INT. RECEPTION HALL-NIGHT

The room seems much more crowded now than it did just moments earlier when Joel went to the bathroom. Almost everyone is seated now.

Joel briskly walks over to the table where Wes and Meredith have now been joined by two other couples. He doesn't acknowledge the other people.

JOEL

I saw her. And she looks amazing. I'm talking like "how the hell did I ever get that" amazing. Oh, and some strange guy in the bathroom had my tie on. It was the weirdest-

WES

(interrupting)

Settle down and take a seat, champ. It's showtime.

Wes motions to the front of the room where a gray haired couple stand. The man, Neil's father, holds a microphone.

Joel sits.

MR. REID

I'm so glad you all could join us this evening. Everyone please enjoy yourselves. I'm not much for speeches so let me just get this show on the road and bring out the people we're all here for.

(MORE)

MR. REID (CONT'D)

The best son, and the best soon to be daughter-in-law an old man like me could ask for. Neil and Vanessa.

The crowd APPLAUDS, except for Joel, who stares blankly ahead. Wes nudges him and he joins in the applause.

Vanessa makes her way to the stage, followed closely behind by NEIL, who happens to be the guy from the bathroom.

Joel looks surprised.

WES

Tie looks good on him.

Vanessa takes the microphone and begins to speak.

VANESSA

First off, thanks to all of you here tonight. Thank you too my soon to be in-laws, Mr. and Mrs. Reid for setting all of this up. It's beautiful. And lastly, thank you to Neil.

She grabs his hand.

VANESSA (CONT'D)

It seems like it was only yesterday that we had our first night together at that wine tasting.

Joel rolls his eyes.

VANESSA (CONT'D)

But these last two years have been the best of my life. Before we met, I was beginning to think guys like you didn't exist.

Suddenly, a few eyes at the table shoot towards Joel, who looks down sheepishly.

VANESSA (CONT'D)

But you proved me wrong, and here we are.

Vanessa starts to cry.

VANESSA (CONT'D)
I'm so lucky and I love you and I
can't wait for tommorrow.

They kiss. The crowd "awwws"

Neil takes the microphone.

NEIL
She's a tough act to follow, huh?
Give it up for my beautiful fiance
Vanessa.

More APPLAUSE

NEIL (CONT'D)
You know, we might have to
reconsider if you're going to keep
upstaging me like this for the rest
of our lives. You're going to give
me a complex.

LAUGHTER. The crowd now rests comfortably in the palm of
Neil's hand. His cadence on stage is a mixture of politician
and stand-up comic.

NEIL (CONT'D)
I'm only kidding, of course. You
say you're the lucky one, but I beg
to differ. The first time I met
you, I knew. Knew you probably
wouldn't even give me the time of
day. Knew that there's no way a
guy like me could end up with a guy
like you. But after a few Pinots,
a few Chardonnays, I found the
courage to go talk to you. I don't
even remember what I said, I was so
nervous. But I guess it worked. And
here we are.

Neil starts to choke up.

NEIL (CONT'D)
Wow, I'm never going to hear the
end of this.

LAUGHTER

NEIL (CONT'D)

I wake up everyday with a life
that's way better than a guy like
me probably deserves. And I firmly
believe it's only going to get
better. I love you.

They kiss again and the crowd APPLAUDS. Misty eyes can be
seen around the room. While everyone soaks up the sentiment,
Joel looks on as if he's waiting to get a root canal.

NEIL (CONT'D)

Now let's eat!

WES

(To Joel)

He's good.

JOEL

Shut up.

WES

He kind of looks like a Kennedy up
there.

Irritated, Joel doesn't respond.

WES (CONT'D)

Clintonian charisma.

Silently, Joel stands and walks off.

INT. RECEPTION HALL BAR--NIGHT

Joel stands near the bar, mixed drink in hand. Dinner has
already been served and everyone is now mingling around,
grabbing dessert, coffee, and cocktails.

KIM (28) a busty brunette with too much makeup and too little
dress stands facing him. She talks incredibly fast while
Joel half-listens.

KIM

...And he hated my dog. Can you believe that? And I told him that was just unacceptable and that any guy who didn't love Pollyanna didn't really love me. So, now I'm with Jason. He's right over there.

Kim points to a gangly looking guy in a navy blazer who is sitting by himself, looking absolutely miserable.

KIM (CONT'D)

He's getting his pilot's license. He's going to fly me to Nantucket one day! How cool is that? And he's great. And he's wonderful. And he just loves Pollyanna and she loves him. I'm so happy! Yay!

She does a little CLAP to show her excitement,

JOEL

It sounds like the world is your oyster, Kim.

KIM

Yeah, I guess so. So, that pretty much covers my last two years. What's up with you? Why are you here?

JOEL

Whoa, okay. Which question should I answer? I'll start with the appropriate one. I'm doing well, teaching now. And I'm here because I was invited and I wanted to support Vanessa. "Yay!"

He mocks Kim and does the little clap.

KIM

Oh. Weird. Well, I'm going to go sit with Jason. I hope he's having fun.

Jason is still sitting by himself, intensely picking at the label on his beer bottle. Kim walks away.

JOEL
(sarcastically)
Let's do this again soon.

Vanessa walks up behind Joel but he doesn't see her yet.

VANESSA
(mocking)
"Oh my God, he is so amazing and my
little wittle Pollyanna just wuvs
him so much!"

Joel turns to her, smiling.

JOEL
Please tell me how in the hell she
made the cut for this thing?

VANESSA
She was my roommate for like two
years. I couldn't not invite her.
I mean, even you made the cut.

JOEL
Harsh words, Dean. You still know
how to hurl the daggers.

VANESSA
One of many talents, but you know
that. Let's go sit down, I don't
think I've done that yet.

INT. RECEPTION HALL--NIGHT

Joel and Vanessa sit at table tucked in the corner of the
reception hall. Vanessa's shoes rest in her lap.

VANESSA
So they answer their cell phones in
class?!

JOEL
Yeah, that's pretty common. The
polite ones just text. I don't
know what to do. I can't get them
to listen. It's like, do I snap
and make an example out of one
them?

(MORE)

JOEL (CONT'D)
You know, like the new guy in
prison does so everyone respects
him?

VANESSA
(laughing)
Well, I'm sure you're doing the
best you can.

JOEL
No. I'm not. It's just hard for
me to care. I just don't know if
this is what I should be doing. I
feel like there has to be something
more. I mean, there has to be
something more. I'm thinking of
just saying "fuck it" and trying
something else.

VANESSA
Decisiveness never really was your
strong suit.

JOEL
Wow, this conversation seems to be
veering into very familiar
territory for us.

VANESSA
I didn't mean to--

JOEL
But you're right.

Joel finishes off the rest of his drink.

JOEL (CONT'D)
I realize my indecisiveness is a
big contributor as to why we're all
here this weekend.

Vanessa looks a little taken aback by the comment.

Quietly, Neil sneaks up behind Joel.

NEIL
So, I leave you alone for ten
minutes and you shack up with your
ex-boyfriend.

(MORE)

NEIL (CONT'D)
I'm afraid this is over before it's
gotten started, my dear.

Joel quickly stands and turns to Neil, unsure how to react.

JOEL
We're just catching up. I'm
keeping the lady company while she
rests those feet. They're
revolting against those heels.

Neil shakes his head and feigns starting to walk off.

NEIL
No. I'm sorry. We had a good
ride. Take care of her.

Vanessa gets up and scurries over to him.

VANESSA
Come here, you.

She grabs him and he turns around smiling. They kiss.

NEIL
All right. Fine. I believe you.

They are all three standing now.

VANESSA
Well now that the ice is nice and
broken, I guess it's formal
introduction time. Joel, this is
my fiance, Neil.

Joel extends a hand and Neil reaches out and shakes it.

NEIL
Talk about tough acts to follow.
This one thinks mighty highly of
you. It's great to finally meet
you.

Neil releases Joel.

JOEL

All lies. Except for the negative stuff, that's probably true. And technically, we did already meet. Sort of. In the bathroom?

Neil plays dumb for a second.

NEIL

Oh right. Yeah. We're tie twins.

They both hold their ties out.

VANESSA

Wow. I didn't even notice that. That is...wow. A strange coincidence.

NEIL

Well, we both obviously have great taste.

He wraps his arm around Vanessa's waist.

NEIL

Right, Joel?

In a quick DAYDREAM, Joel quickly reaches down and picks up a beer bottle from the table and smashes it over Neil's head. Suddenly, Joel snaps back to reality to see Neil and Vanessa staring blankly at him.

NEIL (CONT'D)

Right?

JOEL

(refocusing)

Right. Absolutely.

Neil and Vanessa laugh, Joel awkwardly joins in.

VANESSA

(to Neil)

You're not getting too drunk are you? I'm going to need you firing on all cylinders tomorrow.

NEIL

Do not worry. I've told the boys that I am on a strict three to five beer limit tonight. Dan is going to keep track.

VANESSA

Oh I feel so much better now. So, who's going to keep track when he passes out and pisses his pants?

NEIL

Baby, I've told you, he's over that now. Plus we're responsible adults. We know that we all need to be in tip-top shape.

VANESSA

That's what I like to hear.

She kisses him on the cheek. Meanwhile, Joel has been standing and observing awkwardly.

VANESSA (CONT'D)

Hey! Joel, you should go out with them. It would be fun for you. I mean, you don't have any responsibilities tomorrow. I don't care how drunk you get.

JOEL

Oh! No, you know I'm kind of tired. Woke up early and all that. So--

VANESSA

Oh, come on! Neil, tell him to go and have fun with you boys.

NEIL

(hesitantly)

Yeah, Joel. We're going to the bar just down the road. A few celebratory beers. It'll be...fun.

JOEL

I really shouldn't-

VANESSA

Yeah, you're right. I'm sure sleeping on a cot in a room with Wes and Meredith is much more appealing.

NEIL

Vanessa, don't pressure the man. Let him do what he wants.

JOEL

Maybe you're right. I'll go for a drink or two. A nice nightcap. But I do have a luxury cot with my name on it that I will have to get back to. No excuses.

NEIL

Great. That's great, man. We're all going to meet in the front lobby in about a half an hour. See you there. I'm going to be passing some of those shots that come to me your way. Get prepared!

JOEL

I'll see what I can do.

NEIL

All right. I'm going to go rally the troops.

He kisses Vanessa again.

NEIL (CONT'D)

30 minutes.

JOEL

I'm counting the seconds.

Neil rushes away.

VANESSA

Thank you.

JOEL

Thanks for what?

VANESSA

Agreeing to go.

Vanessa steps back into her shoes and starts to walk off. Joel follows her through the reception hall where the crowd has started to thin.

JOEL

Wait. Why do you want me to go so badly?

VANESSA

Because his friends are going to try and get him wasted and I need someone to be there to make sure that doesn't happen.

On the walk, a well-wisher reaches out to Vanessa and congratulates her with a short hug. Joel remains close behind as she starts to walk again.

JOEL

Hold on just a second. You want me to play narc for you? On your fiancee? On the eve of your wedding?

VANESSA

It can be your wedding gift. I know you haven't bought one yet.

JOEL

I'd rather just buy you a panini press. How about you just trust him and hope for the best?

Vanessa stops moving and faces Joel.

VANESSA

Because his friends do that.

She motions to two men, both with jackets off and ties loosened, leaned back with beer bottles fully tilted to their mouths. They appear to be having a chugging contest.

VANESSA (CONT'D)

They're groomsmen. They've been drinking since they got here yesterday.

(MORE)

VANESSA (CONT'D)

They will think it's funny to get him as drunk as possible so he's as miserable as possible tomorrow. That's a fun Friday night to them.

JOEL

Well as much as I'd like to get mono and take a suck off of the ol' liquor luge, I'm going to have to pass on college night.

VANESSA

Fine. I'm just going to tell him he can't go then.

JOEL

You can't do that.

VANESSA

Why not?

JOEL

Because you will totally emasculate him in the eyes of his friends--you know, like you emasculated me for years. Plus, you'll set a bad tone.

VANESSA

You know what would set an even worse tone? Neil dry heaving his way through our vows. I'll see you tomorrow. I have to find my fiance and go "emasculate" him.

She walks off.

JOEL

I'll go!

She smiles warmly at Joel and embraces him.

JOEL (CONT'D)

For a little while.

VANESSA

Thank you so much.

JOEL
But you just kissed that panini
press goodbye.

EXT. PARKING LOT--NIGHT

Joel and Neil stand, waiting. Awkward silence hangs over them. Then there is a sudden COMMOTION: various obscenities mixed with laughter and assorted hollering as his four groomsmen come rounding the corner. They are all dressed essentially the same--white shirts with sleeves rolled up, khaki slacks, ties loosened to a ridiculous level. Amazingly, they walk in formation, four wide, each one a little shorter than the guy next to him. BEN (27), the short, chubby one is leading the charge. It appears as if his only volume is loud.

BEN
(shouting)
Who's ready to take some fucking
shots?! Round of shotskis on this
guy right here!

The tallest guy breaks a beer bottle on the sidewalk. They CHEER.

They spot Neil and Joel. CHIP (27), the tallest one, breaks from the crowd and slowly approaches Neil.

Silently, he crouches down and pulls Neil's pant leg up and examines his shoes.

Joel looks on, puzzled.

CHIP
What kind of shoes are those?

NEIL
They're Cole Haan. Actually--

CHIP
Wrong answer, amigo! Those are
drinking shoes and you got 'em on!

DAN (27), a thin, freckly redhead, proceeds to grab Neil in a headlock and give him a noogie.

POTTER (27), imposing and thick-bearded, wordlessly produces an airplane bottle of Wild Turkey from his pocket and down downs it in a gulp. Looking on, Joel cringes. Potter spikes the bottle on the sidewalk and it shatters. The gang CHEERS. Chip drapes an arm over Neil and Dan's shoulders.

CHIP (CONT'D)

There was some talent in there. If the turnout at the reception is anything like tonight then I am dragging something back to my room. Am I right?

DAN

You are correct, sir!

CHIP

Potter--'plane me!

Potter produces another airplane bottle from his pocket, and tosses it to Chip. He then pulls out one for himself. Once again, both down the contents in a gulp without flinching and spike them on the pavement.

NEIL

Guys, bring it down a couple notches.

DAN

No such thing, my man. Enough pussyfooting around, we doing this or what?

(to Neil)

You ready for what's about to be unleashed?

BEN

He's not. I don't think he is. He can't--

Out of nowhere, their attention turns to Joel, who had been all but invisible to them until now.

BEN (CONT'D)

Who's this guy?

NEIL

This is Joel.

Joel waves timidly and mouths a "hi."

CHIP

Who the hell is Joel. He a cousin
or something?

NEIL

No. Joel is actually a friend of
Vanessa's. An ex-boyfriend of
Vanessa.

The gang shoots each other puzzled glances.

BEN

You serious? He serious?

JOEL

Oddly enough, he is.

DAN

And is he coming drinking?

JOEL

I am.

BEN

Hey, I can get on board with that.

Potter, who still hasn't said a word, downs another airplane
bottle.

NEIL

Well, actually. I was just getting
ready to tell Joel the bad news.
The limo guy can't come get us
tonight so that means we're going
to have to take Potter's car and
it's kind of small and--

BEN

Problem solved my man. Say no
more.

Ben produces keys from his pocket and jingles them in front
of Neil's face.

BEN (CONT'D)

Someone got his license back last week and the "Boss Hog" is back in business!

JOEL

Well, I don't want to impose. If you can't fit--

BEN

Can't fit?

Ben moves close to Joel and drapes an arm over his shoulder.

BEN (CONT'D)

I once fit twelve grown men in the cab of this truck to get to a late night. And we made it. We didn't make it home, I slept on a park bench that night. But we damn sure made it there.

JOEL

You must be proud. That's quite a feat.

BEN

You're damn right it is. So what do you say we go and send this man into oblivion, I mean marriage, properly.

JOEL

Let's go.

Joel holds up his foot.

JOEL (CONT'D)

Got my shoes...

The gang begins to WHOOP and HOLLER again.

BEN

It's settled. The ex is coming along!

Without prompt, the group charges towards Neil and lifts him up and carries him toward the truck. Joel lingers behind and watches, only to follow.

INT. BEN'S TRUCK--NIGHT

The inside of the "Boss Hog", a gigantic black Ford F-150, is cavernous. Neil rides shotgun while Joel is crammed in the back between POTTER, DAN, and CHIP.

BEN

What are you hens squawking about back there?

JOEL

Oh, you know, Ben. The usual. Jobs, the daily grind.

BEN

I hear ya. I'm looking to get back into that myself. Hit a little rough patch since my last "vehicular unplesantry." But that's behind me now. I'm almost out of the parents' basement and ready to roll. But enough about me, let's talk about Mr. Mousey over here. Why the fuck are you so quiet? Is it because your getting married tomorrow, the prospect of some tits jiggling in front you doesn't excite you anymore?

NEIL

Just soaking it all in, Benny. This is a once in a lifetime night.

BEN

One woman. The legend is calling it quits, ladies and germs.

NEIL

Greener pastures, boys. Greener pastures.

BEN

You did have quite a run, my friend.

JOEL

Wait. We're going to a strip club?

POTTER

What'd you think we were going to a fucking tea party?

NEIL

Jesus, Ben. I thought we were just going to go have a few drinks or something. We went over this. Didn't we get this out of our system at the bachelor party?

BEN

You may have gotten it out of your system but I sure as hell didn't. And this might be your last chance for, oh, I don't know, ever. So you better take advantage of it.

JOEL

Listen, Ben. I don't mean to burst your bubble or anything but I don't think there's any strip clubs around here. This area's a bit on the conservative side.

BEN

Well, it's not exactly "around here." It's kind of on the outskirts.

EXT. .357'S STRIP CLUB--NIGHT

The truck pulls up in front of a strip joint in the middle of nowhere. The sign, in the shape of a gun, reads ".357'S" and underneath it reads "Girls. Drinks. Buffet."

Joel is the last out of the truck. He takes a look around. A few pick-up trucks and beat-up sedans litter the unpaved parking lot.

Ben, Chip, Dan, and Potter charge their way towards the door.

NEIL

Are we seriously going in here?

JOEL
(enjoying Neil's distress)
It's your night, man. I'm just
going to have to remember to
schedule a tetanus shot for Monday.
(seeing Neil is
conflicted)
Are you all right?

NEIL
I'm fine, Joel. Having one of those
"life moments," you know. And no,
I'm not too excited about this fine
establishment. But they want to
show me a good time. It means
something to them to do this, so
I'm just going to go with it.
Can't be that bad.

INT. .357's STRIP CLUB--NIGHT

It is that bad. Joel and Neil step through the door and into a haze of cigarette smoke. In the middle of the room is the stage. A few gruff locals are seated around the stage. In the corner, a large middle-aged man fills up a plate the buffet. On the other side is an area with tables and chairs where a scattered few patrons "converse" with the dancers.

Ben and company are already posted up at the center of the stage, beers in hand. Joel and Neil approach.

BEN
This is bullshit, man. This place
is only topless.

JOEL
Well, off first impressions, I
think I'm okay with that.

BEN
Says you. Well, let's get the man
of the hour front and center.

After some futile protests, Neil takes a seat the center of the stage.

NEIL
So, where are the girls?

Just then, a bikini-clad woman with bleached blonde hair emerges from the back. Before she makes her way onto the stage she stops at the jukebox, feeds it three quarters, and then takes to the stage. "Girls Girls Girls" begins to blast and she starts her gyrations.

JOEL
(To Neil)
Did she just--

NEIL
Yes she did.

The dancer moves her way over to the group. Ben licks a five dollar bill and sticks on Neil's forehead. The dancer bends over, squeezes her breasts together and removes the bill from Neil's forehead. The gang goes wild while Joel sips his beer, expressionless.

Later. The group has moved over to a table. Empty beer bottles cover the table top.

Ben, Neil, and, for some reason, Joel each has a DANCER on his lap. Looks-wise, the girls range from "not that bad" to "she's been doing this awhile."

A dark complected dancer named DAKOTA sits on Ben's lap. DANI, the dancer on Joel's lap is the girl from earlier. She talks to Joel.

DANI
...so once I finish the associates degree I figure it won't be too hard to get a degree and move right on to law school.

JOEL
Absolutely not. Plenty of lawyers get their start just like this.

DANI
Really? You're smart.

JOEL
I know! I mean, obviously. I ended up here. Tonight. With these guys.

DAKOTA

So, boys. What say we move this party on into the back room?

BEN

She's lovely. And a mind reader. I might have to take this one home.

The girls stand and start to lead the guys by the hand.

JOEL

You know, I'm going to sit this one out for right now. There's just not enough to go around, so, I'll take this one for the team. Thank me later, boys.

BEN

Suit yourself. Neil, round two for you, right now. No excuses.

NEIL

No excuse from this guy. I am going to take a bit of a breather, though.

BEN

You don't smell enough like cocoa butter and cigarettes yet. No offense, ladies.

NEIL

I'm going to hang back for a few. But you boys warm them up for me. Because for my grand single man finale, I want a nice dance with all three of them.

BEN

You're a genius. You heard the man, ladies. Let's go warm up.

They head off to the back, leaving Neil and Joel at the table.

JOEL

They seemed like nice enough girls.

NEIL

Yeah, I especially loved the tattoo on your girl. That's probably the first time I've seen a naked lady tattoo on an actual naked lady.

JOEL

Not as nice as the cesarean scar on yours, but close. That looked fresh.

For the first time in the entire evening, the awkwardness between the two men has faded and the mood has lightened. They sip their beers.

NEIL

I can't believe I'm here.

JOEL

You can't believe you're here? You know how many times I've said that to myself in the last ten or so hours?

Neil's eyes trail a dancer in fishnets walking across the floor, his head turns to follow her.

NEIL

I'll be back in a few

He walks off, leaving Joel alone at the table.

CARLA, a pale, raven-haired dancer in a leather bra and thong approaches the table. She is covered in tattoos yet doesn't look to be much over eighteen. She speaks in a soft, Southern lilt.

CARLA

You look sad. Or lonely. Or both.

JOEL

Actually, one part both of those things, two parts bitter and one half confused.

CARLA

Quite a mixture. Want a dance?

JOEL
Uncharacteristically enough, I
would. But I only have--

Looks in his wallet.

JOEL (CONT'D)
Five dollars. And a buy one get one
coupon from Qdoba. So a dance
doesn't appear to be in the cards.

CARLA
Is that card valid for any item?

Joel studies the card.

JOEL
Yes it is.

CARLA
Tell ya what. Throw the card in
with the five and you can stare at
my tits while we chat.

JOEL
Sounds like a steal.

INT. .357'S STRIP CLUB--NIGHT

Minutes have passed. Topless, Carla sits across from Joel,
her elbow on the table, her head resting in her palm. Joel
is talking.

JOEL
...it's not that I refused to get
married, it's just that I didn't
want to do anything drastic until I
got my shit together, you know? It
was for the best at the time. And
now, here I am, two years later,
paying you to listen and show me
your tits while her fiance gets a
lap dance I paid for. My life is
awesome.

She glances at a clock on the far wall.

CARLA

Time's up, sweetie. I'm on deck.
Word of advice--don't think so
much.

JOEL

I've heard that before.

He hands her the money and the coupon.

JOEL (CONT'D)

You can't miss with the chicken
burrito.

CARLA

Thanks. Say, you don't happen to
have any quarters would you?

JOEL

Sorry.

She walks off.

Joel stands and makes his way towards the men's room.
Halfway there he stops and looks around. He realizes that he
doesn't see anyone familiar.

He walks towards the black curtain and starts to walk through
it but a thick hand grabs his shoulder. Joel turns around to
see a cartoonishly bulky BOUNCER with a greasy ponytail.

BOUNCER

Hey buddy, a dancer needs to
accompany you back there and you
gotta pay in advance.

JOEL

Yeah, I just want to look.

BOUNCER

No shit. What do you think the
money's for, dumbass?

JOEL

No, I'm trying to find my fr--the
guys I came with. Did you see four
guys, all dressed the same. One
had this same tie on?

BOUNCER

The three left awhile ago. Your
tie buddy walked out about five
minutes ago.

EXT. .357's STRIP CLUB--NIGHT

Joel bounds out the door. He surveys the parking lot and
sees an empty space where Ben's truck sat only moments
before.

He walks to one side of the building and glances around.

Nothing.

JOEL

(To himself)

Where'd they go?

Bewildered, he turns around and when he does so he almost
runs into Neil who is rounding the corner.

JOEL (CONT'D)

What the hell, man? What happened
to your friends?

NEIL

What do you mean?

JOEL

What do I mean? Look around, the
truck's gone.

NEIL

(looking around)

No! No, not tonight, Ben. Any
night but tonight.

JOEL

Did they just leave us? Because
that would be really shitty.

NEIL

Yeah. They did. Ben has this
thing. He's done it since college.
It's an old fraternity prank.

JOEL

Cute. Well how long does this go on?

NEIL

It kind of varies.

JOEL

Well, call him. He's not exactly smooth with his timing. Get him back here so we can get back and go to bed. I kind of recall the fact that there's a little something going on tomorrow.

NEIL

Really? I'd forgotten. Thanks for reminding me.

Joel starts to speak, to lay the situation out to Neil, but thinks better of it.

JOEL

Make the call, Neil. I'll try Wes and maybe if we combine our powers we can actually get out of here.

NEIL

Whatever.

Neil walks off to the left and Joel to the right. Joel dials Wes' cell phone.

INT. HOTEL ROOM--NIGHT

Wes is asleep, propped up against the headboard of the bed, on top of the covers, fully clothed. In one hand is one of the mini-wine bottles, in the other is the remote control. The television is on. Lying horizontally on her stomach, at his feet, half on the bed and half off, is Meredith. A trash can rests on the floor beneath her head.

The cell phone on the table vibrates but neither one of them stirs.

EXT. .357'S STRIP CLUB--NIGHT

JOEL
(to himself)
Goddammit, Wes. Of all the times
to not answer.

Frustrated, Joel snaps his phone shut and walks toward Neil.

JOEL (CONT'D)
Nothing.

NEIL
Same here. Fuckhead turned his
phone off.

JOEL
Of course. Well, call the other
guys.

NEIL
Already did. They're not
answering.

JOEL
What the hell is wrong with your
friends?

NEIL
Immaturity, mommy issues, it's
laundry list. Look, dial 411 and
ask for a cab company. I'll go
inside and ask the bouncer if he
can get us one.

Joel looks at his phone.

JOEL
Lovely. I'm not getting a signal
now. Let me use yours.

Neil tosses Joel the phone and walks inside. Joel begins to
dial on Neil's phone when it BEEPS.

The name on the caller ID displays a text message from "Julia" Joel stares at it for a few beats, then guiltily clicks to read the message.

The message simply reads: "Room 122. ETA?"

Neil approaches and Joel quickly shuts the phone.

Neil
Any luck?

Joel
Nope. None at all. No answer.
You?

NEIL
No. According to the cab dispatcher, it's prom night for like three schools around here. Apparently MADD or the PTA or somebody contracts out all the cabs so the kids don't drive drunk. So it could be awhile. We're talking hours.

JOEL
How nice.

NEIL
But, I got in touch with our limo guy Jerry and he is going to make an exception. And he should, as much as we're paying this guy, he should drive us to Paris.

JOEL
You can't drive to Paris.

NEIL
It was an expression, Joel.

Joel doesn't respond; he's still clutching Neil's phone.

NEIL (CONT'D)
So can I have my phone?

Joel hands him the phone and Neil walks off to make the call, Joel watching him the whole time.

EXT. ROADSIDE--NIGHT

The two men walk on the side of a dark highway. The only light coming from the moon and the fleeting headlights of the sporadically passing cars.

NEIL

He said the station that he'll pick us up at is only about two miles from here. That's like a thirty minute walk, tops.

JOEL

Why couldn't he pick us up at the strip club?

NEIL

Something about offending his other passengers.

JOEL

Other passengers? So are we just going to hijack someone else's limo?

NEIL

I hope so.

Silence for a few paces.

NEIL (CONT'D)

How'd you meet her? I've never heard this story.

JOEL

Are we really having this conversation?

NEIL

Fine. Nice meeting you, Joel. Thanks for the lap dance.

They trudge ahead silently for a few paces, Joel lagging behind Neil, who has now picked up his pace.

JOEL

We were in this poetry workshop, in college. She was just taking it to burn off an elective, but I was really into it.

Neil slows down, Joel catches up.

JOEL (CONT'D)

I was going through this mopey,
faux-tortured artist phase--

NEIL

Is that about over?

JOEL

(ignoring him)

I wasn't like wearing a beret or
anything, but I did have a goatee
for a little while and wore horn-
rimmed glasses for like a week.
Anyway, I was writing this shitty
poetry. Like Bukowski, only really
terrible and without the sex. I
thought it was great, but clearly
it sucked. And no one told me.
Everyone was really polite about
it. Except for Vanessa. Here was
this beautiful, sharp girl who flat
out told me I sucked.

NEIL

That's our girl.

JOEL

She always sat right next to me and
after a whole semester I finally
asked her out on the last day of
class. I shaved my goatee and
stopped writing bad poetry and we
were together for four years.
Until--

(pause)

Well, I'm sure you've heard that
story.

NEIL

Yeah. I did. Right off the bat.

JOEL

She put it right out there, huh?
What, she lay it out at the now-
legendary wine tasting?

NEIL

Well, we didn't actually meet at the wine tasting. That was our first date. Officially.

JOEL

So, why'd you say that in your toast?

NEIL

It's just a technicality. Not important.

JOEL

Technicality?

NEIL

The first time I met her was at a party the weekend after you'd broken up. I stepped outside and saw this gorgeous girl sitting by herself. She was drunk. And crying. She was going through the inevitable newly-single, liberated woman thing, and we talked. I held her hair back while she puked. And well, she got a little too single and a little too... liberated. So, you know, not exactly a G-rated story.

Joel stops walking.

JOEL

You gotta be shitting me? Why did you tell me this?!

NEIL

You asked. Does it really matter now?

JOEL

Yes, it matters to me!

NEIL

But it worked out!

JOEL

Do you know how long before I even attempted to sleep with someone else after the break-up?

NEIL

I'm gonna go out on a limb and say it hasn't happened yet.

JOEL

Eight months, smart ass.

NEIL

Well that's just sad.

Joel wordlessly starts walking again breezing past Neil.

NEIL (CONT'D)

Yeah, imagine that, permanent man-boy, Joel Greer wallowing in pity and drowning in a sea of negativity! Feeling sorry for himself. You're exactly like she said you were.

JOEL

Fuck you. And fuck her too. And you're not welcome for the lap dance. I hope you caught some...stripper disease.

Just then a dented, black Oldsmobile drives by and HONKS, a male voice SHOUTS unintelligible insults at them.

JOEL (CONT'D)

And fuck you too! Asshole!

Suddenly, maybe 50 yards down the road the car hits the breaks and stops. The driver throws it in reverse and slowly begins to back up.

Neil merely watches in stunted disbelief while Joel, clearly now at his breaking point begins to walk towards the car as it backs up, arms flailing.

JOEL (CONT'D)

That's right! This guy right here, fucked my ex-girlfriend on the night he met her.

(MORE)

JOEL (CONT'D)

The weekend after we broke up. And he's marrying her tomorrow! And I just bought him a lap dance.

A head can be seen sticking out of the driver's window. The man has bushy hair and a full beard. From the looks of him, odds are he's headed toward .357's and he has no qualms about making a detour and kicking both Joel and Neil's asses on the roadside.

NEIL

What the fuck are you doing, Joel?

JOEL

(shouting toward car)

Her name's Vanessa Dean and she's staying at her parents' house on Downey Lane tonight. Just go over there, feed her some Cosmos, get her talking about how much I suck and maybe she'll sleep with you too!

The car continues to back up and is now only ten or so feet from them. The moonlight reveals a bald head sticking out of the passenger window.

NEIL

(to himself)

Holy shit. We're going to die.

Joel stops and looks back at Neil.

JOEL

Okay, so if you know so much, where's her favorite place to be kissed?

NEIL

What?! I think we should run!

JOEL

Well, I think that you should--

Joel looks toward the Oldsmobile. Not one, but two burly men, step out of the car and walk to the trunk. From it, one produces what appears to be a tire iron while the other pulls out a baseball bat.

JOEL (CONT'D)

Running works.

They take off into the moonlit woods, swatting branches and hopping over stumps along the way.

NEIL

What the were you thinking?!

JOEL

I wasn't! Where are we going?

NEIL

I don't know! I'm just running!

JOEL

Oh shit. I think I heard a dog!
You think they sent a dog after us?
Those guys looked like the type
that would have dogs. Mean, nasty,
rip out your throat dogs! We're
going to die. I'm so sorry, man.

NEIL

Shut up and run.

EXT. WOODS--NIGHT

Joel and Neil, both out of breath, stand at the edge of a large stream. It is roughly fifteen feet wide and lengthwise runs for an indeterminable amount.

JOEL

Should we just try and go around
it?

NEIL

I don't know. These things can run
for miles.

JOEL

Well, let's find out--

Joel starts to walk off but Neil stops him.

NEIL

No. If we try go around it we'll get off course.

JOEL

We don't have a course! It's bound to lead somewhere, let's just follow it.

NEIL

In which direction?

Joel looks both ways and points to his left.

JOEL

That one.

NEIL

No. We'll just cross it and keeping going straight. I know Route 5, runs perpendicular to the road we were just on. It's probably less than a mile from here. These things aren't ever that deep.

JOEL

All right. Let's cross then.

Both of them just stand there, waiting for the other to cross.

NEIL

Go ahead. Cross.

JOEL

Oh, no. After you, Magellan.

NEIL

Nope. This is your fault. You're going first.

JOEL

Fine.

Joel walks a little to his left. In the water, he spots a mass of logs, leaves, and sticks. Slowly, he steps onto it. His foot barely submerges.

JOEL (CONT'D)
This is actually pretty solid.

He takes a few more steps, tiptoeing.

JOEL (CONT'D)
It's like a bridge.

He reaches the other side.

JOEL (CONT'D)
Easy.

A loud SLAP is heard and something SPLASHES in the water.

NEIL
What was that?

JOEL
I don't know. Probably just a fish.

NEIL
Loud fish.

JOEL
Just come on.

Neil hesitantly sets foot on the mass, holding his arms out for balance.

NEIL
My shoes are getting ruined.

He tiptoes a few more steps, halfway there.

JOEL
Sorry to hear that. You're almost there.

NEIL
This doesn't feel secure.

JOEL
It's fine. Just--

A quick series of CRACKING sounds and the logjam gives way underneath Neil. He falls straight through, winding up waist deep in water and debris. He flails around wildly.

NEIL
Oh shit! My foot's stuck!

JOEL
Well pull it out!

NEIL
I can't. Help me!

Joel begins to make his way into the water. Suddenly, more SLAPPING and SPLASHING, this time, much closer.

NEIL (CONT'D)
Something's brushing against my side!

JOEL
It's just a branch. Here, grab my hand.

Joel reaches out.

NEIL
There it goes again. It's moving!

More SPLASHES. Suddenly, a beaver emerges from the remains of its den and scurries over Neil's shoulder and back into the water. Neil SCREAMS.

NEIL (CONT'D)
(panicked)
Get me the fuck out of here!

JOEL
It's okay. I don't think they bite.

NEIL
Bullshit they don't bite! They chew through trees! Their primary job *is* biting! It's gonna chew through my leg! I'm gonna lose my leg. What if they carry rabies?

Joel wades into the water a little further, reaches down and grabs Neil's hand and pulls.

JOEL
They don't have rabies! I gotcha.

NEIL
How do you know?!

JOEL
I just do! Now, pull up.

The movement causes more of the dam to break apart. More SLAPS. A beaver surfaces between Joel's legs, it's tail slapping his inner thigh as dives below the surfaces. He YELLS.

JOEL (CONT'D)
That was close!

NEIL
My foot's free...and still attached!

Neil trudges his way to dry land as the beavers continue to splash and dive around Joel. Neil reaches out to Joel and helps him to the bank. They lie on the side of the creek and catch their breath.

EXT. WOODS--NIGHT.

The woods are becoming less dense. While Joel looks muddy and soaked, Neil somehow has managed to stay relatively clean, his suit still crisp. Neil walks with a slight limp due to a missing shoe.

JOEL
I can't believe that. I didn't even know they were indigenous to this area. I mean, did you?

NEIL
(coldly)
I don't know, Joel. I'm not exactly up on my woodland creatures.

JOEL
I'm sorry, man. I realize that this is all pretty much my fault.

Neil doesn't dispute him.

JOEL (CONT'D)

So, when we get to civilization, I think it's best to go our separate ways. It's probably for the best. Before I, get us mauled by a bear or something.

They exit the woods and find themselves alongside another highway. Across the street is a gas station.

NEIL

I can't believe this. This is the gas station where Jerry's supposed to pick us up. I hope we didn't miss him.

(looks at his phone)

He would have left a message. I'm gonna run in and clean up.

JOEL

I know I shouldn't ask you for favors but can I use your phone? Please?

Neil tosses Joel the phone and heads into the gas station. Joel begins to dial and as he pushes the "send" button, a call comes through that Joel inadvertently answers. JULIA begins to speak without waiting for a "hello."

JULIA

So, maybe it's female intuition or maybe it's experience, but I can tell when I'm being stood up and this sure feels like one of those times.

Joel stands dumbfounded.

JULIA (CONT'D)

Look, if we're not going to do this then I'm going to need to know soon because I'm not going to sit in this shitbag motel much longer. You're lucky I'm bored and horny. If I don't hear from you in an hour then I'm going to be forced to invite someone else. Neil? I can hear you breathing--

A horn HONKS and a limo slowly approaches. Neil rushes back outside. Startled, Joel ends the call. The driver's side window rolls down and JERRY (50's), a stocky Italian-American man with thick grey hair and moustache sticks his head out.

JERRY

Neil?

NEIL

Hey Jerry.

Jerry looks them up and down.

JERRY

You guys okay?

NEIL

Yeah, we're good.

JERRY

Well get in. Time's money.

Neil looks to Joel, who hasn't moved.

NEIL

Come on. Let's quit while we're ahead.

Hesitantly, Joel walks towards Neil and hands him back the phone. He walks around the side of the limo, opens one of the rear doors and climbs in, expecting Neil to follow. Instead, Neil shuts the door behind Joel and makes his way to the passenger seat.

INT. JERRY'S LIMO-NIGHT

Pastels, all over. Five heavily made-up teenage wannabe celebutantes in varying shades of pink, violet, and green formal dresses are seated all throughout the back of the limo. Their CHATTERING gives way to silence and suspicious glances as Joel plops down facing them.

JOEL

Hi. Prom night, huh?

Silence. More staring.

JOEL (CONT'D)

Nice.

INT. JERRY'S LIMO--NIGHT

The girls aren't minding Joel at all. They gossip and sing along to Rhianna. An endless stream of camera flashes go off as the girls pose for countless kissy-face photos. Joel sits alongside them expressionless and uncomfortable. The two girls closest to Joel, KATIE (17) and CASEY (16), begin to converse at lightning-round speed, with the remaining three joining in.

KATIE

Chad likes you soooo much, Casey.
He couldn't stop smiling at you all night.

CASEY

I know! But then why was he dancing with Ashley?

KATIE

Because you were dancing with Danny, slutbag. Plus, she totally wasn't into it. She told me. Do I look like Hilary Duff when I do my hair this way?

CASEY

Totally. Yeah, I really like Chad too and he's such a good kisser. He has these soft, little baby lips.

KATIE

Then go for it!

CASEY

But I still have a thing for Danny. He's supposed to call me later. I'll so sneak out for him. He has his dad's convertible.

MELISSA

Ew! But last weekend he got a BJ from that skank Chrissy Campbell in the bathroom at Eric Fedder's party.

KATIE

That is a really hot car, though. You should for sure go.

Joel tries his best to block all of this out, but somehow can't resist listening in.

CASEY

I know right! And the whole thing with Chrissy kind of makes me like Danny even more. It's so dirty that it's kind of hot.

DANIELLE

He's like one of those boys from *Laguna Beach*.

KELSY

He is! But Chad's so sweet though.

CASEY

That's the thing. Chad's way too nice. Do you think Chad would get a random BJ in a bathroom at a crowded party? No. He'd just want to make out a little and talk out his feelings. Lamé.

KATIE

Yeah. Who wants that? We're hot bitches. We're rock stars!

CASEY

Rock stars! Whooo! I'm texting Danny.

DANIELLE

Get it girl!

JOEL

Unbelievable.

At first, they don't acknowledge Joel. So he speaks up.

JOEL (CONT'D)

You fucking girls are unreal. Do you hear yourselves?

CASEY

Excuse me?

JOEL

You heard me. Listen to you. Now, my opinion may not mean shit, but it sounds like this Chad fellow is getting a bit of a raw deal. You'd honestly rather have some douche bag whose claim to fame is his father's convertible and his tendency for getting sleazy bathroom head, than a guy who apparently not only has nice, soft lips but his only fault is being too nice? Sounds a little fucked up to me.

KATIE

Whatever. Who asked you, old man?

JOEL

No one. But I'm telling you anyway. Listen, I'll guarantee you that right now, our pal Chad is sitting in the corner at some party, nursing a warm bottle of strawberry Mad Dog and wondering where you are and what you're doing. But in reality, he knows. He knows that you're on your way to ending up in the back of Blowjob Danny's dad's convertible with your legs up over your head and your dignity drifting away in the wind. And that ain't right. And in ten years, Chad's gonna be doing something really great while you and Danny are going to be driving around in that same fucking convertible. And he's still going to be getting head in the bathroom, but believe you me, it won't be from you. But, hey, at least he never wanted to just talk or get to know you and all that silly shit. At least he was never the nice guy, right?

DANIELLE

This guy's nuts. He smells like pond water.

JOEL

Yes. And you are all cruel, vapid, little she-beasts who will grow up to become the types of soul-crushing creatures that turn the Chads of the world into guys who behave like me. Congratulations, Casey. You just turned Chad into me. I hope you're happy.

Stunned silence. Katie rolls down the partition window separating the front of the limo from the back. The backs of Jerry and Neil's heads are visible. Neil is talking on his cell phone.

KATIE

Jerry!

EXT. ROADSIDE--NIGHT

The limo veers to the side of the road near a shopping center. Jerry steps out and opens both the passenger and rear doors and instructs Neil and Joel out.

NEIL

Jerry, we had a deal.

JERRY

Yeah, well your buddy back here ruined that. I'll be there tomorrow but I can't help you anymore tonight. There's a bus stop right over there.

Joel gets out. Before shutting the door he takes one last look into the limo.

JOEL

You all look fat in those dresses.

Neil quickly pulls him away and slams the door as the limo pulls away. They walk over to the covered bus stop.

NEIL

Those were seventeen year old girls and you couldn't ride in the same car as them for fifteen minutes without causing a scene?

JOEL
Who's Julia?

Neil stops cold.

NEIL
People have secrets, Joel.
Necessary evils.

JOEL
Not like Julia. One more time for
old time's sake?

NEIL
That's why they're called secrets.
(pause)
But you're probably going to tell
on me, right? Blow the whistle?
Look like the hero. You really
couldn't have written this any
better--

JOEL
Call her.

NEIL
Right. I'll call Vanessa and--

JOEL
Call Julia and tell her to come
pick you up. And tell her you
can't wait to get her back to that
motel room and...

NEIL
What?

JOEL
Go for it, Neil. Look, you don't
have to explain "indecision" to me;
I know it well. So why should I
ever try and pass judgment on you?
I mean, I will, but it might not be
valid. Do I agree with you're
doing? Hell no. But do I
understand why you feel like you
have to? Hell yeah. Do you think
if Vanessa wanted a last romp in a
motel I'd be here spending this
quality time with you?

(MORE)

JOEL (CONT'D)
I'm just going to walk back. Good luck, Neil.

NEIL
It's a hike.

JOEL
I know. If I get tired, I'll stop for a nap... possibly in the middle of traffic. If Vanessa asks, tell her I never made it out and that I owe you guys a panini press.

NEIL
Well, I'll see you tomorrow, right?

JOEL
No, I don't think so.

Joel starts off down the sidewalk as Neil silently watches.

NEIL
Hey Joel?

Joel stops and turns

JOEL
Yeah?

NEIL
You mean it? You'd do the same thing? If Vanessa--

JOEL
Yeah. I would. But she'd never do that. Not in a million years. You know that.

Joel walks off.

EXT. SIDEWALK--NIGHT.

Joel walks along, looking tired, sad, defeated. A car slows behind him, but he pays no attention to it until it has pulled up right behind him. Joel turns and sees Neil sitting in the passenger's seat. The driver cannot be clearly seen.

NEIL
You're slow.

JOEL
I'm tired.

NEIL
Get in. There aren't any seventeen-year-old girls for you to insult.

JOEL
Neil, I told you--

JULIA (late 20's) leans over Neil and reveals herself to Joel.

JULIA
I don't bite.

Joel studies her for a second, he knows he's seen her somewhere before. Finally, it comes to him: she's the TV newswoman from earlier. She's no longer wearing her power-suit, as she's now clad in a buttoned-down trench coat, which, given the circumstances, it is unlikely that there is much underneath.

JOEL
I know you--

JULIA
No you don't.

JOEL
Well, I've seen you--

JULIA
(sarcastically)
Really?! I have *never* heard that before! How about I sit here in the middle of the road and you stand there and tell me all about it?

NEIL
You coming?

Joel opens the door and gets in the backseat.

INT. JULIA'S CAR--NIGHT

From the back, Joel watches as Julia rubs her hand up Neil's leg. Neil squirms somewhat nervously. Julia whispers something to him that can't quite be heard.

NEIL

It's fine!

JULIA

I want some champagne.

NEIL

I thought you said you had some.

JULIA

Well, I did. Three hours ago. You know, when you were supposed to be there. But then I opened it. And then I drank some and now it's probably flat. So I would like some more.

NEIL

You'll be fine.

Julia steers the car into a shopping center parking lot and proceeds to a 24 hour grocery store. She pulls into a spot close to the door.

JULIA

Now, we're here. So you might as well. Hurry! You've only got ten minutes before they stop selling.

Defeated, Neil starts to get out of the car.

NEIL

(to Joel)

You want to come with me?

JOEL

Not particularly.

NEIL

Fine. You want anything?

JOEL

Cheeseburger Hot Pockets.

NEIL
Seriously?

JOEL
No.

Neil shuts the door and walks toward the store. The car is silent for a few seconds. Vanessa rolls down the window and lights a cigarette.

JOEL (CONT'D)
So, with your profession do you have issues with, like, prisoner mail? I always heard--

JULIA
You're going to rat us out, aren't you?

JOEL
No. As a matter of fact, I'm not.

JULIA
Well...why not?

JOEL
What's the best case scenario? I tell, no one believes me, I get pegged as a crazy, jealous ex, which I haven't exactly given much evidence to the contrary. I look like an asshole and am forever known to roughly a couple hundred people as the sad loser who tried to ruin Vanessa's wedding. Or they do believe me and I cause an even bigger disruption and in the process ruin multiple lives, waste tens of thousands of dollars, and cause Vanessa to develop the kind of trust issues that shrinks only dream about seeing walk through their doors. Who exactly wins there?

JULIA
If I were in your position, I'd totally tell. I'm a catty bitch, though. So, take that for what it's worth.

JOEL

He loves her. You do know that, right?

JULIA

I know. He loves me too. Not in the same way, of course.

JOEL

That may be so.

(PAUSE)

I don't know what you're thinking is going to happen tonight, but he's still going to marry her tomorrow.

JULIA

Yeah. So?

JOEL

And you're okay with all that?

JULIA

I'm not going to send them a Pottery Barn gift card or anything. But this is America, Joel. People get married all the time, people who probably shouldn't. But that's the way things go. For better or worse, right?

JOEL

But nothing about this situation is strange to you?

JULIA

Not really. I've slept with a married guy before. But that was only once. And he was already separated, so that doesn't really count.

JOEL

So, you make things like this a habit?

JULIA

Once does not a habit make.

JOEL

True.

JULIA

I'm sure you think I'm some kind of whore. I mean, look at me. I saw you staring at my tits in the rearview mirror. No, they're not real. So you can stop wondering.

JOEL

Thank you for clearing that up.

Julia exhales a plume of smoke and flicks her cigarette butt out the window.

Joel scoots up and sticks his head between the seats.

JOEL (CONT'D)

I just...I don't understand any of this. They're getting married tomorrow. And she's never going to find out about this. They're going to have kids, celebrate anniversaries, go to Disney World, and she'll never know that the night before their wedding he had sex with someone else. He's just going to spend his whole life hiding something so big from someone he's supposed to share so much with. But you know what the real kicker is? It's not going to matter. Theoretically, their lives will play out in the exact same way as long as she never finds out.

Julia smiles warmly at Joel and puts a hand on the side of his face.

JULIA

Ding ding ding. Now you're catching on.

Just then Neil knocks on the window. Julia unlocks the door and he climbs in, holding cheap bottle of Korbel.

NEIL

Last one.

JULIA
It'll work.

EXT. MERCER SUITES--NIGHT

Julia pulls the car up to the front entrance of the hotel.

JOEL
I don't really think it's possible
for this to be a non-awkward
goodbye. So, I'm just going to say
thank you, get out, and wave.

JULIA
Joel.

JOEL
Yeah?

JULIA
This is how things go.

JOEL
Yeah...

Joel steps out of the car and stands on the curb. As the car pulls away, Neil locks eyes with Joel and the two men hold the gaze until the car is out of sight.

INT. MERCER SUITES HALLWAY--NIGHT

Stepping out of the elevator, Joel is immediately met with a ruckus that can only be recognized as the groomsmen, still continuing their evening.

Joel continues down the hallway toward the gang. They all sway drunkenly. Ben is still wearing his shirt and tie but is now sans pants. He drinks beer out of an ice bucket.

BEN
(spots Joel)
Heeyyyy! Look at this guy! The
little doggies found their way
home. You're broken in, brother!
Welcome to the crew! Where's the
man? Face first in the toilet, I
should hope.

Joel approaches them. He looks all four of them over.

BEN (CONT'D)
Take a swig, my man!

He offers Joel the ice bucket. Instead, Joel reaches down and takes off his shoe and shows it to them.

BEN (CONT'D)
He's still got 'em!

They CHEER. Rather than taking the ice bucket, Joel quickly whacks Ben in the face with the shoe. He falls backwards, spilling the contents of the bucket in the process. The other three are silent for a second but slowly break into a drunken GIGGLES that turns into full blown HOWLS. Joel steps back into his shoe and storms off.

INT. HOTEL ROOM--NIGHT

Carefully, Joel eases the door open and walks into the room. Wes and Meredith have moved from the previous positions and are now fast asleep and cuddling under the covers. The television is still on. They don't stir.

Joel kicks off his shoes, takes off his shirt and tie and collapses onto the cot. He tosses and turns a few times, struggling to get comfortable. He turns onto his left side and is face to face with the gift basket. He reaches out, rifles through it, and notices something toward the back of the arrangement. Serving as a backdrop for all the tiny soaps and shampoos and the small boxes of snacks is a large cardboard sheet with a photo collage of Neil and Vanessa. Various pictures: them bundled up and smiling on a ski-lift, frolicking on the beach, gazing into each other's eyes while slow dancing. The text, flowing cursive in the middle of an oval, reads "Love. Honor. Cherish."

Joel lays the picture on his chest and looks up at the ceiling.

JOEL
(to himself)
Goddamnit.

INT. MEREDITH'S CAR--NIGHT

Joel is behind the wheel of the car. He speeds and talks to himself.

JOEL

This is so fucking stupid. Stay out of it! Is it really that hard? You said it yourself--they will be fine. Ignorance is bliss. This is how things go....

EXT. MOTEL 8--NIGHT

Joel sloppily flings the car into a parking spot. He bounds out and sprints toward room 122. He arrives at the door, which is partially open, and bursts in.

INT. ROOM 122--NIGHT

Julia jumps as Joel enters. She sits in the bed, the covers up to her waist. She wears tiny, black-lace teddy. The trench coat lies crumpled on the floor. She sips the Korbel directly from the bottle. Her mascara is running and smeared.

JULIA

What the fuck are you doing here?

JOEL

Where is he? He can't do this. Look, I know that people do these things and if she never knows it won't hurt her and all that. But he'll know. And I probably don't know shit about love and even less about marriage, and yes I'm really naive about it all, but this isn't good. It can't be.

JULIA

Well, he couldn't do it. We started, and we did for a few seconds. Then we stopped. Then we started again.

(MORE)

JULIA (CONT'D)

Then we stopped again and he started crying Then he said pretty much what you just said and left. Oh, and I'm pretty sure he stole my car.

Joel sits down on the edge of the bed.

JOEL

I see. Well, I feel like an asshole bursting through your door.

JULIA

I could tell you wouldn't last being immoral. I'm surprised it took you this long to crack.

She thrusts the bottle to Joel.

JULIA (CONT'D)

Lukewarm cheap champagne?

JOEL

Definitely.

Joel takes a swig.

JOEL (CONT'D)

You okay?

JULIA

Yeah.

JOEL

Sure?

JULIA

Yeah. I know I come across as kind of a jaded bitch, which I am, but, I'm not *that* jaded. Deep down, this really wasn't just a sex thing. I really did want it to be a goodbye. Sweet, I guess, as much as situation like this could be sweet.

She grabs the bottle back from Joel.

JULIA (CONT'D)

(swigging)

Seeing him freak out like that showed me that he really was gone. I couldn't even have him physically anymore, not even for one last night. And for a second, I got kind of disgusted with myself for being so selfish to think I could. But only for a second. I'm fine now. I guess I had a small moment of clarity.

JOEL

There's a lot of that going around tonight.

Joel takes the bottle.

JOEL (CONT'D)

(swigging)

They're going to be okay. We're going to be okay, too. Somehow. Probably not in the way that they're going to be okay. But still, we'll be--

JULIA

(interrupting)

Wanna fuck?

JOEL

(instantly)

Oh yes.

They vault towards each other and start kissing furiously as Julia pulls Joel down onto the bed.

INT. ROOM 122--NIGHT

Joel and Julia lie under the covers. They're having fun: laughing, cuddling, smoking cigarettes.

JULIA

Yeah, I'm very popular on Block D. This one guy named Clarence sends me a letter every week in which he describes, in detail, his pre-lights out routine. Which, as you can imagine, heavily involves mental images of me.

JOEL

Yikes.

JULIA

Yeah. Luckily for me though, he stabbed his girlfriend in the neck. So, I probably won't have to worry about seeing him for another 35 to life. I might be up for it by then.

JOEL

Good to know.

JULIA

How old do you think I am?

JOEL

Oh no. I know about this question. It's a trap.

JULIA

Just guess!

JOEL

Fine. Twenty-seven. A year younger than me.

JULIA

Joel, we've already had sex. The time for flattery has passed. Be honest.

JOEL

That's my honest guess!

JULIA

(leans over and whispers)
I'm thirty-three.

JOEL

Shut up.

JULIA

Yep. My business is a young gal's game. Gotta try and stay a step ahead of these little twenty-two year old bitches breathing down my neck. I will never get a fucking face lift though. I draw the line at collagen.

JOEL

What are you talking about? You're hot. Probably the hottest girl I've ever...you know.

JULIA

Hotter than Vanessa?

JOEL

That's not fair. That's different.

JULIA

You're right. That wasn't fair. I've never actually even met her. It's kind of strange though. How both of our lives kind of intertwine through her. I dump Neil, weeks later he's with her. She dumps you--

JOEL

She didn't dump me. I guess, technically, she did. But I forced her hand.

JULIA

Oh. I just assumed--

JOEL

No. You're right to assume. I generally give off the vibe of a guy who would induce women to break up with him. But no. It was all me.

JULIA

Yeah. You kind of do. So, what happened?

JOEL

Do you want the real version or the one that I tell most people so I don't seem like such an idiot?

JULIA

Let's go with both.

JOEL

The fake, less embarrassing version is the standard "we grew apart, got too busy, etc., etc."

Julia waits for reason No. 2.

JOEL (CONT'D)

I had these friends I grew up with who were in this hardcore band called Ardent Fervor. So one summer I decided that I was going to follow them around while they did this east coast club tour. I was going to film a documentary about them. You know, like *Don't Look Back* but with lots of combat boots and straight-edge kids. Vanessa was less than thrilled. She told me that I was twenty-five years old and I should start acting like it. That it was time to get serious. I'd been working a series of mediocre jobs, not sure what I wanted to be when I grew up. Honestly, I was so lucky to still have had her. But I went. Like an asshole, I went. She said if I went then she wouldn't be there when I got back and I told her that I was sorry it had to be that way. Well, as it turns out, hardcore bands are pretty fucking boring, or at least this one was. All they did was play half-empty shows at dirty punk houses, fix the van that broke down every other day, and blacked out off of PBR at some kid's bar mitzvah. I left the tour after two weeks. I got back and expected her to be there waiting for me.

(MORE)

JOEL (CONT'D)

But all I found was a letter taped to the front door with a key in it to the storage unit that she'd had all my stuff moved into.

JULIA

Did you try to get her back?

JOEL

I got my self together after that. Got certified, started teaching. I tried and tried to get in touch with her and explain, but she never wanted to talk. Said it was too hard. And here we are.

JULIA

So you would have done it?

JOEL

Done what?

JULIA

Met up with her if she called. Like Neil and I.

JOEL

Like I told Neil, it's a moot point because Vanessa would never do that. It's not how she's wired. She's way too practical and analytical and--

A cell phone RINGS from inside of Joel's pants on the floor. It RINGS again. Joel looks at Julia.

JULIA

That would be so fucking creepy if it's her.

Joel shifts and reaches for the pants, pulling them to him. He talks as he fishes the phone out.

JOEL

No. It's probably just my buddy Wes wondering--

Joel looks at the caller ID and freezes. It reads "Vanessa Cell." He opens it.

Julia, still brushing her teeth, doesn't speak, she just nods.

JOEL (CONT'D)

I guess she just wants to talk or something.

She goes into the bathroom spits and rinses and comes back and sits on the bed.

JOEL (CONT'D)

I shouldn't go. Maybe I won't go.

JULIA

Fucking go!

JOEL

Huh?

JULIA

If you don't go you're going to wonder about this for a long time, aren't you?

EXT. THE DEAN HOME--NIGHT

Joel parks the car in front of a large colonial on a quiet suburban street. A lone light illuminates a window on the far corner of the second story. Joel exits the car and slowly walks onto the porch. There is a note stuck to the front door that reads: "Joel, I'm in my room. Come in. Walk quietly!"

INT. THE DEAN HOME--NIGHT

Inside the home, most of the lights are off. Joel tiptoes. Almost immediately the sound of paws scattering across the tile floor can be heard. A large black lab bounds toward Joel, BARKING.

JOEL

Shit! Bugsy, easy boy! Be quiet.

The dog jumps up and down near Joel, still BARKING.

JOEL (CONT'D)

Remember me, boy? We had some epic fetch games. Quiet!

Joel spots a chew toy on the ground. He picks it up and throws it and Bugsy bounds after it. Joel treads lightly down a hall and towards the steps. He looks back as he walks. Not watching his step, he stumbles into an ironing board, knocking it and the iron on top of it over, and tripping in the process, causing a metallic CLATTER. The BARKING starts again and Joel collects himself and hurries up the stairs, nearly tripping again on the final step. He pauses at the top, standing still and hoping the commotion hasn't woke anyone. He takes a step and a picture falls off the wall. At the end of the hall is Vanessa's room. The door is partially open, the light is on. Joel scurries toward it.

INT. VANESSA'S ROOM--NIGHT

The room looks preserved in time, with the same framed posters and collages on the walls and knickknacks lining the shelves as they did when she lived there. Joel eases open the door, revealing Vanessa, standing in front of a mirror, clad in her wedding dress.

JOEL

Should I come back later?

VANESSA

I laid down and tried and to go to sleep...

JOEL

You *lay* down.

VANESSA

I *lay* down and tried to go to sleep and kept having this horrible fear that I was going to wake up in the morning and my dress wouldn't fit. Like maybe I got fat overnight or something. It wouldn't go away.

JOEL

Looks like it fits pretty good to me.

VANESSA

What does a nervous breakdown feel like?

JOEL

I pretty much live in that state
constantly so I'm not sure what
it's like for normal people.

VANESSA

Am I having one?

Vanessa returns to the mirror and continues tinkering with
her dress. She stops and turns to Joel who is now sitting on
the edge of the bed.

VANESSA (CONT'D)

I'm getting married tomorrow...
I'm fucking terrified. Is that
normal? I don't think it is. I'm
scared to death, I shouldn't be
scared to death.

She sits next to Joel on the bed.

VANESSA (CONT'D)

This is it.

JOEL

Yes it is.

VANESSA

The rest of my life.

JOEL

Yep.

Vanessa lays back on the bed.

VANESSA

Was Neil nervous?

JOEL

He seemed...fine.

VANESSA

Figures. He handles stress so much
better than me. I freak out and
call my ex-boyfriend. Who does
that?

JOEL

You'd be surprised...

Joel reclines to where he is resting next to Vanessa.

VANESSA

Weird, huh? Do you ever wonder?
You know, what things would be
like?

JOEL

Would you believe me if I said "not
really"?

Vanessa smiles.

JOEL (CONT'D)

Okay then.
(pause)
It wouldn't have worked, you know?

VANESSA

Nope. I'm the stubborn yet
nurturing career woman and you're
the intellectual, freewheeling man-
boy.

JOEL

Too different. It would have
caught up with us sooner or later.

VANESSA

Maybe in another life...

JOEL

Right. In another life we're...A-
list actors with a whole slew of
adopted kids.

VANESSA

Nope. We're husband and wife
astronauts. And the first family
to colonize Mars.

JOEL

I like that.

Joel reaches over gives her a high five.

JOEL (CONT'D)

Nice one, Dean. I mean, Reid.

VANESSA

It's still Dean. For a few more hours, at least.

She snuggles up to Joel and lays her head on his shoulder.

VANESSA (CONT'D)

I always knew you'd be involved with my wedding in some role or another.

JOEL

You have no idea.

VANESSA

Can you just stay here with me, for a little bit? Until I fall asleep?

JOEL

Sure.

They lie on the bed, both staring up at ceiling. The cheap glow-in-the-dark stars Vanessa tacked up there as a child, faintly glowing in the dim light.

EXT. MERCER SUITES--NIGHT

Joel races back into the parking lot of the hotel. As he steps from the car he glances toward the Waffle House directly beside the hotel. He sees Neil, sitting near the window staring glumly into a cup of coffee. Joel hesitates, then walks toward the restaurant.

INT. DINER--NIGHT

Joel walks through door and makes his way to Neil's booth. Neil doesn't look up until Joel is sitting across from him.

NEIL

What the hell are you doing here?

JOEL

Come on. Doesn't everyone want some coffee at...

(looks at watch)

4:23 in the morning.

NEIL

Why are you up?

The waitress comes over and Joel motions for a coffee.

JOEL

Couldn't sleep. I'm on a cot,
remember?

Neil sips his coffee.

NEIL

I couldn't do it.

JOEL

And why is that?

The waitress returns with Joel's coffee.

NEIL

I almost did. I kind of did. For
like a second. But, Jesus, the
wave of just sheer guilt and shame
that washed over me when I walked
through that door. It was probably
the worst I've ever felt. And I
had this flash, of like, Vanessa
doing the same thing, bed with some
guy...

Joel almost chokes on his coffee.

NEIL (CONT'D)

I mean, it wasn't you in the image,
he was pretty much faceless. Plus
he was muscular and tan--

JOEL

So you're dreaming of buff dudes--
you're gay and you're calling the
wedding off--well, I'll go tell
Vanessa...

NEIL

(not laughing)

I had to get out of there. I took
her car. Kind of a dick move. I
do feel bad about that. I'm going
to have to mail her keys.

(pause)

(MORE)

NEIL (CONT'D)

Does all of this mean I'm going to be a terrible husband?

JOEL

No. You're going to be a good husband. Because you saw what it was like to almost have fucked it up before it even began. You dipped your toe into the water and didn't like what you felt. But what do I know? I told you, stop listening to anything I say.

NEIL

I think you're actually better at this whole advice deal than you give yourself credit for. You saved my ass tonight. And, by extension, Vanessa's too.

JOEL

(sipping coffee)

I'm all about Vanessa's ass.

NEIL

You're making jokes, but thanks. I feel good. No secrets lingering out there. That's a good feeling.

Joel stares out the window.

NEIL (CONT'D)

You know?

JOEL

Yeah. Right. No secrets.

Joel takes a quick sip of coffee.

JOEL (CONT'D)

Let's get out of here. You need your beauty sleep for tomorrow.

Joel reaches in his pocket to pay the bill.

NEIL

I got it. You did buy me a lapdance, remember?

JOEL
Hope it was good.

NEIL
Actually, it was awful. But I
appreciate the gesture. We'll make
up for it at your bachelor party.

JOEL
Let's not get head of ourselves,
Neil.

They stand and walk towards the exit, passing a table at which a teenage boy and girl sit across from each other in their rumpled prom clothes. The two are engaged in conversation, the girl's back is to Joel so that her face can not be seen but the boy appears both smitten and incredibly nervous. Joel walks closer and realizes the girl is Casey. He stops at the table. Casey sees him and looks at him with disgust.

JOEL (CONT'D)
(to the boy)
Chad?

CHAD
(confused)
Yeah?

JOEL
(to Casey)
Good girl.

Casey's frown slowly breaks and she smiles at Joel. Neil, standing behind Joel, produces a twenty from his pocket and sets it on the table.

NEIL
It's on us. You kids be good.

Befuddled, Chad stares at the two men as they exit the diner.

INT. ELEVATOR--NIGHT

Joel and Neil stand silently in the elevator. The elevator reaches the third floor and DINGS.

NEIL
Here's my stop.

JOEL
I'm two more up. Bit more of a
commute to my neck of the woods.

NEIL
Well, since you're not coming
tomorrow--

JOEL
I'll be there.

NEIL
Really?

JOEL
I'm rather invested in this whole
thing now. I'm waiting for the "if
anyone knows any reason these two
should not be joined" part.

NEIL
Good. I'll see ya then.

JOEL
Kick some ass up there. Don't lock
your knees. That's a big one.

NEIL
I'll remember that.

Neil steps off the elevator. The doors close.

INT. CHURCH--DAY

Joel sits on the edge of a pew near the back of the cavernous
church. To his right is Wes. They chat as guests slowly
file in.

WES
So, no stories? No puking?
Stripping? Dead hookers?

JOEL
Nope. We just ended up at some
strip-mall bar for a few beers.
(MORE)

JOEL (CONT'D)
Kind of boring, actually. I got in
before two. I can't believe you
didn't hear me come in.

WES
You kidding me? They could have
imploded the hotel around me and I
wouldn't woken up last night.
Well, glad to hear I didn't miss
anything.

JOEL
Not a thing.

A woman walks up beside Joel but only her midsection can be
seen.

WOMAN
Is there any room--

Joel looks up and realizes the woman is Julia.

JOEL
Oh! No. We can scoot.

Joel starts to scoot over, forcing Wes and then Meredith to
do the same. Julia sits down.

JOEL (CONT'D)
I thought you weren't coming.
How'd you get here?

JULIA
I drove.

JOEL
But he took your car.

JULIA
Well I had a friend come get me and
drop me off at the hotel where it
was. Luckily, I have a spare set.

JOEL
He said he'd mail them to you.

JULIA
(sarcastically)
Aww. How sweet.

JOEL

But you said last night there
wasn't a chance in hell of you
coming...

JULIA

That was last night. I changed my
mind.

JOEL

What changed your mind?

JULIA

Really? With the questions?
Still?

Wes clears his throat.

JOEL

Oh yeah. Julia, this is Wes and
his wife, Meredith.

They exchange pleasantries.

WES

Wait! Newsgirl! I mean,
anchorwoman. Anchorperson?

(to Joel)

You don't know her! You said when
we were watching the news last--

JOEL

(quickly)

We met last night at the rehearsal
dinner.

Julia shoots Joel a look.

JULIA

Yes. At the rehearsal dinner.

WES

That's weird. I don't recall
seeing you.

JOEL

There were a lot of people at that
dinner, Wes.

JULIA
 Lots of people. Very crowded.
 Lots of faces.

JOEL
 She came late.

JULIA
 (smiles as she hears
 herself)
 I came late.

WES
 Wow. I thought I would have
 remembered seeing you. Ah, who
 knows, I was drunk. So, how do you
 know Vanessa?

JOEL
 Julia is actually--

JULIA
 (quickly)
 I'm Neil's ex-girlfriend.

WES
 Talk about symmetry.

The MUSIC starts playing and bridesmaids and groomsmen start to make their way down the aisle.

INT. CHURCH--DAY

The vows are almost finished. Vanessa, more beautiful than ever, and Neil, actually looking Kennedyesque, stand holding hands on the altar.

MINISTER
 So, if anyone has any reason why
 these two should not be married,
 speak now or forever hold your
 peace.

Silence. Playfully, Wes leans forward, looking at both Joel and Julia, who glance and at each other uncomfortably, as if feeling like all eyes are on both of them.

On the altar, both Neil and Vanessa nonchalantly crane their necks out into the crowd before slowly turning back to each other, both breathing silent sighs of relief.

MINISTER (CONT'D)

Then I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may now kiss the bride.

They kiss. The crowd APPLAUDS.

At the pew, Joel discreetly places his hand on Julia's knee. She hesitates a second before placing her hand on top of his and giving it a light squeeze.

Everyone stands as the new couple begins their recession.

JOEL

Well this is going to be awkward. Them seeing us sitting here. Together.

JULIA

I hadn't thought about that. They'll think we planned it. Like some horrible, immature "fuck you."

JOEL

Kind of thing I might do, actually.

JULIA

We can't walk out before the bride and groom. That's horrible wedding etiquette. I don't care what the circumstances are.

They couple is drawing closer. They smile and wave at guests on their march out. Neither has spotted Joel and Julia yet.

JOEL

Well, we just have to smile. Wave and smile. Not let on anything is going on.

JULIA

What *is* going on?

They are only a row away. Just when it appears that they will both lock eyes with Joel and Julia, an elderly woman on the other side of the aisle mouths something to Vanessa, which also draws Neil's attention. They are both so occupied by her, smiling and mouthing "thank yous" that they breeze right by without so much as a glance in Joel and Julia's direction. They turn to each other with looks of relief that mask their slight disappointment.

JULIA (CONT'D)
That was anti-climatic.

JOEL
No. That was fitting.

INT. CHURCH LOBBY--DAY

A mob of guests is milling around. Wes stands by the exit. Joel and Julia approach.

WES
Ready to roll?

JOEL
Yeah. Give me a second?

WES
Take your time. We'll be at the car. Nice meeting you, Julia.

JULIA
Likewise.

Wes exits, winking at Joel.

JOEL
So...

JULIA
So...
(pause)
Wanna ride with me? I mean, the reception doesn't start for like an hour.

JOEL
Okay. But Wes thinks I'm going to ride with him so I should--

JULIA
Yeah, what could be more important
than riding with Wes?
(pause)
Jesus, Joel. Hints!

JOEL
Yeah, just let me--
(pause)

JOEL (CONT'D)
Oh! You mean. You want to...

JULIA
There you go.

JOEL
By all means, let's walk then.

JULIA
(motioning across the
lobby)
I'm parked over there.

They turn down an empty hallway.

JULIA (CONT'D)
You know when this is all said and
done I'm most likely just going to
end up leaving you a broken shell
of a man, right?

JOEL
Worse things have happened.
(pause)
There's no chance we actually end
up going to this reception, is
there?

JULIA
None whatsoever.

JOEL
That sounds good. I can deal with
that.

Joel reaches out and attempts to wrap his arm around Julia's
waist. She quickly wriggles her way out.

JULIA

But if we do give this a try,
promise you'll be as hung up on me
as you were on Vanessa--who looked
fat, by the way, in that dress. I
want to be the girl people are hung
up on and not the one-last-hurrah
at the cheap motel girl. I'm done
with that. Got it?

JOEL

Yeah. But how about the girl that
guys are hung up on in a cheap
motel. That work?

JULIA

We'll start there.
(tosses keys to Joel)
You're driving...

They exit into the bright sunlight of the parking lot. The
doors swing closed behind them.

FADE OUT.