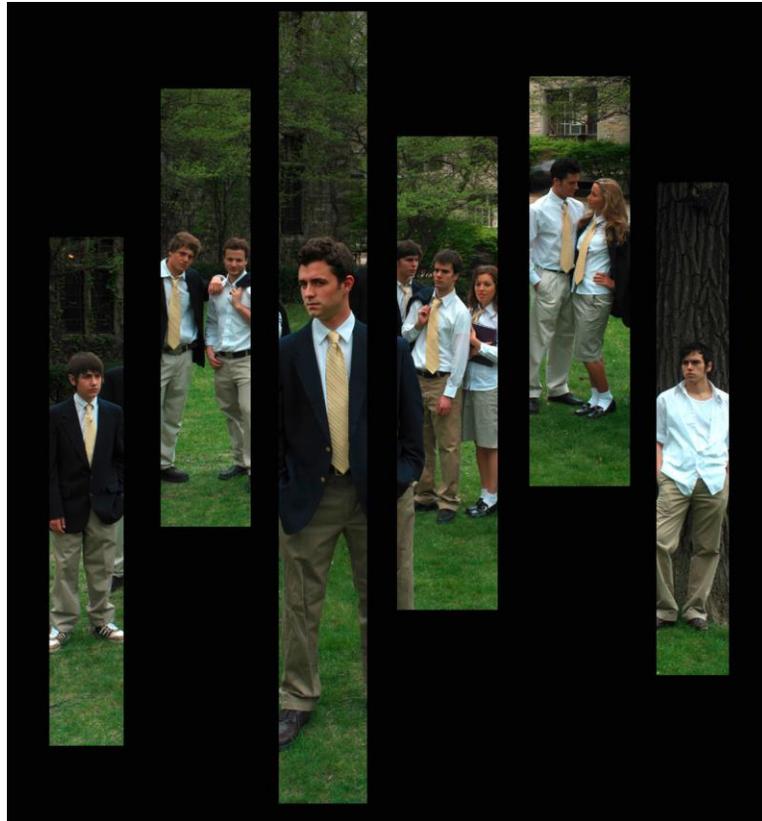


Ever Asking

A Film by Branden Blinn



Screenplay treatment

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"EVER ASKING"
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Amidst the gurgling of a brook, chirping of birds and scurrying of animals, we HEAR boy's sporadic conversations about coeds. NINE CROSS COUNTRY RUNNERS round a corner and come into full frame. Breathing heavy, drenched in sweat, they wear different colored shorts and sneakers but the same shirts; navy blue with a gold and green emblem - GRAFTT ACADEMY. These are boys becoming men and the differences marking this passage are what we notice most.

The RUNNERS push through brush onto an open field. A 2019 Tesla Model XP100D crosses frame picking up a New England township. Maple trees just beginning to flush yellow and red...Oaks ...Evergreens...the steeple of an old church...Ivy ensconced brick buildings. Lawns are long, sweeping and meticulously manicured; the homes elegant and distinguished, as are the passengers in the XP100d; save young, worn tee-shirt, baseball cap wearing, JOHN TRIPLER (16) who sits in the back seat blaring iPod music. John has olive skin, Asian eyes and classic European features which he shares with his mother, clearly the stunning result of a Eurasian union. John is not a happy camper in this moment and even his step-father's reference that John's athletic hero, Mark Winter, is at Graftt, does nothing to lift his sour disposition. John's upset because he's coming in new after the school year has already started, upset that the whole varsity basketball team is returning, and he probably won't even get to play, and upset that just because his mother has been recently accepted back into the patriarchal, LACEY family that once disowned her, doesn't mean that he should have to be. Mother and son wage a battle through the visor mirror until Mrs. Nash packs her makeup away and flips the mirror up ending the discussion.

GRAFTT ACADEMY is as old and stately as the ancient oaks that surround it. Upon arriving John grabs his duffle, working to create as much distance between himself and the "rents" as is possible given the weight of the bag he half drags. Every COED they pass rubber neck in John's direction. Even BOYS take notice of him. Mr. and Mrs. Nash share a knowing smile. John has this affect on everyone, something they both know and he will never care about.

Making his way across campus is CHRISTOPHER LACEY.

Christopher is 17 years old, a handsome, strapping boy/man, who looks more like he belongs on a college than a high school campus. Christopher is your typical high school jock-in-charge and denies himself nothing. The beer, the girls, the partying, everything is a conquest to Christopher who thrives at being the center of it all. John Tripler is Christopher's first cousin though it is on this day or shortly thereafter that the two first meet.

Christopher stops every so often to accost PASSING STUDENTS. Some shrug, others shake their heads, one points and Christopher heads off accordingly but not before intercepting a floating frisbee and returning it to its thrower in one smooth sweep.

A baseball throwing boy outside talks about what a weirdo Stanford Lacey is inside. "Well at least he's not a nerd." The other thrower contends: "Kevin Jamison is a frigging nerd." Pulling back through a dorm window reveals a framed family photo. The clothing and accoutrements of the room in which the photo is taken reek of old money. Lined up in front of the notable Mother and Father are their five ties and jackets wearing sons. Christopher leads off the line up. In the middle stands the boy sitting just beyond the photo on his bed. They all share a remarkable dark haired resemblance except for this platinum blonde haired boy who looks to be the youngest but we assume from his placement in the photo, is in the middle. STANFORD LACEY (15) sits on his dorm bed intently paging through a large book with pictures. He is beautiful, soft, innocent, and almost angelic.

Stanford's dorm room vibrates with pounding. He works that much harder to concentrate on the book, checking its photos, then examining first under his arms and then into his pajama bottoms. As the door flies open and Christopher barges in, Stanford launches the book under his bed. Christopher crooks his neck, reaches down and pulls the book out -- ADOLESCENCE and PUBERTY

There is a brief conversation about hair, hormones, sports and whether or not Stanford is weird, which reveals both that the two are indeed brothers and that Christopher could care less about Stanford's dilemma only that he has a game in two days and his good luck charm middle brother has yet to bestow his magic. The arrival of DAVID LACEY (16), another not quite so hairy as Christopher Lacey look-a-like, lets us know that the tightly nit family of boys are

all in attendance at Grafft. Stanford watches David and Christopher leave, shaking his head after them. He then resumes that which he will do throughout the entire film...search his body for hair.

LATER. Clad in horseback riding regalia Stanford skips across campus. His euphoric, self-absorbed attention momentarily shifts outward as a strapping young man intersects his path. This is the MARK WINTER (17), who was referred to in the opening scenes. Mark is tall, dark, quiet and self reserved. Loved by men and women alike we will come to know Mark as a natural athlete, straight-A student, who is being scouted by every Ivy League school in the country. Although he is the true star, he is the antithesis of the stereo-typical athlete. He doesn't drink, doesn't smoke dope, doesn't go to the parties, mostly he stays at home and studies.

Stanford is off to the STABLES because today is the day they're bringing in the STALLION and one day Stanford is going to ride him! Mark is late for football practice but Mark is clearly "family" to Stanford so they take a moment to catch up. Before rushing off Mark turns: "Stanford... You make sure I'm there...when you ride that Stallion." Stanford gestures affirmative and takes off leaving Mark smiling after him. The kid IS weird but he is also... well...Stanford.

FOOTBALL LOCKER ROOM. BOYS argue and change into gear. SATCH and SLOOP, two typical simply minded-jocks, undress in close proximity. Big linemen types but still very much BOYS every time we see them they will be brawling with each other, about to brawl with each other or will have just finished brawling with each other and today is no exception. They can't seem to stand one another yet we never see one without the other.

Off to the side is ADRIEN SANCHEZ. ADRIEN is 16 years old, short, slender, Latin, and sexual with an inability to hide it. He has the look of someone who has weathered hard labor and a hard life. As Christopher drops his underwear and dons a jock. Adrien's glance turns into a longer look. "What are you staring at?" The locker room falls silent as ALL EYES lock on Adrien. Christopher drops his jock and opens his arms: "Here, you want a better look?!" Amidst loud laughter and cat calls, Adrien propels off slamming into Mark who rushes in from around the corner. With

genuine concern Marks rights Adrien, who, too humiliated to even look at Mark, takes off running.

Christopher, Mark, Satch, Sloop, David, and the other, now fully geared football players, jog past the field hockey team on their way to practice. Each in his own way, zones in on one thing...SASHA DAVIES BREASTS which seem just too big and amazing for a girl any age. Christopher knocks into Mark, who slams into David, who stumbles into Satch who rams into Sloop. It's a big pile-up that simply will not be avoided.

A star forward of the girls field hockey team, Sasha transformed herself one summer by loosing braces, getting contact lenses and shooting up to a long, lanky 5'7. She's turned out to be a knock-out, but has never quite gotten over the fact that the once plump, braces clad, pink rimmed coke bottle glasses wearing girl that nobody wanted to talk to, is long gone and will most likely never come back again. The attention of the boys, which would flatter any girl, only embarrasses Sasha. The close-by EMILY BOND circles Sasha into her protective fold pulling her out of ear shot of those inane, hormone crazed idiots.

Christopher's loud laughter follows as the FOOTBALL PLAYERS empty onto the field. Only David Lacey lingers back taking one last, longing look at Emily. Emily is 17 years old, blonde, beautiful, and outgoing. She has the look of the girl that everyone loves to hate, but in truth is much simpler than that. She loves field hockey, she loves Mark Winter, and will spend a lot of time trying to convince him to love her back. She is sensitive and resourceful, but doesn't use her beauty to manipulate people, although you do get the feeling that she'd really like to be having some sex. She is the kind of protector who would choose her friendship with Sasha over a silly boy any day and has long gone back to field hockey. She doesn't know David exists.

Meanwhile at TALBOT STABLES Mrs. Talbot, a sophisticated, self-assured, earthy, fifty-something woman, who on her best day is Susan Sarandon, oversees a STABLE HAND, Adrien, and Stanford as they ease a large BAY STALLION out of his trailer. The stallion rears again and again. Everyone is terrified of the Stallion except Adrien. We're not sure if the kid is plain stupid or just self destructive but as the rearing Stallion begins to calm, realize that something deeper is going on. And it is this something that both

Mrs. Talbot and Stanford recognize in Adrien, even if he doesn't recognize it in himself.

Back on the athletic field the Blur of a soccer ball dances between two nimbly moving feet. Satch reveals for us that the fancy footwork of the new "asian" kid belong to none other than Christopher's cousin. Much to the chagrin of the Head Football Coach, all play everywhere stops to watch the new kid. COACH DENNIS slams his clipboard to the ground. PAPERS fly everywhere. Nobody seems to notice or care until he launches them onto the field hammering after them as they go. Quick instruction to Christopher, followed by what can only be seen as abject refusal to comply, gets Mark Winter thrown out of practice but only because quarterback Christopher is needed more.

The dejected Mark draws supportive looks and comments as he leaves and Dennis works to discipline his cocky players.

As MARK pulls open the locker room door Emily, who has been watching with fellow field hockey players, intercepts him. She wants to "comfort" him but takes the opportunity to pursue her Mark Winter agenda, inviting him to an upcoming party. Mark doesn't respond. It's not a brush off or even a send off; Mark is simply just too shy. After the gallant effort Emily waves at Mark and returns to practice where her teammates wait in anxious anticipation.

Spectators joke and laugh amongst themselves. Girls watch boys, boys watch girls, and focus on sports. There is sexual tension flying everywhere -- it's high school.

In the LOCKER ROOM Soccer Coaches compare notes while Mark moves a soccer uniform out from in front of his locker. He then strips to socks and underwear and lapses onto the bench. Sensing a presence Mark looks up. John, dripping with shower water, reaches for the towel Mark is sitting on. Realizing that the person before him is none other than his boyhood idol, John launches into acclamation about sports and schools and scouts and athletic choices.

Mark is stunned by the adulation but even more stunned by a rush of feeling and emotion that he has never really had; certainly not in this type of situation and certainly not towards another boy. Mark puts as much physical distance between himself and John as he can, given their close proximity, lockers and the wall behind him. Mark quickly

drops his underwear and secures his towel in one smooth swoop, disappearing into the shower as the oblivious John marvels after him: "That was Mark Winter."

Back at TABLOT STABLES dusk has arrived. Stanford enters on a small mare and he and Adrien have a meaningful conversation about horses and instinct revealing the depth of Adrien's sensitivity, animal awareness and knowledge. They are interrupted by Mrs. Talbot pointing to her watch and Adrien frantically tearing off. The DOGS take off after Adrien, and moments later, the cat follows. We get the feeling if the Stallion could he probably would too. We may not like the kid but it is clear Stanford, Mrs. Talbot and the animals do.

Back in the LOCKER ROOM, somewhat renewed by his shower, Mark dresses, sharing an awkward conversation with John who, now fully dressed, is about to leave. John reveals the tragic death of his Chinese/Hawaiian father, his "black sheep Lacey mother's" marriage back into good graces and how he is therefore expected to be part of the Lacey tradition at Grafft. Sobered by the memory, John abruptly exits frame as the rest of Mark's teammates come in from the field.

Christopher tries to console an inconsolable Mark who storms past Christopher out of the locker room. Christopher chases out after Mark and when he returns the locker room is empty. Christopher slams open lockers shut on his way to his own, until COACH LECROIX a thirty something teacher, barely older than the boys themselves, intercepts him. "Are you having a bad day, Christopher?" Through the windows of the coach's office both watch FISTS flying as Adrien ducks away from Coach Dennis' assault. The door opens and Coach LeCroix and Christopher duck back as Adrien rushes past to trailing comments about being late one more time and losing the one thing we now know Adrien cherishes most -- his work at the stables. Adrien is Dennis' "misguided" step son and: 'has been trouble since the day I met him.'

Freshly showered and changed Christopher eventually makes his way across the playing field toward a dark shadow which turns out to be Mark. Christopher wants resolution; Mark just wants to be left alone. They stare each other down, Christopher taunting, Mark defending until a full out fist fight ensues but these boys are best friends and the result is a lot of laughter, good humor and ribbing.

Back in the locker room Adrien sits on a bench hauntingly eyeing the ASSISTANT COACH who, while drying footballs, fights to ignore him. The Assistant Coach eventually succumbs and when they lock eyes Adrien gestures outside: "I'll go tell the old man you're giving me a lift."

A CAR with the dark faces of the Assistant Coach and Adrien pulls out of the parking lot igniting the light faces of Christopher and Mark. The contrast seems a stark one. When they arrive at a wooded area the Assistant Coach nervously turns off the car. Adrien pops open his pants.

A DORM ROOM conversation shows that Mark and Christopher are also roommates and that everyone knows of Emily's plight for Mark's affection with questions about why Mark refuses to respond. Christopher continues to talk and Mark continues to try and study until a comment about John and Mark in the locker room launches Mark out the door and to the library, with Christopher's echoing comment: "The kid idolizes you, you know, although I don't know why!"

Although MR. LECROIX teaches many subjects, they all have to do with the behavioral sciences so he always knows exactly what not to say. He also understands that kids need to be allowed to make mistakes and his are the classes everyone wants to be in. Containing a myriad of adolescent emotions, much is revealed in this classroom including an incident that has Christopher calling out the so-called "truth" about Mark's feelings for Emily Bond: "I thought you wanted nothing to do with Emily Bond, Marko, you are the sly one, aren't you!"

As John Tripler is introduced more and more into Christopher's fold, Mark becomes increasingly distant. These interactions also trigger a string of events that eventually have us realize that while John is spending a good deal of time trying to get closer to his boyhood idol, Mark is doing everything he can to avoid him.

An episode involving Adrien, the Assistant Coach, and John results in Mr. LeCroix placing John on his varsity basketball team and Adrien becoming the manager.

In his role as Head Basketball Coach, LeCroix is having a private meeting with Adrien, when shouting and yelling interrupts them. We watch it all come to a head when John

and Mark end up in fisticuffs as their shocked teammates watch on. "Ever since day one you've been on my ass! What did I do to you? huh!? What did I ever do to you?" John yells out before storming off the court. LeCroix stops John, and sends Mark to the showers.

Mark heads out; his head hanging low, Coach Dennis on his heels, jabbering after him like an incessant poodle. Meanwhile Emily Bond and the horrified field hockey girls, watch from across the gymnasium.

In the shower Mark stands alone, knocking his head against the wall. He is completely beside himself and we are too.

Stepping out Mark fights inner demons to offer John an apology but there is only half hearted reception from John. Mark leaves. Everyone watches him go. Emily intercepts Mark in the hallway and for the first time ever Mark accepts her offer for support.

Later in the TEACHERS LOUNGE Mr. LeCroix reads a paper as a fellow teacher remarks: "He could give Hesse a run for his money." Revelation of the title, "The Agony and the Ecstasy, Alexander's Plight to Conquer the World," and author, Mark Winter, sends LeCroix into a moment of deep reflection.

The next thing we know LeCroix forces John and Mark onto each other, instructing Mark to teach John everything he knows.

The Graftt world seems to stabilize. Emily seems to make headway in pursuit of Mark. David steals unreturned glances at Emily. Satch and Sloop continue to brawl and Stanford is forever searching his body for hair.

During a basketball game a series of quick moves between Christopher, John, and Mark reveals that Coach LeCroix's instincts have paid off. John is as much a star on the basketball court as he was on the soccer field and everyone now knows it and the tension between Mark and John seems to have subsided.

When winter break arrives Christopher, Mark, and John pile out of Christopher's car in order to retrieve Stanford from Talbot Stables. We see Adrien on the Stallion for the first time. Amidst the pure white of the snow it is as if

we are watching a fine and flawless ballet. Even Christopher is impressed until he remembers he doesn't like the kid and turns his focus on getting the others back in the car and on the road. As they each finally pile in Mark and Stanford lock eyes. It is, in an odd way, the same to Stanford; Adrien riding that Stallion and Mark negotiating his life, though it is an awareness that nobody else seems to notice or share.

In the LACEY SKI CHALET a beer bash is in progress though it's only the boiz. Straws are drawn for sleeping arrangements and Mark and John end up assigned to the same bed. A long conversation about pajamas versus sleeping commando ensues. When John reveals that sleeping naked is the only way to go, cat calls and jeers abound from all sides and Mark takes leave. The conversation then turns to girls and sex culminating in John revealing not only a great deal of experience but his absolute adoration of Mark. Satch accuses John of being "in love" with Mark, to which John replies: "Totally! Hell I wish I were Mark!

Later in the MASTER BEDROOM Mark feigns sleep when John enters. John drops his robe, slides under the covers and promptly falls asleep. Mark rolls over, glances at John and after a brief internal battle, grabs a robe and leaves. Stoking the fire Mark's solace is interrupted by John's voice: "Mark, its cool, go back to bed, I'll sleep out here." "No," Mark explains, "Christopher's right, that bed is big enough for five. You go ahead; I'll be in in a few minutes." But John settles down on the rug next to Mark and a long intimate conversation ensues.

Time passes, we hear a toilet flush and realize that someone is up. Moments later Stanford emerges watching them. As snow continues to fall, Stanford tiptoes away and John tells Mark the story of his life. -- But it's very late and although Mark is riveted, John is spent. Eventually John slumps over onto Mark, into a deep sleep.

Mark repositions the sleeping John on the Angora Rug studying him...his feet...the line where the hair on his ankles begins...his calves....thighs....the slit of his open robe. Firelight reflects off Johns face, eyes, and lips. Mark watches John sleep for several moments and then covers him with blankets and exits frame.

The next morning, John folds his makeshift bed, Stanford

makes breakfast....Satch and Sloop go at it as usual. Mark steps around them into the living room. John looks at Mark, bedding in hand...Something has changed, suddenly everything seems different.

John enters Mr. LeCroix's empty classroom sitting in a chair opposite him. LeCroix waits. John gathers his thoughts, then without a word, gets up and leaves. LeCroix watches the door close behind John.

In the WEIGHT ROOM Mark and Christopher are bench pressing when John enters wearing the same clothes as the previous scene. Mark is visibly relieved to see John. There is an awkward moment of silence, and then John announces he's skipping weight training today and exits.

Christopher and Mark eventually exit the weight room. John leans against the wall outside where he has been waiting. He asks if he can talk to Mark alone, Christopher nods, and Mark and John head into the empty cafeteria where John musters everything he has then asks: "I'm sorry if this is coming completely from left field man...and...well...you may have to straighten me out here but...are you like, you know, into guys?" Mark doesn't say yes but he doesn't say no, either. John then launches into a revelatory exposition about his own sexuality including an entire summer of adolescent exploration with another boy. John laughs as he recalls his mother walking in on them with their pants down around their ankles, wanking on each other. He relives the hilarity of it all explaining how shortly thereafter he discovered girls: "And it's been like Christmas ever since. ` Listen, I'll do it with you if you want, Mark. If I were ever to do it with a guy again, you'd be the one, that's for sure...It's just...I feel like I'd be lying, you know?"

Mark stares at the table, now "outed" and feeling rejected all at the same time. After an excruciating moment of silence he asks that John to keep the information to himself and leave him alone. John fights to explain how it works with girls but is abruptly put in his place when Mark reveals: "Yeah, well, it kind of feels like I'm lying, you know?"

Stanford who has watched the whole thing unnoticed from across the room, sits up when Mark leaves the cafeteria. Shortly thereafter Stanford notices something outside,

scoops up his books and exits himself.

The Basketball team runs drills, sans Mark and when LeCroix asks where Mark is all eyes turn to John.

Mark walks aimlessly through the snow. A crunching in the snow behind him brings him to a halt. Stanford stands behind Mark, books in hand, shivering without a coat, claiming he just happens to be going for a walk. Mark looks at the trail in the snow, clearly he's been followed.

Mark throws his overcoat over Stanford while Stanford launches into questions about Mark's experiences with puberty, explaining how both his older brothers and both his younger brothers have hit puberty but it's not happening to him. The whole conversation actually begins to amuse Mark temporarily lifting him out of his own personal hell - an affect Stanford seems to have on everyone. When Stanford somewhat out of the blue turns the conversation toward Stallions more is revealed and we begin to see just how very perceptive and special this weird kid really is.

Meanwhile in the LOCKER ROOM, SPORTS CAGE a much bolder Assistant Coach sidles-up along side Adrien. Rejecting any advances Adrien heads outside. But the Assistant Coach won't be put off. He follows Adrien out and grabs him when suddenly out of the darkness emerge Stanford and Mark. The Assistant Coach abruptly steps back as if he were never advancing on Adrien at all. Mark and Adrien lock eyes and finally Mark gets the chance to tell Adrien what he's wanted to say ever since that day before winter break: "It was amazing watching you with that Stallion, Adrien. 'I don't think I've ever seen anything so beautiful in my life.'" Adrien shrinks inside himself and barely mumbles out: "I've been meaning to apologize; you know about the Library;" speaking of an earlier time when Mark was trying to help him. To which Mark replies; "Yeah, well whenever you're ready to get back to it, I'm here for you." The moment sends Stanford into his own private world of bliss in the midst of which he turns to the Assistant Coach and unabashedly asks him about his puberty and hair. When the Assistant Coach leaves in a huff, Mark breaks into hysterical laughter: "Stanford you have to stop asking people that, folks are going to think you're crazy." The locker room door swings open just at this moment and John and Coach LeCroix step out. Mark and John lock eyes, and Adrien takes his leave. LeCroix asks if Mark will be at

practice tomorrow. Mark shrugs, 'maybe,' then asks John if he wants to join him and Stanford for dinner. They take off. LeCroix watches them go. Even he doesn't know what's going on. In the distance Adrien slips into the darkness, alone.

Later that night in the cafeteria, everyone is jabbering away, happily eating dinner. John, hastening around a corner with a tray full of food and beverages, slams into Sasha sending food and beverage everywhere. Sasha's tee shirt is drenched, her nipples become erect, and on John's lead the entire cafeteria bursts into a spontaneous food fight. In the meantime John yanks Sasha down, whips off his shirt and offers it as cover, seizing the moment to ask Sasha out. She nods, unable to look him in the eye. As the food fight subsides and Sasha heads back to her friends who are also now covered in food, John turns to his friends euphoric. 'She wants to go out with me.'

In the weeks that follow football, basketball, field hockey, players; Mark, John, Christopher, David, Satch and Sloop, etc. horse around between classes. The usual: David steals glances at Emily Bond. Emily watches Mark. Mark approaches Adrien who stands alone. John and Sasha have become too engaged with each other to notice anything else outside their self contained sphere.

At TALBOT STABLES. Adrien is jumping the Stallion as Mrs. Talbot and everyone watch on. For her it is better than sex until Adrien abruptly aborts a jump. Mrs. Talbot looks back. Mark stands watching from the barn. Adrien and Stallion stand quietly for a minute. Adrien works to settle first himself and then the stallion, then executes the jump flawlessly. Mrs. Talbot nods a knowing smile and looks back one more time but Mark has disappeared into the barn.

Meanwhile at the SODA FOUNTAIN, John and his buddies watch as Sasha and her Frumpy girl sidekick enter and approach a table full of Field Hockey Girls. There is room for one but not two. Sasha motions the Frumpy Girl to join her at another table. Moments later Emily sacrifices the security of her "tribe" to join Sasha and the Frumpy Girl. With that as an opening, John separates from his friends and joins the girls.

Back at TALBOT STABLES Adrien has finished bedding the

Stallion and is cleaning up. Beads of sweat roll off his face, he hikes his shirt to wipe it. Mark looks from Adrien's belly to his eyes, and then turns away - there are those feelings again that Mark wishes he did not have. As the two exit, supposedly on a study mission, Adrien pursues a different agenda pulling out a joint, 'wanna?'

Mark opts for the joint and soon thereafter he is standing in front of the glass case in a convenience store wracked with anxiety trying to choose a beverage. Adrien is outside laughing hysterically. It is clearly Mark's first time being stoned and Adrien is thoroughly entertained by this.

Back at the soda fountain Emily, John, and Sasha sit in private conversation with John marveling over Sasha's every word.

Meanwhile Adrien has talked Mark into a frozen dunk in an effort to straighten him out before practice. It's freezing and they'll have to be dry when they're done so they strip naked and jump into the frigid water each shooting out like missiles. Standing suddenly naked in a way he's never been, Adrien gets uncomfortable, hands Mark his clothes, and turns away to dress.

Mark becomes confused on multiple levels. When Adrien tries to explain that he feels like he's corrupting Mark, Mark insists that he's not the pure thing that everyone thinks he is but we and Adrien both know that in truth he is. Adrien also knows there is no way he wants to lead Mark into the dark places he has been. Not having a clue about what Adrien is talking about Mark continues to insist how good Adrien is for him but Adrien simply cannot hear or begin to believe this.

GYMNASIUM-DAY. The stands are overflowing. Seconds remain. Mark steps to the free throw line....Emily Bond watches, Adrien watches, 'swish!' Mark steps out of the locker room a while later and Emily launches herself into his arms. Mark then crosses to where Adrien waits in the shadows. They high five, laugh, and Mark invites Adrien to the after party which Adrien vehemently declines. "You have to let them know who you are, Adrien." Adrien can only shake his head. Christopher watches and when Mark returns he wants to know why Mark is hanging out with that "fag?!" -

"The group" heads across the parking lot and piles into cars. Emily gets into Christopher's car; Mark flashes Adrien one last look and then climbs in after her. --- Several hours pass and they're all at a party and fairly drunk. Mark has "disappeared" and Christopher and Satch smoke a joint and talk about what a wuss Mark Winter is.

John and Sasha, who refuse to leave each other's side, pass through the kitchen so John can use a back bathroom. Christopher takes the opportunity to make his move on Sasha. Sasha stands her ground but can't help but blush as the compliments keep coming. John returns from the bathroom, surveys the situation, takes Sasha's hand and wordlessly slips her back to a private corner of the living room. Sloop taunts Christopher: "You're just no match for Tripler, Lacey." To which Christopher replies: "We'll see, we'll see."

Mark and Adrien have met out on campus grounds and contemplate getting stoned, but they're both freezing, so Mark suggests that they go back to his dorm room. At first Adrien declines, but gives in when Mark tells him that Christopher won't be back for hours.

Mark and Adrien sit on beds opposite each other and have a conversation that reveals that although Christopher and Mark have been best friends for life; "Christopher doesn't really know me."

Mark touches a bruise on Adrien's arm and asks him if he gets beaten everyday. He then lifts Adrien's shirt to reveal his back covered in welts. Adrien tries to push away but Mark edges closer, lifts the shirt again and begins touching the bruises. Mark gently massages out Adrien's tensions, while telling him a story of the Mongolian Battle fields where soldiers massaged each other to remove the memory of the battle from their bones. "That way they could enter the battlefield the next day fearlessly."

As Mark's hands move he becomes more and more absorbed. As Mark becomes more absorbed Adrien becomes completely relaxed until Adrien surrenders to everything Mark has to offer.

Back at the party Christopher is pounding beers, getting

out of control. John and Sasha are on the couch doing less talking and more touching.

Back at the DORM ROOM Mark has fallen asleep with both arms wrapped around Adrien. When Adrien startles awake out of a nightmare he works to get his bearing. Mark calms him down; "it's all right, Adrien, it's only me. Everything's going to be all right." Adrien remains shirtless, though both are completely clothed. When Adrien starts shivering Mark pulls a blanket up covering them both. Holding Adrien close Mark whispers to himself; "This is immense...this is so immense." In the silence we see tears roll off Adrien's face. It is the first time he's ever truly been touched. It is the first time he's ever truly been held. It is the first time he's ever truly been loved.

At the party John and Sasha kiss in a back corner. Other than the loving home in which she was raised it is the first time Sasha's ever really been touched. It is the first time she's ever really been held. It is the first time she's ever really been loved. The party is breaking-up, people are coupling off and heading out. Sasha and John remain...kissing in the back corner.

When Christopher bursts into the room later he startles Adrien and Mark awake. Christopher first stumbles into the closet, but then finds his way to the bathroom, pissing on the floor and slowly turning until he hears a splash. Mark uses the moment as a diversion to rush Adrien out of the room unnoticed.

FOOTBALL FIELD - THE NEXT DAY. Mark teaches Adrien how to throw a football. Finally after multiple attempts Adrien throws the perfect pass. The other guys show-up and there's a five on five scrimmage. Adrien is quarterback and throws a touchdown pass to John. Christopher scowls; Mark revels. Coach Dennis appears out of nowhere and calls Adrien out breaking up the game.

TALBOT STABLES- LATER. Adrien's clearly been beaten again. Stanford is begging Adrien to saddle the Stallion and go for a ride, but Adrien has come to the stable to tell Mrs. Talbot that this is his last day. She takes his face in both her hands; "somebody has got to stop this!" Adrien rushes off, unable to bear the reality of his life.

Back in Christopher's dorm room Satch, Sloop, John, David

and several football players shout out over each other about the size of Adrien's anatomy, from having seen it in the shower room. Just then Mark walks in and Satch calls out: "So, Mark, does Adrien Sanchez's dick get any bigger or does it just get harder?" To a chorus of hysterical laughter and cat calls, Mark backs out, stunned. John takes off after him: "Mark! They're just messing around. They haven't figured it out." "Figured what out?!" Mark shoves John, and exits in a rage.

Mark is in the library anxiously waiting to tutor Adrien when Adrien comes in. Mark sees the fresh bruises, shoves his papers and books into his back pack and bolts out of the Library making a beeline for the coach's office where he grabs Coach Dennis by the throat, slams him against the wall, and threatens to kill him if he ever lays a hand on Adrien again.

Utter chaos ensues. Four coaches hold Coach Dennis back as he goes ballistic. As he's later led out of the locker room with an ice pack on his head, Coach LeCroix addresses the basketball players telling them that Mark Winter is having a tough time right now and needs their support. Everyone starts talking at once wanting to know what is going on. All eyes turn to John. John shakes his head. He doesn't want to tell them.

In MARK AND CHRISTOPHER'S DORM ROOM Mark and Adrien talk of the possibility...the impossibility of what they're involved in. Adrien: "What we're doing is wrong, Mark." Mark: "It doesn't feel wrong to me. Does it feel wrong to you?" As the reality of it sinks in. Mark collapses inside himself. Amidst his own inner anguish Adrien rushes out.

Moments later Christopher bursts through the door and screams for Mark to get out and starts dumping all of Mark's clothes and belongings into the hallway. Mark stands stunned. John and the rest of the football players rush up shortly thereafter. John stares aghast at Christopher: "What are you doing??" Christopher barks back: "I'm not living with a FAG!"

Mark takes off and John stands in utter disbelief watching Christopher demolish the room. John then steps into Christopher's path with fists clenched: "You heard Coach LeCroix, Mark needs your support." 'Yeah?" Christopher retorts: "What does Coach LeCroix know, he's probably a

"fag" himself. You ever seen him with a woman? Yeah, well neither have I." Fellow teammates and Dorm Residents take this in. Sloop steps up to Christopher, acknowledging the fact that he and Mark have been best friends since they were kids. They are inches away from an all out brawl when John stoops down and starts picking Marks stuff up. "Help me!" he calls out. Some help and some don't. Most just stare at each other in shock.

Mark paces outside the Girls Dorm. When Emily Bond steps out Mark collapses in front of her blurting out how sorry he is and that he's a liar and that his whole life is a big lie. Taking him into a full embrace and then out of earshot of eavesdroppers, Emily puts her own horror aside to listen, empathize and care for Mark. She explains to Mark that everything is going to be alright. And she believes this. Mark: "I was only trying to help him." Emily: "Who Mark? Who were you trying to help?"

ADRIEN stands in the adult section of a MAGAZINE SHOP. He catches the eye of an older man whose hungry eyes cruise Adrien. Adrien closes his magazine and walks out into a dark alley but not without first glancing back. Moments later the man closes his magazine and follows Adrien. The streets are black, slick, wet, empty. The man steps up to Adrien. Motions signal he is opening Adrien's pants. Adrien closes his eyes. Later, Adrien walks the streets, his clothes drenched in rain. We wonder if the moisture rolling off his face is from rain or tears.

HEADMASTERS OFFICE. Mark, and his parents sit facing the Headmaster. Mrs. Talbot, Coach Dennis and Coach LeCroix are also present. The Headmaster drones on about tensions being high and Coach Dennis being an upstanding citizen etc, etc.. Mrs. Talbot, unable to be dissuaded, explains that Coach Dennis is beating his step son and it needs to be investigated!' Upon the Headmaster's assurance that it indeed will be, she leaves but not without first silently acknowledging Mark.

The Headmaster turns to Mark but Mark refuses to apologize. Coach Dennis explains to Mark how he will understand one day when he's a parent, why parents do the things they do and that everything that has been done has been done in both his and Adrien's behalf. Mark restrains himself in his seat. His parents look on like deers caught in headlights. When Mark is reassured that none of this will

go on his record and becomes horrified to realize that the meeting isn't about Adrien, but about him: "You heard her! He beats him up every single day!" Mark's parents abruptly intervene, begging apologies to the Headmaster. Coach LeCroix looks at Mark as if to say this is a battle you're going to have to let go of for now. They lock eyes. Coach LeCroix acknowledges Mark and exits frame.

GYMNASIUM-DAY. Championship game, the opponents are ahead by one. The stands are overflowing and Mark is once again at the free throw line. He bounces. The crowd is hushed. He shoots. The ball doesn't even reach the rim. The game resumes around him, moments later the buzzer sounds.

Christopher, John, and other players shower and dress. Mark is already out the door. All eyes watch him go. Coach LeCroix calls Christopher into his office. It's a standoff. Christopher doesn't think he should be blamed for the loss. He certainly isn't the only one who has a problem with the "fag." After several beats he exits leaving Coach LeCroix staring after him.

Mark exits the gym to the glares of many of his once "supporters." There is a mixture of expressions from concerned, to repulsed, to sympathetic. Emily is about to make a move toward him but thinks better of it. Adrien pushes people aside and exits in the opposite direction.

Christopher comes out and Stanford and Sasha are waiting alone. All the others are gone. Stanford smugly remarks: "Gosh, after I wished you luck and everything." Christopher is not amused and when Stanford brings up a long buried memory of Christopher's childhood dog Max, Christopher becomes outright angry with Stanford.

John sits alone on the bench in the locker room. Coach LeCroix tries to console him. John doesn't want to talk about it; he just wants to go home. Sasha is waiting for John outside the locker room. They leave together and while referring to an experience Sasha has had in English class with Mark Winter, Sasha recounts for John a story about Alexander the Great and alludes to other papers Mark had written about Michelangelo and Socrates and other "great," purportedly gay men. For the first time we see John's true colors and how deeply he feels the loss of his hero, the loss of the things he's cherished most, the loss of innocence: "Mark Winter no longer gets to be one of us,

he's different." "No, John," Sasha explains: "Mark Winter is still the same; it's your perception that's different. It's just your perception that's different." Unable to contain himself John breaks down and sobs in Sasha's arms.

MARK AND CHRISTOPHER'S DORM ROOM. Christopher picks up a framed photograph of him and Mark as they hug after a big game. He smashes it.

TALBOT STABLES. Adrien works to execute a jump. Something distracts him. He and Stanford turn to see Mark in the field waiting, forlorn and alone. Adrien gallops off in the opposite direction. Stanford stands traumatized and devastated, at a complete loss as to what to do.

LECROIX'S CLASSROOM. All eyes avert Mark. The bell rings. Christopher is up and out the door. Sasha tries to talk to Mark but he ignores her...and everyone else.

SCHOOL CAFETERIA. Mark sits at their usual table. Christopher slows...then moves to a table in the middle of the room. All other football and basketball players follow Christopher. John boldly sits down next to Mark. Mark tells him that he doesn't have to. John insists he wants to eat with him, so Mark confronts him. And John explains that he told the others about him because he was trying to help.

Mark tells John to tell everyone that he's really, really, sorry. And he leaves. Everyone watches Mark make his way across the cafeteria and out the door.

LECROIX'S CLASSROOM. John has come to confront Coach LeCroix: "Do you think I'm gay?" "No, I don't think you're gay, John but Danny Everett was." Coach LeCroix pulls out an old dusty scrapbook and hands it to John. It's his scrapbook from his glory days in high school -- same kinds of pictures of him and another boy, hugging each other after games, etc. Then LeCroix hands John a weathered obituary photo with the heading reading "The Tragedy of Teenage Suicide:" "He tried to talk to me about it, but it was way more than I could handle at the time."

John bolts out of LeCroix's classroom. He is in an absolute panic. He pounds on Mark's dorm room door calling out to him...He checks the football field...the weight room...the gym...locker room...the plaza. He questions students and

teachers and strangers. Mark is nowhere to be found.

TALBOT STABLES. Stanford is about to burst with excitement as he's hoisted up on the freshly saddled Stallion. He looks around for Mark, having been promised by him that he would not miss Stanford's moment. Stanford looks every which way but Mark is nowhere to be seen. Mrs. Talbot calls up to Stanford: "Whatcha waiting on, honey?"

LECROIX'S CLASSROOM. Sunlight streams across Mark's empty chair. --- There's a knock at the door...the Headmaster's face peers through. LeCroix steps out into the hallway.... a quiet conversation....then the door heaves with the weight of Coach LeCroix collapsing against it. The Assistant Headmaster steps into the room and tells Christopher he's wanted in the Headmaster's office right away. Christopher looks to Mark's empty chair for several beats then exits....every face reflects the burden of impending despair.

We dissolve into an empty DORM ROOM. Beds are stripped, closets are empty nothing is left except for dusty furniture. John, Satch, Sloop, David, Christopher, and Basketball and Football Players all dressed in black funeral attire stare aimlessly at specks of dust floating in the sunlight.

There's a knock at the door. John answers and his face alights to see its Mark. He gives Mark a hearty hug. Everyone (except Christopher) mumbles a warm hello. They then all exit leaving Christopher and Mark alone. Christopher trembles with emotion: "What am I going to do without Stanford, Mark?"

Mark is silent. Christopher asks if Mark remembers the day they had to put his childhood dog to sleep. "You just kept saying to me over and over that he's going to be so much better off in dog heaven." Mark nods. "Do you think Stanford is in dog heaven?" Mark shakes his head then shrugs then nods. He really doesn't know. Christopher suddenly notices and pulls out the now dusty book from under the bed -- "Adolescence and Puberty." "Stanford was for...ever asking me about that." Christopher says; "It was embarrassing, man." Mark and Christopher share a hearty laugh and for a moment everything is normal...but just for a moment.

Christopher: "I don't want you to be a fag, Mark."

Mark: "I'm not a fag, Christopher! Look, I don't want to do what you do with girls. Not ever...I don't want to do it with guys either...But I do have these feelings. And they're strong feelings. And yeah, right now they happen to be for... you've got to get out of your head that what I want to do with him is what you do with all these girls..."

CHRISTOPHER: "And what might that be Mark?"

MARK: "You know Christopher it's as if I've always been a prop for your movie. But I've never really been in the movie. And there have been a lot of things you've done that I wouldn't dream of doing, but that doesn't mean I..."

Christopher: "You're wrong! You're wrong about that, Mark Winter! You're my best friend, my very best friend, the only friend I've ever really had. You've seen and know things about me nobody ever will!"

MARK: "And now you're seeing and knowing things about me...But I'm still the same person, Christopher. Nothing's changed."

Mark turns away, working to mask sudden emotion.

Christopher takes this in. Contemplating...thinking... after several beats he exits leaving Mark sitting alone.

At STANTON STATUE John and the gang listen as Adrien recounts the story of how one minute Stanford was looking back at him and Mark smiling from ear to ear...."the happiest, brightest moment of his life" and then the next minute he was gone...forever. Christopher walks up, tears streaming off his face. With difficulty he goes to Adrien apologizing to him and telling him that Stanford thought the world of him. Again, Christopher can't take all the suddenly self revelatory emotion and struts off. But he abruptly turns back and tells Adrien that someone is in Stanford's dorm room who: "sure as shit could use a friend."

Christopher makes his way across a sunny campus. Students offer their condolences. Christopher laughs one minute, sobs the next. It's almost schizophrenic. Adrien stands in indecision.

STANFORD'S DORM ROOM. Sunlight streams in through the windows igniting Mark and the puberty book sitting on the floor. Mark slowly looks up to find Adrien standing in the doorway. ADRIEN: "I've done some...things. Bad

things...with other men...things that I'm not very proud of...and..." Adrien hangs his head. Mark stares down at his hands and, without looking up: "Maybe I can dig them out...the memories...from your bones..." Adrien: "That would be nice." Mark slowly stands, crosses to Adrien, wraps both arms around him and pulls him in close. Adrien slowly begins to sob.

TALBOT STABLES. Still decked in their funeral attire, everyone is gathered underneath the tree branch which is now ceremoniously decorated with flowers and garlands. There seems to be an atmosphere of camaraderie and acceptance, although some eyes still avert Mark's.

A joint makes its rounds. Emily smiles at Mark. Then she gets an idea and sidles up along side David Lacey, gently taking hold of his arm: "Are you alright?" David barely manages to look up but when he does he sees Emily's radiant smile. She squeezes his hand and moves off.

John and Sasha are happily wrapped up in each other. Satch, Sloop, and Christopher pass the joint, Mark and Adrien pat the Stallion. Rays of sunlight stream high above and through the tree. It is revealed to be entirely decorated with garlands and flowers.

FLASHBACK: In the golden light of day we watch Adrien, Mark, Mrs. Talbot, and the Stable Groom smiling broadly as they watch Stanford galloping the Stallion, his blonde hair blowing in the wind, tears streaming off his face...this moment is, for Stanford, the happiest moment of his life.

He never even saw the branch that took him away...instantly and forever.

FADE OUT.