



Chasing Joey

Cheree Franco

In seventh grade, she didn't make cheerleader. But then, Richard Linklater let her play one.

NASHVILLE, Tenn. — If you disagree with Joey Lauren Adams, even over a topic that she knows intimately, she will remain polite. Even after she's had a few drinks and her friends — east Nashville bartenders, animal rescuers,

movie buffs and bushwhacker aficionados (“It’s like an alcoholic milkshake”) — are defensive on her behalf.

Adams is polite when she tries to steal a cigarette break, just before signing hundreds of autographs as part of the CMA Music Fest, even though she has been gone exactly three minutes before CMT sends down a production assistant. In the five hours following the Hard Rock Cafe premiere of *Still the King*, CMT’s first scripted series, she will remain polite through two stage appearances and at least two hours of standing in heels, scribbling her name and posing for pictures with her co-stars (one of whom, Billy Ray Cyrus, stays seated), as her stomach growls, her gums dry and her cheeks ache.

Adams is polite to restaurant servers, executive producers, journalists, drivers, celebrities, fans and random people in parks. She is polite when appearing on the 21st morning show of a single morning to answer questions on a jet-lagged four hours of sleep. She is polite because she’s Southern, because she’s her mother’s daughter and because her livelihood depends in part on her personability.

But don’t mistake polite for pushover.

When Adams was 6, she challenged her preacher on his Sunday message: “It’s all about God passing down the sins of the fathers ... and I’m like, what? ... Why would God punish innocent children?”

She had her mother schedule an appointment with the preacher, only to receive unsatisfactory answers. (“She’s determined,” says her aunt, Kathleen King.)

When Adams didn’t make seventh-grade cheerleader — considered so tragic that her mother’s friends brought food — she immersed herself in

school plays, learned flute, and she and a fellow flutist made “flute loops” shirts. (“She’s the raw flame, the live wire,” King quotes Steely Dan. The song is called “Josie,” but King always hears it as “Joey.”)

“She’s very much a leader,” says Meg Reticker, who edited Adams’ 2006 film *Come Early Morning*. “It’s just her energy, bringing people together.”

“Generous, loyal, intentional ...” King lists her niece’s virtues. “And inclusive.”

Adams logged an exchange semester in Australia before graduating in 1986 from North Little Rock’s former Northeast High School and working multiple jobs at once, at Cajun’s Wharf, the Oyster Bar, Victoria’s Secret and the Maumelle Country Club golf shop. By 19, she had saved \$1,000. She flew to California to stay with an aerobics instructor, a friend of her mother’s friend.

FROM THE WEST COAST TO THE FAR EAST

In 1988 Adams was hired by The Troy Cory Show. It was the first American entertainment group to perform in China after the cultural revolution and her first paying show biz gig. She spent 10 days in China, haphazardly delivering nostalgic Americana to audiences of 15,000.

Now the tour’s pixelated footage lives on YouTube, with Chinese acrobats bounding and upended pandas rolling balls. Adams, the only blonde (“That’s why I got the role,” she says) leans forward to light a candle.

Afterward, Adams navigated a “cliche” Los Angeles minefield. “I’d meet someone who was kind of legit, who’d done something I’d heard of, and

they'd be like, yeah ... I'm going to make you a star, let's go to dinner. And then the hand on the knee"

She grimaces. "I was always like, how does that contract go? Do I have to sleep with you eight times to get eight minutes of screen time?"

One night she met a 24-year-old painter whose work had been exhibited by Andy Warhol. Within hours, James Mathers had moved into Adams' apartment. A few weeks after that, he left for Bali.

He gave her two paintings. "If you can sell these, buy me some paint and yourself a ticket," he said.

INT. BEGGARS BUSH, UBUD, BALI, 1989

The small, dim bar twinkles with candles and Balinese statues. It's an ex-pat watering hole a decade before Ubud becomes touristy. The barflies are serious traders and travelers.

JOEY, 20, stands in the doorway, head cocked, listening to 1930s blues. She's not sure where it's coming from, but it reminds her of Arkansas, of her father's guitar. After a moment, she walks to the bar.

JOEY (to bartender)

Excuse me, do you know James?

A blond man moves from the shadows to stand behind her.

JAMES

Joey?

...

Armed with nothing but a phrase (Mathers told her he'd be "at Simon's in Ubud"), Adams had crossed the Pacific. If she hadn't been able to find him, she planned to post fliers around town.

"It was intense young love, Romeo and Juliet stuff," she says, almost three decades later.

They spent four months in Bali before moving to New Orleans, where Mathers made props for the film *Zandalee*. One of *Zandalee*'s producers became Adams' manager and helped her win her first TV roles on *Married...With Children* and its spinoff, *Top of the Heap*.

CHASING SUCCESS

At 23 Adams landed the role that eluded her in seventh grade. ("Fry like bacon, you little piggies!" cheerleader Simone jeers at freshmen recruits, in an emblematic scene from Richard Linklater's *Dazed and Confused*.)

"Rick sent a letter to everyone and cassette tapes with '70s music and said, if you don't like your character, change it. Just know it when you get to Austin, [Texas]" she says.

In their downtime, Adams and co-star Parker Posey revised the script. "We'd be like, Rick, we wrote a scene, and he'd say, OK, I'll give you one take."

Two years later Adams appeared in Kevin Smith's *Mallrats*. By 1997, when she starred in his follow-up, *Chasing Amy*, she and Smith were dating. An independent film made for \$250,000, *Chasing Amy* grossed \$12 million.

Adams was nominated for two MTV Movie Awards and a Golden Globe. She made the late show rounds — Conan O'Brien (twice), Jay Leno (four times) and David Letterman (twice) — but neither she nor Smith were prepared for the film's aftermath.

It seemed to Adams that Smith was happy to discuss "intimate details" of their relationship with press, and "all of a sudden, it became this scrutiny of our life." In *Chasing Amy*, Alyssa, a lesbian artist, falls for Holden, an artist played by Ben Affleck, who ultimately can't handle her sexual history. It wasn't explicitly based on Adams' and Smith's relationship, but Smith admitted that Holden's fears and doubts were his own.

"He didn't really leave New Jersey and ... I had traveled. He saw me as more worldly," Adams says. "It just created these insecurities and fights and problems. A lot of the scenes, he would write and give to me, and I knew they were apologies."

TRUTH WILL SET YOU FREE

It happened every time Adams finished a shoot. The next morning she'd lie in bed paralyzed, aimlessness crushing her chest. One night, following one such panicky morning, she glanced around an LA bar and thought, "I have no reason to get out of bed tomorrow, and that's why I'm here drinking. And that's why everyone here is drinking."

The next morning, she started writing. The result was *Come Early Morning's Lucy*, a construction contractor dealing with an uncommunicative father, a penchant for boozy one-night stands and an existentialist dilemma. Lucy was complicated and challenging, the role Adams (the perpetual girlfriend) yearned to play.

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"There are times when I've found Joey to be very spiritual ... there's an intellectual and rational way about her and then an irrational way. I feel like she's always evolving, maybe because she's accepting of so many different kinds of people and ways of looking at the world," Reticker says.

Come Early Morning, the first feature written and directed by Adams, is an extension of that childhood conversation with her preacher. ("I ... am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation." Exodus 20:5, King James Version)

Working from a paternal history as dark as a Faulkner novel, Adams wrote to exorcise demons: a bullying patriarch, a son's thwarted dreams, addiction, an electrocution and other freak accidents, children hiding infidelities from mothers hiding infidelities from their children, a father who doesn't speak.

("It wasn't that he didn't want to have a relationship. He was paralyzed by the communication that it takes," King says.)

Throughout her life, Adams wondered, "Do we have four more generations of this? How do you stop it?" Eventually she decided power comes through blunt recognition.

"It's not God in heaven just deeming it so. It's an energy. It's like, you're [her grandfather] cheating on your wife, and the wife is having to hide the fact that you've been gone with your mistress for three weeks ... It's just a negative, dark energy that kids will carry."

Playing off the biblical concept of Jesus as "the way, the truth and the light," to Adams "truth is where God exists ... If you're able to look at things truthfully and accept them, you can lose that energy."

She wanted Lucy (played by Ashley Judd) to demand the truth from her father. She wanted to script a monologue that the paternal character, Lowell (played by Scott Wilson), would deliver, perhaps tearfully, absolving generations of pain.

"I just kept writing and writing, but Lowell wouldn't say anything," she says. She worked on the monologue for days, sometimes weeping out of frustration. Finally, she understood. "I'd created this character who doesn't talk. He's not going to all of a sudden launch into a monologue."

"JUST MAKE ME FEEL ALIVE" — ALYSSA

The day after she strolls the 2016 CMT Awards' pink "red carpet" in a sleek sea-foam dress, an Entertainment Tonight headline screams, "Joey Lauren Adams seemingly hasn't aged since Chasing Amy." Adams, sans makeup, sits cross-legged under a tree, processing her chemistry with Cyrus.

They both view their lives through competing/complementary prisms of fate and focus, but there's something more. "'Achy-Breaky' was a huge hit, but he's not doing anything different ... He's been recording music and in his world, it hasn't stopped," she says.

(Cyrus, a creator on *Still the King*, always wanted Adams for the role: “In a perfect world, I was like, who can play this? Joey! All I have to do is know my mark and my lines. She carries the scene.”)

Occasionally Adams meets people who ask where she has been since *Chasing Amy*. Her Internet Movie Database page lists dozens of roles. “I’ve been doing films,” she says. “It’s just, not every film is *Chasing Amy*.”

In a content-saturated era, maybe there couldn’t be another *Chasing Amy*. This topic will be volleyed around later that night, over bushwhackers and among other topics, such as ’90s rap (her husband, cinematographer Brian Vilim, is a fan), whether or not Alyssa’s sexuality is relevant and how, as a young teen, her friend Jess (one of those Nashville bartenders) traveled solo working with the fair.

Adams and Vilim are excited about spending part of the year in Nashville, where they lived as newlyweds during *Still the King*’s first season of shooting. “Once I realized acting wasn’t going to bring me all the happiness in the world, you start to figure out what life is about,” Adams says. “Life is about the little things. It’s your dogs and finding someone you love and trying to be supportive of each other.”

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By the time *Come Early Morning* was filmed in North Little Rock, Adams lived in Oxford, Miss. — a literary fortress safeguarding Southern Gothic past and present.

“You get a good sense of who Joey is through her life in Oxford, through her friends there,” Reticker says. “Creative, eccentric, very Southern, open.

Into their cocktails and having a good time, interested in discussing ideas.”

Not far from Adams’ house, there’s an homage to a long-gone Oxford eccentric. William Faulkner, frozen in bronze, turned toward an imaginary compatriot, waiting for a conversation that never comes.

In 1956, Faulkner told The Paris Review, “An artist is a creature driven by demons.”

In 2001, Adams rewrote a poignant scene in Come Early Morning.

INT. SHABBY LIVING ROOM, NORTH LITTLE ROCK

LUCY and LOWELL face each other, lit by a single lamp. He’s in an armchair, strumming an acoustic guitar. She’s on a sofa, motionless. If she breathes, she’ll cry.

BEAT. Lucy sighs, rolls her eyes, leans forward.

LUCY

Dad, I wanted to talk.

LOWELL keeps strumming. He doesn’t say a word.