

# All About My Mother

## Oedipus Mutates in *Laurel Canyon*

By Basil Joe Rocker



Ah, Frances McDormand- the tightly wound, hyper-conservative professor/mom in *Almost Famous* ("I'm sorry," goes her completely famous line-of-the-movie, as she stands in front of her college class, unable to focus on the day's lecture, "Rock Stars have kidnapped my son," and she walks away from the podium and out the door.), the nervous college dean's wife/adulteress in *The Wonder Boys*, the no-nonsense, yeah, you betcha, Minnesota cop in *Fargo*, with a list that goes on. *Laurel Canyon* should soon be added to her litany of superb roles. If she has a signature line on par with the above from *Almost Famous*, it is the following, as delivered by her jaded record producer, Jane-

*I've done a lot of weird shit in my life,  
but I draw the line at fucking my son's girlfriend.*

How magnificently strong this line is as the atlas that holds up the movie's delicately shifting leitmotifs and perspectives. Indeed, she may have already fucked her son's girlfriend Alex, played to nuanced perfection by Kate Beckinsale, in a swimming pool menage a trois with her rock star man-meat, Ian McKnight (Alessandro Nivola), but that is left open and we're never quite sure how far the deal went- "deliciously ambiguous," my hyper-het sensibilites say. In fact, I'm not really sure how to define "fucking" between two women. If indeed such classification is possible, *Laurel Canyon* could find a way.

Directed and Written by Lisa Cholodenko, the film oozes with seductive upscale, Hollywood Hills smarm. McDormand is the center of the film, the sun around which all the other satellites/characters spin. She does shine like a crazy diamond, but with a hard-nosed survivalist sense that Syd Barrett never had- a supercool 60's/70's rock and roll refugee who has not only been around the block, but has lived on it, and perhaps died and resurrected on it a few times. The dramatic foundation of the film is her battle to finish a record with her boy toy's band. She thinks she has already finished it, and is quite proud of the resultant LP. However, the uptight label executive (Melissa de Sousa) overseeing the packaging end of the "product" won't give her a moment's rest (or herself for that matter) until there's a salable single for the always fast-approaching Christmas consumption frenzy.

So, in comes Jane's son, and foil, Sam (Christian Bale), a kid who has reached his lifelong ambition of achieving normalcy by completing med school at Harvard. Once his residency in LA is completed, he hopes to work as a full-fledged psychotherapist. He has become the diametric opposite of come-what-may mom. He arrives in LA expecting his "embarrassing" mom to be out of her Laurel Canyon digs so he and his bride-to-be may have some peace so he can work on his residency at a nearby psychiatric hospital, and she can finish her dissertation on the sex life of fruit flies. Sam goes into slow meltdown mode when he learns that not only is he going to be stuck with mom and her merry band

of decadent artists toiling to finish the recording in the home studio, but the Malibu Beach House option has been nipped in the bud by a feckless ex-husband of Jane's who "needs a place until he gets back on his feet." But Dr. Son sharply observes that feckless ex-husband ((one of apparently countless former spouses and lovers of both sexes, and there is no lack of suspicion about mom's past with some horses in the corral next door (just kidding about that last one.)), he doesn't have any feet. One-Nil.

Boy-Toy, bride-to-be, and from a distance, son, begin their slow, but speeding revolutions about mom, becoming faster and faster until worlds collide, and how. While Jane, boy-toy, and Sam are predictable ((the former two predictably unpredictable, the later predictably predictable (hmm..funny Freudian side note here to my dearest, most gentle readers: In my first re-read of the first draft of this verbal spew, I have misspelled Sam several times as "Same." Put that in your mental notebook. You'll need it later.)), Sam really needs a good psychic enema to cleanse all that subconscious sediment caused by years and years of geekhood trapped in the den of too-coolness)), Beckinsale's Alex, is the most dynamic character. She is the good girl, the product of "good breeding" from an upper class East Coast wasp family. At the going away party thrown by her parents in their oh so lavish, but tasteful wasp home, both parents are doubting the wisdom of the young couple's move to the West Coast. Her mother urges Sam to take good care of their daughter, and "don't let her join the Scientologists." The 'rents then cackle like two hyenas, and look like their very souls are shriveling to raisins by the millisecond, if they aren't as such already. You can't help but scream inside your heart, "Run, run far away!"

And Alex does so, physically, and psychically. In LA, the prim Alex (she and Sam play scrabble on the plane!) gradually wanders away from her fruit fly copulation thesis, and into the lives of Jane and Ian the boytoy. She is curious about them both. Having been sequestered in Ivory Towers of one sort or another all of her life, these LA industry-types are odd specimens she must examine. But as these decadent types always seem to do in the movies and possibly real-life (its been a long time since I've trucked with such ilk, and my memory is fading fast- organically and intentionally - of those days, but yeah.. it's true of reality, too. ), they rip the scientist out of her objective role, and into a subjective role in their inner sanctum. Jane and Ian manage to reach into Alex's soul and pull out the inner decadent, to spectacular effect. She starts drinking and toking weed with Jane, the laconic sound engineer (aren't sound engineers always laconic), and the band down in the home-studio as the dissertation languishes. All she can offer her professor back at Harvard are emailed excuses as she discovers a part of herself that has lied dormant in her since day one.

She blossoms with her taste of darkness, bonding with her two specimens on more than one level. In a starkly poetic image, the morning after the pool tryst, Alex ditches her usual uber-yuppie running gear, and goes for a jog in the hills dressed in Jane's vintage AC/DC shirt. The soft black shirt and majestic red rock and roll emblem lend a touch of soulful bad girl quality to her deep eyes and screams out her newly found identity. It's a bit incongruous at first, but you get the impression that she is growing very comfortable in the new skin with each passing second, relishing every slough of the old. You can also see that the bonding with the mother, even becoming like Jane to a degree (rock-n-roll shirt as surrogate skin) is leading to a greater understanding of her uptight hubby-to-be.

Her myopic view of life has opened onto great vistas and she seems to be breathing easier knowing that life doesn't have to be all genome patterns and data flogging. If only she could open Sam's eyes.

Sam is a rebel, and tragically so. Poor guy is trying so hard not to be like his mother, that he has completely stuffed his soul deep down the well of his consciousness. Along comes fellow resident at the psychiatric hospital, Sarah (Natascha McElhone), who tries hard to follow her instinct, and bag the rigid Sam. After a night of drinking, blowing off steam with some fellow residents, the two privately confess that they are queer for each other. Sarah is ready for serious bone-jumping, while Sam, true to form, insists on sublimating desires. He even says the word "sublimate." You just want to slap the guy. How many men have what it takes to attract a smart, beautiful, heavily accented Israeli woman? Not many. And Sam's eagerness to toss this fish back in the sea makes you think that this guy needs a good old fashioned colonic as much as a psychic one. The man is so out of touch with his instincts that you kind of feel sorry for him, at least after a good bitch-slappin' down Fairfax you would. The opening love scene between Sam and Alex is also indicative of this. "Gee guy, just shut up and fuck her," ya wanna say. Yes, this character is infuriating. Why be so damn smart and good looking and not enjoy the heaping pile of pussy that tends to follow it. Hey, what would Bill Clinton do?

But lo and behold, Sarah does not quit on the guy. She continues to pursue him. They have a make out session in the parking garage, but Sam still can't stop denying his instincts. Where his mom has gone extremely to the ends of decadence, he has gone to the opposite end of the spectrum, living in a personally-imposed state of absolute repression.

All this leads to the showdown at Chateau Marmont where Sam walks in on Alex and Ian in bed, in a certain state of undress. (This is right after the thwarted second threesome which is followed by the line-of-the-movie near the top of this verbal tirade) Mr. Repression flies into a rage and bangs up not only Ian, but accidentally damages mom's eye as well. This leads to a loud argument between mom and son in the lobby, and a frenzied litany of self-examination between the weds-to-be out in the street. Alex screams that she only kissed his mom (Really? What about the pool, dearest), then pleads to Sam that she "never learned how to fuck up." Sam tells her "he just wants to get it right." All you want to say is "then loosen up, man. "

The next morning we see Alex back in the yuppie running gear as she confesses to Ian that she was curious about him. Alex is world weary in the face, but back in proper presentation form. She has learned a lot, and has taken a few spins around the block in this decadent city. Ian flirts back, making crude remarks. She rolls her eyes, and I can't help think, "Please, someone, throw her a Motorhead shirt or something."

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