

Ponce de Leon

by Joe Mulder

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Starring Amy Adams, Jonah Hill, Julia Roberts, Cate Blanchett and Bradley Cooper

Jessica Vermeer (Amy Adams) is a drunk. Not many people know that, because she's young, pretty, smart, politically outspoken, and decent at hiding being a drunk. So why hasn't she made it out of Ponce de Leon, Florida, a tiny backwater town in Florida's panhandle? Mostly because she's a drunk.

She's also one of the town's poll workers, and she shows up at the local polling place, a baptist church rec room, on the morning of November 7, 2000. She's excited and nervous and, yes, already drunk. She can't really handle the prospect of a George W. Bush presidency, so she started drinking first thing in the morning out of dread. In fact, she plants a flask in the seat cover dispenser in the restroom as soon as she gets to the polling place.

The town's other poll worker is the Holmes county sheriff, Jordan Schlemmer (Jonah Hill). He's a feckless dweeb and he's hopelessly in love with Jessica. He knows she's a drunk; he's even driven her home a few nights after pulling her over. Jessica tolerates his mooning affections because they enable her.

Case in point: Jessica starts a fight on the morning of the election when a voter comes in with a portable radio blaring the inexplicably popular Pete Preston Program. Preston (Bradley Cooper) is a nationally known ultra conservative blowhard in the Wally George mode, but his nonsense comes in a slick package with expensive suits and stylish hair so some people actually listen to him for four hours a day (and watch his syndicated half-hour TV show).

Jessica and the voter fight over him having the radio on in the polling place. Jordan arrests the guy and takes him to jail. Jessica excuses herself to the restroom and fills her Diet 7up can with vodka.

Jordan comes back. It starts to rain. The storm knocks out the power to the building, in fact, which disables the optical scan ballot machine. Jessica and Jordan decide to hang onto the ballots and feed them into the machine once the power comes back on. But Jordan has to leave before the polls close, to let the earlier guy out of jail.

Voters trickle in as poll closing time approaches, although the power isn't back on yet and it's getting dark. Just moments before the polls close in her county (located in the Central time zone), but after they've closed in most of the rest of Florida (Eastern time zone), Jessica flicks on the portable radio and hears that Florida has been called for Al Gore. Relieved beyond belief, she grabs her flask from the

bathroom and finishes it. The power comes back on, and a TV in the rec room flicks on right in the middle of Pete Preston's show. She turns it off in disgust. She drunkenly attempts to start to get the ballots into the voting machine. She makes a mess of them. She tries to stack them neatly on a table but she can't manage. She picks them up and stuffs them into a nearby duffel bag; she figures she'll wait until she sobers up a bit to get them into the machine. She sits and listens to the radio. To her dismay, they take Florida away from Gore and say it's too close to call. She fights to stay conscious to hear more, but falls asleep/passes out.

She lurches awake at around 2:30 in the morning, feeling like shit. She turns on the radio. The race has been called for Bush.

Drunk and angry, she looks at the duffel bag and the many, many ballots that haven't been counted. She looks back at the voting machine. She says "fuck this," grabs the duffel bag, runs out back to the nearby woods, staggers around for a while, and chucks the bag. Then she staggers back to the church and passes out.

Jordan shows up the next morning at the church, finding her passed out. The vote count is needed desperately, because Florida is still up for grabs. She says they called it. No, they uncalled it, he says. Florida, and the entire election, is still unsettled. She tells him she thinks she threw the ballots away. Where, she has no idea. They look for a couple hours, but can't find them. She proposes a way around this: she still has tons of blank ballots sitting around. They'll fill them out themselves and feed them into the machine. How long could it take to do a couple thousand ballots? She figures that since most of the people in the county are redneck assholes, she'll have to give Bush about 1,000 more votes than Gore so it doesn't look suspicious.

Jordan doesn't want to do that at all, even if it might save her gorgeous, shapely ass. It's too much, even for him. "We've got to come clean." She won't hear of it. If anybody finds out what she did, she's certain her life is over. Jordan still won't budge. Not until she looks at him, starts to unbutton her shirt, starts to undo his belt – well, you get the idea.

So they dummy up the ballots, guessing the best they can on state and local issues, giving Bush 1,000 more votes than Gore. They feed the ballots into the machine and report the numbers. They're pretty sure they got away with it.

One week later, the world is focused on Florida. Media from everywhere converge. One of them is Australian newspaper reporter Audra Wilkinson (Cate Blanchett). She's in the western part of the state, covering developments in the panhandle. Going for a morning jog, she spots a duffel bag in the woods. She opens it and finds the ballots. A bit of detective work leads her to Jordan and Jessica. She asks to meet up with them at the county sheriff's department.

POOP READING

She confronts them about the ballots. It doesn't go well. She threatens to go public. Jordan and Jessica demand to know where the ballots are. Tell us or I'll arrest you, Jordan says. She scoffs at that ridiculous idea and starts to leave. Jessica goes to physically stop her. Audra starts kicking Jessica's ass; Jordan jumps in and grabs her. A struggle. Audra falls and hits her head on a desk. Audra is dead, believe it or not.

Jordan is hysterical. Election fraud is one thing... Jessica immediately goes into crisis management mode. She looks outside; Audra had a car. A rental, undoubtedly. She looks at Audra's keys. Enterprise Rent-a-Car. Jordan is screaming at her, asking her what the hell she's doing. She slaps him. "Get it together!" She devises her plan on the fly: she'll see if she can find out where Audra rented the car. If it wasn't nearby Pensacola (and it'll turn out that it wasn't), Jessica will quickly dye/cut/style her hair into that of a reasonable facsimile of Audra, grab Audra's ID and passport, and take Audra's rental car and switch cars at the Pensacola airport, claiming something wrong with the existing car. Then, out in the middle of nowhere, Jordan and Jessica will put Audra's body in the car and stage a deadly single car crash. Jordan doesn't get it; why not just crash her car right outside town? Witnesses, Jessica says. We need them, and the airport will have tons.

"As long as I get in and get out quick, and as long as I sign some paperwork at the rental car place, it'll look like she was there later this afternoon. Nobody will think we killed her this morning if she 'died' in a car crash two hours away this afternoon." Jordan wonders how the hell she came up with all of that so fast. She's sober, she says. Hasn't had a drink since election night.

Jessica executes her plan, but barely. As she's driving away from the airport in the new rental car she notices an employee running after her, trying to flag her down, shouting "Ma'am? Ma'am!" She doesn't stop, doesn't look back. She meets up with Jordan on a deserted road west of the city, they stage Audra's accident, and they head back home. They feel like they got away with it.

For about two days.

Then FBI agent Laura Brown (Julia Roberts) shows up at the Holmes county sheriff's department. She's looking into election irregularities, she tells Jordan. "I pissed off some of the wrong people during the whole Clinton/Lewinsky thing, so they gave me the shithole Florida counties. No offense."

The vote totals are a little weird, she informs him. Bush might have gotten maybe 600 votes too many, based on what you'd expect from the county's voting history. "Maybe the numbers are legit; we just have to check everything. Quietly. Just ask around, see if you hear anything weird."

Jordan, panicky, immediately heads to Jessica's house.

Jessica is watching Pete Preston on TV; he's moved his show to Tallahassee for the time being, since everyone else in media and politics is in Florida. Jordan bursts in. Jessica asks if he can believe this asshole; Jordan asks why she watches if she hates him so much. Jordan says he's freaking out. This FBI agent came by asking questions; he's really worried. If anybody finds out what they did – the ballots, the Australian reporter – they're well and truly fucked. He needs Jessica right now, he says. Needs her help. Just... needs her. He starts to touch her, kiss her; she pushes him off. "What the hell?" he says. "I thought we were together now."

"Based on what?"

"Based on all we've been through. Based on what happened the morning after the election."

She scoffs. "That? I only fucked you to keep you from ratting me out, you little creep."

Jessica thinks he's a little creep. He's always loved her, and she thinks he's a little creep. After everything he did for her! Jordan realizes it's all over. Any chance with Jessica, any chance of staying out of prison now that the FBI is poking around; all of Jordan's ships have sailed. He pulls his gun. Jessica screams.

Laura bursts through the front door. She followed Jordan, assuming he'd panic and go right to whomever knew anything about the voting irregularities. She ascertained almost immediately that he couldn't have orchestrated anything on his own.

"Drop your gun."

Jordan doesn't. "All that stuff you made me do," he says to Jessica. "That poor reporter..."

"Hold on, Sheriff, what reporter?" Laura asks, but then Jordan sticks his gun in his mouth and pulls the trigger. Jessica screams.

Aftermath of the shooting. Laura tries to be sensitive with Jessica, saying she stills needs to talk to her, but obviously it can wait a few days while she recovers. "But don't go anywhere."

Meanwhile, Laura goes looking into "that poor reporter." She discovers that Audra Wilkinson died in a single car accident a few counties over in broad daylight on a long, straight road. Sounds fishy. She can't prove anything just yet, but a comparison of her signature at the rental car counter at the Pensacola airport doesn't seem to match Audra's handwriting closely enough.

She heads back to Ponce de Leon and calls Jessica. It's been two days; they need to talk. No answer. She goes over to Jessica's house. Jessica's dead. Seems pretty clear it's alcohol

POOP READING

poisoning, her body being surrounded by empty liquor bottles and vomit and all.

Determined to figure out what the hell is going on, she goes to the Pensacola airport. She goes to Enterprise Rent-a-Car. Walking up to the counter she almost bumps right into a stereotypical Florida redneck in flip flops, denim shorts, a Nascar t-shirt, sunglasses indoors and a trucker hat; he says, "Please; after you." Laura identifies herself as FBI and asks the employees if anybody has seen anything out of the ordinary at all.

There was one thing a few days ago, she finds out. This lady exchanged cars because she said there was something wrong with the one she had, but they checked it out and it was fine. Also the lady left in such a hurry that she forgot a duffel bag in the trunk of the car. They tried to flag her down and get it back to her, but she wouldn't stop.

Laura takes the duffel bag. Walking away with it, she zips it open an inch or two and peeks inside. Ballots. Lots of ballots.

She gets into her car in the parking garage, tosses the duffel bag in the passenger seat, and shuts the door. In one fell swoop the passenger door opens, the duffel bag is yanked out of the car, and a gun is pointed at her. "Place your weapon and your phone onto the passenger seat. Slowly." She does.

The Florida redneck we just saw at the rental car place climbs into the passenger seat, holding the duffel bag, and shuts the door. He immediately tucks both guns into his waistband and puts her phone in his pocket. "So sorry about that. Gotta get the guns out of the way so we can talk."

He takes off his hat and sunglasses. It's Pete Preston. Laura's mind is boggled. "YOU? What the hell are you doing here? Who do you work for?"

"You've never heard of us."

She demands to know what's going on. He figures there's no harm in telling her. Professional courtesy, her being FBI and all. Besides, the entire point of his public persona and his covert job is: who's ever going to believe anybody who says that Pete Preston, of all people, is really a shadowy undercover operative?

Things can go wrong, he says. Things can get fucked up. But they can't get fucked up this badly. The fate of the nation can't be demonstrated to be this capricious and arbitrary. One drunk in Florida fudges a few ballots and alters the course of history? No. Nobody can know about this. There could be bedlam. "Why do you think we fomented all those JFK conspiracies? You can't hope to maintain any semblance of order if people really understand how easy it is for one insignificant figure to drastically change the entire world in less than a minute."

"People could handle it," Laura says. "People are smart."

"A person is smart. 'People' are dumb, panicky, dangerous animals and you know it."

"Didn't Tommy Lee Jones say that in *Men in Black*?"

"Yeah, and he was *right*!"

Preston says he got the full story out of Jessica Vermeer before she died. Never mind how.

"We both know she probably gave Bush about 600 too many votes, and I'm sure if we counted these ballots that's what we'd find. Kind of ironic, considering how much she hated him. I guess she figured everybody in her town was an idiot, and every idiot votes Republican. Anyway it's too late to tell anybody now. The vote totals from Ponce de Leon, Florida that were reported the day after the election are the vote totals from Ponce de Leon, Florida, now and forever."

Preston gets out of the car, carrying the duffel bag.

"This is insane!" Laura calls out to him as he leaves. "All this for 600 extra votes? What difference could that possibly make?"

Preston looks back. "Call it an overabundance of caution."

Fade to black.

Title card:

ON NOVEMBER 26, 2000, THE STATE CANVASSING BOARD CERTIFIED GEORGE W. BUSH AS THE WINNER OF FLORIDA'S ELECTORS BY 537 VOTES

The End.
