

That Time I Watched Iron Man 2 with James Franco

By W. Tyler Paterson

WHY WE LIKE IT: *A conflicted 20 something dude's grapple with the meaning of life raises more questions than it answers and the seamless introduction of James Franco can be seen as both a projection and catalyst of his intellectual and spiritual bewilderment. This is RPF (Real People Fiction) and the first example of the genre we've published. A lot of times in these stories things get out of control, with the real person stealing the scenes or a breakdown in fictional credibility. Not here. The convincing narrator is exactly the kind of existentially troubled hombre we like to read about (and hang out with) and besides, any writer who has the pluck to dangle 'Schrodinger's cat' before our eyes is almost a guaranteed shoe-in.*

I was at my buddy Chad's place sitting on a lush blue sectional fidgeting with a bong listening to him drone on about his new three thousand dollar skis when he got a text.

"My buddy James is gonna swing by," he said, looking at his phone. It was a phone that he had to recently repurchase after leaving the old one on the roof of his car and driving it into traffic. When he picked up the new device, he once again opted out of insurance and paid twelve hundred dollars out of pocket. Asshole. "Just be cool."

"I'm always cool," I said, and ripped a gnarly toke.

"If I wanted lip from you, I'd pull down your pants," he said, really proud of that one. I started to wonder why I was even friends with such a dick, but the weed started to

kick in like a slow moving river through a springtime forest and I remembered exactly why I was friends with such a dick.

“Seriously,” I said, “I’m always cool.”

“Jonah,” he warned, and I sat back into the plush cushions and started staring into his sixty inch mounted flat screen, which was hooked up to Bluetooth stereo surround sound. We had been gearing up for *Endgame* and going through the Marvel movies, one or two per night, and wildly out of order. For instance we watched *The Avengers* before we watched *Iron Man*, which – if you’re familiar with the series – is like going the wrong way down a one-way street with your dick out to piss all over the *Do Not Enter* sign. A few nights before we’d stuffed our faces with Dominoes pepperoni pizza and parmesan knots and pulled a double feature with *Winter Soldier*, and then *Thor: Ragnarok* hollering at the screen like mad men.

Chad lived alone in a baby blue ranch style house in the burbs that he filled with really expensive toys. Most of it he had just to have, like a two thousand dollar guitar for his home recording studio, only he didn’t know how to play. He figured someone else would and then he’d just record *that* person.

As far as romance, Chad was just past the age where it was considered cool to be a swinging bachelor. I never saw him with the same woman twice, but through the years I noticed a change in how the women responded to him. In his mid twenties, they saw his potential and kind of dug it. A young charismatic guy, well-groomed, a great job selling cloud space to tech companies, it was like the ladies saw him as their ticket into a life of elegance. Now in his mid thirties, women left feeling sorry for him. It was like the best thing that they could do was wish that he was someone else.

My cell phone buzzed. One of the games I had been playing – a restaurant simulation where I had to cook and serve hungry patrons their specific meals - told me that a new location would be opening soon. It made me realize how hungry I was, so I dug my fingers into the ceramic bowl of Cooler Ranch Doritos on the coffee table with wood supposedly from the Amazon rainforest.

“Save room, I made chili. James loves my chili,” he said.

“Dude, are you in love with James or something?” I teased.

“What did I say about being cool?!” he said from the kitchen, pointing at me with a long wooden spoon stained dark red at the wide end.

I grabbed the remote and queued up *Iron Man 2*, the one with Mickey Rourke playing the villain Whiplash, only Mickey Rourke looks like he’s only in the movie for the paycheck. It makes the movie really funny because major villains aren’t supposed to phone it in. Thank goodness Sam Rockwell, who is a national treasure, was able light up the screen bright enough for the both of their dark characters.

My mind started to drift and the evening room was steadily growing darker. The THC was kicking in hard because I kept running my dry tongue along the dry roof of my mouth, and then taking too large of gulps from my water. Chad had one of those fridges that auto filled any glass under the built-in faucet with the right amount of ice and water, and a part of me was looking for an excuse to use it.

Chad walked into the living room with empty bowls and clean spoons while I stumbled toward the kitchen using my hand to balance on the wall, and clinked the glass into place. The nozzle began to spray water and ice looking like it was hot syrup seducing ice freshly scooped ice cream. I thought about ice cream and pulled open the freezer expecting

to hear Chad yell for me to get out of there, but he didn't say anything so I took note of the unopened pint of cookies and cream.

When I walked back into the room, James had showed up and was sitting on the opposite end of the couch catching up with Chad, who was standing near the coffee table.

James was James fucking Franco. He was in the Spider-Man movies with Toby Maguire before both of the reboots. He played Tommy Wiseau in *The Disaster Artist*, which is based on the movie *The Room* - which is considered one of the worst films ever made - and got an Oscar nod for it. Really, James Franco did a great movie about a bad movie and was recognized by his industry for turning the same story into one of the best films of the year.

My brain started to hurt so I sat down on the couch. If a movie was bad, but the movie about that movie was amazing, was the first movie ever actually bad? How could two things exist on the same spectrum on polar opposite ends and still be linked as the same?

“Jonah, this is James,” Chad said.

“Whaddup,” I said, leaning over and giving James fucking Franco a fist bump.

“Hey,” he said. He smiled his movie star smile – inhuman and otherworldly, a changeling, a slip-skin hag come to collect - and me in my infinite coolness started to blush and giggle like that smile had activated some sort of twisted auto-pilot of internal lame-ness.

“Don't mind him,” Chad whispered, but still loud enough for me to hear. “He lost his Dad in February.”

Normally such a statement would have been cause for me to return fire. Vulnerabilities should be kept under lock and key of their confidants, but I let it slide because mostly I'd never been in the presence of a movie star before. Even though he was wearing blue jeans and tan work boots and a grey zip-up hoodie over a white tee shirt, his presence filled the space with both imagined and perceived status.

“I haven’t seen this one before,” James said, nodding at the title screen of *Iron Man 2*. Chad patted him on the shoulder and told him to kick back and relax, that the sofa becomes a recliner and there’s the lever.

Why did James Franco deserve our intimate creature comforts? I had been friends with Chad for years and he both never mentioned a friendship with a movie star, though all things considered it kind of makes sense, but I’ve also never been shown how to make myself more comfortable. As a human being, did James possess something that I did not that made people want to give him things?

As the movie started, I could only imagine what it was like for a movie star to be watching a movie that he wasn’t in, and one by Marvel no less. A part of me wanted to ask him if he felt bitter over the Spider Man reboots, to watch a franchise move on without him, but it also felt rude. When people asked me about my dad and how I was doing, I was never sure what they were looking for. Certainly it couldn’t have been the truth, that life felt meaningless and banal, that the person who brought me into the world was gone and I felt horribly alone, that the pain never actually went away even if I was smiling, so I knew that they kind of wanted me to lie so that *they* felt better.

It made me think about the soul, and if the soul has a soul, and how the soul can’t exist as one singular thing because how could a soul know what it wanted if all that it ever knew was me? Then I wondered if the soul *did* have a soul and that maybe I was the soul of a bigger thing that I couldn’t see. The idea of a soul started to feel empty, as just a thing that people talk about when they can’t be bothered to actually understand themselves. I found it hard to believe that my father’s soul was watching me from heaven because I’m not very interesting and if he could have been anywhere, he probably would have been golfing at Pebble Beach because apparently his soul loved getting birdies.

“That’s cool,” James Franco said, watching Tony Stark jump out of an airplane in the Iron Man suit dodging fireworks on the way down.

“God isn’t real,” I said, clicking my dry tongue against the roof of my dry mouth. The idea that all of us were watching the same movie, acting as receivers for the same information, and each of us taking away something different felt less than divine. Unity was divine, togetherness. What James was experiencing wasn’t bliss, it was watered down excitement so that he could relate to us plebeians.

“Jonah, cool it,” Chad said. James looked at me curiously and then back at the movie as the surround sound system rumbled the couch like summertime thunder sometimes did. Chad was sitting on a black leather barstool with the Led Zepplin logo on the top, and I thought about how *Stairway to Heaven* was lyrical bullshit. Musically it’s amazing, but the idea of paying your way into eternal happiness felt asinine because how can shadows be taller than souls when souls cannot exist?

Then I wondered about metaphor and how maybe the world existed in codes as a way for us to make sense of chaos. It was like *The Disaster Artist* and *The Room* both being one in the same, but both existing as opposites. Chaos might be easier to understand when we think about how multiple realities exist all at once in the same moment and inside of the same space. Watching *Iron Man 2*, all of us were getting something different.

James was chillaxing on the opposite end of the couch.

Chad was putting on a show and playing it cool for James.

I was stoned as a motherfucker and yet, all three of us were on the same ride through space and time.

James reached towards the table for the ceramic bowl of Doritos and I got nervous because he has an image to uphold.

“Should you be eating that?” I asked. James turned to Chad.

“Should I not be eating this?” he asked, confused.

“Eat whatever you want, bro,” Chad said, and then shot me a mean look. All I could think about was how Doritos sometimes give me diarrhea and I eat junk food all of the time. What would they do to someone who ate clean and worked out a bunch? What if he went to a meeting with studio execs and had to excuse himself because he had to pinch his butt cheeks together so hard that he waddled as he walked to the bathroom because of diarrhea?

But then I saw James Franco as human who just wanted to be human. He probably enjoyed Doritos. My perception of him was probably wrong because what do I know about anything? When the doctors told me that my dad’s cancer had metastasized I started laughing I thought they had made the word up. It sounded like something that would describe Godzilla when Godzilla got hit with electricity and started to grow. *We need him to grow bigger and defeat Motbra! What size? Metastasized!*

Also the idea of a giant moth isn’t very scary, at least not scary enough to coax a giant lizard into fighting it to the death over a Japanese village. But maybe moths were scary and I just didn’t know why. The writer’s probably did, which is why they included it, and I started to think about all of the things I didn’t know.

Then I started thinking about some of the things that I did know, like how birds fly south for the winter, and how the fuck did we ever figure that out? It had to start with an idea, then a theory, but what made someone even want to test that theory? I imagined it as a happenstance piece of dialogue.

“Hey Jim! Remember that bird you described when I visited you in Maine? Well I think I saw the *exact* same bird in Florida.”

“Don’t you pull my leg, Robert. How could a bird fly all the way to Florida, and why would it make such a treacherous journey?”

“You’re right, I’m being silly.”

And then at the same time, they both looked at each other with wide eyes and said, “Unless...”

But even then it would take years and years to gather data, test theories, and confirm information so whoever it was that figured it out did an amazing thing that we just take for granted. And then they died. I didn’t know his name. Or her. I don’t even know, so I began to wonder if birds *actually* flew south for the winter because I was in no position to really question the validity of the idea. Even if I did, there was no way for me to realistically test the findings and so all things continued to exist on a spectrum of both existing, and not – like Schrödinger’s cat.

I realized I had been spacing out and snapped back to the present. It was the part of the movie where Whiplash confronts Tony Stark at the racetrack and people are freaking out because only Tony Stark is supposed to have that technology. Mickey Rourke is whipping his electrified cables and slicing cars in half in slow motion.

“Nice,” James Franco said. Chad laughed and echoed the *nice*.

I took a sip from my glass and spilled water down my chin and onto my shirt.

“Ice,” I said, but no one got the joke. They both looked at me like I was about to have a seizure. I wondered if they were judging me because I was high and couldn’t sip my water the right way, and if later on James Franco would text Chad to talk shit about me.

“Napkin?” James said, pinching a white piece between his fingers and handing it my way. I took it and dabbed the front of my shirt.

“Do you miss Spider Man?” I suddenly asked, my itchy eyes growing watery. “Is it hard for you to keep going on knowing that Spider Man isn’t part of your world anymore and you have to figure out new movies to be in, but sometimes they don’t feel right and it’s like you’re drifting from thing to thing just because you have to, and not because you want to?”

Chad looked furious. He was as red as a stop sign and his eyes filled with venom.

“I would have loved to have been in *Endgame*,” he said, then frowned. “But I don’t really have a say in what happens to the world or the people in it. The best I can do is live with the cards I’ve been dealt.”

I thought about *The Room* and *The Disaster Artist* and how good and bad can coexist as one. I thought about my Dad and how on the days when I didn’t see him and he was alive, I carried on just fine, but in the days after his death and knowing I’d never see him again, everything carried a different type of gravitas. I thought about birds and the soul and golfing and how all three existed together in non-linear lines.

“You were great as Tommy Wiseau,” I said.

“That’s what’s up,” James said, and leaned over to give me another fist bump.

I started thinking about other stuff and before I knew it, the movie was over. James Franco left and Chad wasn’t mad at me anymore.

“Old family friend,” he told me, as though reading my mind about how he knew James fucking Franco. It made sense – Chad always filled his home with expensive toys.

“You want to crash here tonight? I’ve got lots of leftover chili that needs some eating.”

I realized he was lonely, and that I was lonely too, and even though we were together, we were still alone. We existed as the same, but different, which made me realize that we maybe weren’t so different despite what we felt. Everything we did to fill the time

was to divert our attention away from the dark void of death, and so I kicked my feet up onto the sofa and stared into the bright flashing lights of the flat screen TV. Chad sat where James had been sitting and pulled a blanket up to his neck.

“Do you think birds really fly south for the winter, or do you think it’s all bullshit, like the idea of heaven?” I asked.

“Man, fuck birds,” Chad said, and pressed play on the remote so that *Iron Man 2* started up again.

AUTHOR’S NOTE: *I wish I had an interesting origin story for this piece, but it really came out of boredom. I had been writing more traditional literary stories and kind of got bored with the same ol’ themes so I started asking myself a bunch of ‘what ifs’ to kick start the creative wheel in my brain. Somehow I landed on the idea that people act differently around celebrities even though they’re just people too, which made me chuckle. I imagined James Franco sitting on a couch watching a movie and THAT made me chuckle again because of course he likes movies and of course, he has opinions on them. Then I wondered what would happen to someone under duress if they met a celebrity and couldn’t get a hold of themselves but for very different reasons than just being a fanboy. Next thing I knew I had a draft of this story. I loved the idea of the main character being emotionally wiped out, physically exhausted/stoned, and mentally in a dark place when he meets Mr. Franco, which allows him to follow his inner monologue to unique places and actually lets him start to heal. Mostly, it was fun to write—especially imagining the speaker in the story to be similar to the character of Jonah from Veep on HBO, the type that says whatever they’re thinking without regard to anyone else. I’d also watched a ton of Marvel movies to get ready for Endgame so that for sure played a role.*

BIO: W. T. Paterson is the author of the novels ‘Dark Satellites’ and ‘WOTNA’. A Pushcart Prize nominee and graduate of Second City Chicago, his work has appeared in over 50 publications worldwide including *Fiction Magazine*, *The Gateway Review* and *The Paragon Press*. A number of stories have been anthologized by *Lycon Valley*, *North 2 South Press* and *Thuggish Itch*. He spends most nights yelling to his cat to “Get down from there!”