

PALO ALTO

"The stories . . . capture with perfect pitch the impossible exhilaration, the inevitable downbeat-ness, and the pure confusion of being an adolescent." —ELLE

*"Rigorously unsentimental and fabulously dark."
—Michael Cunningham*



JAMES FRANCO

More Praise for PALO ALTO

“The stories are raw and funny-sad, and they capture with perfect pitch the impossible exhilaration, the inevitable downbeat-ness, and the pure confusion of being an adolescent. . . . Franco has a flair for creating these stopped moments that lift a story from its specific setting into a universal place, so that particular meanings resonate out from themselves and redouble their effect.”

—*Elle*

“Delightfully coarse, riffing dialogue that hones in on subjects like race and sex, love and violence . . . Compelling and gutsy.”

—*Vogue*

“Franco writes with such deep empathy and affinity that one has to wonder if he lived this life.”

—*USA Today*

“You’ll be able to pick out Franco’s influences: Raymond Carver’s tight-lipped stoicism; the sun-streaked disaffection of *Less Than Zero* . . . Hubert Selby Jr.’s *Last Exit to Brooklyn*. . . . He excels at dialogue.”

—Salon.com

“In ‘I Could Kill Someone’ especially, about a high schooler’s deliberations over murdering a bully, there is an element of sympathy for the tormented narrator that makes his thought process real and frightening. . . . Franco is a serious writer.”

—*The Wall Street Journal*

PALO ALTO

stories

James Franco

Scribner

New York London Toronto Sydney

To the teachers
Ian R. Wilson
Mona Simpson
Amy Hempel
Michael Cunningham
Jenny Offill

There is hardly a single action that we perform in that phase which we would not give anything, in later life, to be able to annul. Whereas what we ought to regret is that we no longer possess the spontaneity which made us perform them. In later life we look at things in a more practical way, in full conformity with the rest of society, but adolescence is the only period in which we learn anything.

—*Within a Budding Grove,*
Remembrance of Things Past

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PALO ALTO I

American History

Then the other day in tenth-grade American History, Mr. Hurston was teaching us about slavery and we had to act out a mock debate between the slave states and the free states. I played Mississippi, and I had to pretend that I wanted slavery to remain legal. Me and the other four slave state guys sat on one side of the room and faced the five kids from the free states. The rest of the class watched us with dull stares.

I'm not the most outgoing person, but no one was really saying anything. So I started it off.

"We need the blacks to be slaves because this country would fall apart without them."

Jerry Holtz represented New York and the good side. Jerry

was handsome and good and a good soccer player. His hair was short in a crew cut and looked just right.

“Look,” he said. “We don’t want to cause any problems with you slave states, but the country can survive without slavery nowadays. We’ve established ourselves apart from England, and new industry is taking the country to new levels.”

“That may be all fine and dandy for you,” I said. I was getting into it a little. “But we Southern states depend on slave labor to run our plantations. It’s been done this way since the beginning, and there is no reason to change now.”

Then it was funny; something happened. Stephen Gary got really mad.

“What are you people saying?” he said. “It’s wrong! It’s dead wrong. I can’t believe you’re talking about it so calmly like this!” Stephen was playing Massachusetts, and he sat next to Jerry. His outburst was a shock to everyone. Stephen’s face was flushed, and his eyes were big. He looked mad and like he was going to cry at the same time. Mr. Hurston’s face was blank and he stared into the back wall. I looked to the other students. Some were interested in the debate now. Lewis, the only black kid in class, had a blank look on his face too. Stacey, the prettiest girl in class, was picking a scab off the back of her hand.

My slave state partners didn’t say anything so I spoke up again.

“It is not wrong,” I said to Stephen as calmly as possible. I was being real rational. “It is our God-given right as white Americans to own slaves because we are a superior race.”

Stephen’s big eyes got bigger, and his mouth became

a black hole. He stood like that and no one said anything. Everyone was waiting. Good Jerry had begun to speak again when Stephen jumped up from his seat, his belly shaking like a water bed. He was screaming.

“You racists! Ray-sists! No wonder Hitler killed all the Jews, because you’re all a bunch of racists!”

In general, Stephen was an idiot. He didn’t have many friends. He wasn’t handsome, he didn’t play sports, and he was really quiet. But more than that, he was just strange—the way he picked food from his braces in class and left the little colored bits on his desktop, or like when he told Mrs. Steinbach that he wouldn’t read *The Picture of Dorian Gray* because gay people were goblins who stole children to use in sacrifices. But usually he didn’t say much.

The class was very interested in the debate now. Ivan and John were laughing silently in the corner. Stacey had stopped picking her scab and looked from Stephen to me.

I said, “I think that that is a pretty racist statement in itself. And I don’t really know how it applies, especially because I’m not Jewish, but I think it’s the wrong century.”

Mr. Hurston broke off his stare and landed back on earth for a second.

“Yes, Stephen, you can’t say that because it’s a hundred years past the time we’re depicting here.”

“Hitler is timeless!” screeched Stephen. Now he *was* crying. Most people were laughing out loud now. John and Ivan were about dying in the corner. They slapped each other’s back and cackled. Lewis, the black kid, was over in his spot doing nothing.

“Stephen, why don’t you sit down,” said Mr. Hurston.

“No, I won’t sit down! I won’t bow down to these racists! They deserve to die! They should burn in the ovens!”

Now even cool Stacey looked surprised. Then she smiled. Everyone was having a great time except Stephen. I really felt bad for him, but Stacey’s smile did something to me. If I look back on it, that’s what did it, that little upturn at the sides of her glossy pink lips. I wanted to make Stephen go crazy so that I could see Stacey smile.

“Well, Stephen,” I said. “Since we’re confusing different centuries, why don’t I bring up a little book called *The Bell Curve*. It shows that whites and Asians are superior to black people.”

“Racist! Racist Jewish institutional testing. It doesn’t count,” screeched Stephen. He was gesticulating now. His arms swung out at his sides like coiled wet towels and his belly shook some more.

“Boys,” said Mr. Hurston. “You can state your opinions as freely as you like, but you must keep the discussion to the 1860s.”

Stacey wasn’t smiling anymore. She was bored. She went back to picking the scab on the back of her hand.

I should have stopped arguing with Stephen but I didn’t. I know I got everything I deserved afterward, but I couldn’t stop because I wanted Stacey to laugh. I looked over at Lewis, but he still had that dumb stare. Lewis was a bad student. He hung out with the tough black crowd. There weren’t many black students at the school, but a group of them hung out together and acted like they were a gang. Lewis was the runt

of the group. It didn't look like anything I was saying even registered with him so I really got into it.

"Niggers," I said, and "Niggers" and "Niggers." I kept saying it as part of my act. And Stephen would scream and bring his arms together in a strangling gesture. He'd grit his teeth and hiss and strangle the air to emphasize his points. I couldn't believe that Mr. Hurston allowed it to go on. It was a real show. Everyone was laughing except Stacey and Lewis.

And then it was over. Mr. Hurston ended the debate a minute before the bell rang. He told Stephen to sit down, but he wouldn't. Then he told the class that it was a great exercise and that it was okay and brave of me to act like I had, using the N word and all, because it gave everyone a sense of what people were like back then.

"Some foolish people have tried to get the N word removed from *Huckleberry Finn* because they find it offensive. Good-intentioned idiots," said Mr. Hurston. "But if they were ever successful, we would lose a sense of what things were like before us. And if we don't know our history . . ."

". . . we're doomed to repeat it," the class mumbled as the bell rang. Everyone stuffed notebooks into bags. From across the room I saw Stephen leave with his head down. Mr. Hurston called after him but he was out the door.

I went back to my regular seat to get my stuff. Stacey's desk was a seat away from mine. She was already packed up when I got there.

"Pretty funny, huh?" I said.

"What?" she asked.

"Stephen, getting all mad like that."

"I thought it was kind of scary," she said. I didn't have anything else to say so she walked out.

The rest of the day was uneventful. I ate lunch, went to the rest of my classes, and then walked home after school. I passed the field and saw Jerry Holtz and the soccer team warming up for the big game against Gunn.

That night I called Stacey. I got her number when I volunteered us for a joint report on the Salem witch trials at the beginning of the year. She never helped me with the report, but I had asked her if I could keep her phone number, just to see how she was doing sometimes. I had never used it.

I was nervous as I called. I had prepared some funny things to say when she answered, but she didn't answer and I didn't leave a message. I called her a few more times that night while I watched *Beavis and Butt-Head* and then *The X-Files*. I got her machine each time. Her voice was hoarse, and the way she said "Stacey" was so raspy and whispered it made me want to squeeze my penis until it hurt. Later, when I called again, I realized that it was a pager, so I typed in my home number. In the middle of playing DOOM on my computer, I heard the phone ring. It was about eleven thirty. There was loud music wherever she was.

"Hello? . . . Hello?" she said, close to the phone. Hearing her voice outside of class made me tingle at the back of my neck.

"Hey, it's Jeremy," I said.

"Oh, hey," she said.

"Where are you?" I asked.

"Hugh?" she said. There were other voices near her.

“What are you doing?” I said.

She was having a hard time hearing me.

“Who is this?”

“It’s Jeremy. Jeremy Thompson?”

“Oh, hi. What’s up, Jeremy?”

“I don’t know . . . I just thought we might hang out sometime.”

“Oh. What do you mean?”

“I don’t know, I just thought we could maybe do something sometime.”

“Okay . . . sure.”

“Okay,” I said. Then there wasn’t much else to say. I forgot all my jokes.

Then she said, “Okay, I’m going to go.”

“Okay, I’ll call you sometime,” I said.

“Okay, bye.” She hung up, but not before I heard someone ask, “Who was that?” I bit my lip really hard until it almost bled. Her voice was echoing in the cold air. I was left with my computer screen and the empty room and the blackness outside in the backyard, and everything felt empty. I couldn’t go back to my video game with her voice still in my head, and those other voices too. I couldn’t play the game anymore without feeling like I was wasting my life. I watched some more television in the living room until my father came home at twelve thirty and told me to go to bed.

I had PE first period. It was a drag getting into those stupid uniforms first thing in the morning. Short green sweat shorts and tight off-white T-shirts. I’d always get depressed playing softball with all the other dweebs who didn’t get excused from

PE because they played sports. I'm usually late. The day after Stephen's outburst, I was getting dressed alone in the locker room when Lewis came in, followed by a bunch of the tough black guys: Ezra, Jackson, Damon, Roland, and two big white guys that hung out with them, a fat guy named Mike Farley, and a muscular guy named Damian Petrone. They were all older and all really big. Next to them Lewis was a skinny midget.

Jackson walked up to me. He played running back for the school and got most of our touchdowns. He was six foot three. I was trying to pull on my PE shorts when he pushed me down onto the bench.

"Use that nigger word to my face," he said.

"Excuse me?"

"Come on, use that fucking nigger word to my face, white boy." He put his hand on top of my head so that I couldn't stand up from the bench. He didn't push down; he just held it there so I couldn't stand up.

"Come on, white boy, say that fucking nigger word."

"Call him a nigger," said Mike, the fat white guy.

"Listen, I was just doing it for class, I don't really think those things."

"What things, white boy?" said Jackson.

"Those things I said. I was just saying them because I was supposed to."

"You're supposed to? Your teacher told you to call Lewis a nigger?"

"I didn't call Lewis a nigger."

He slapped me across the face.

“Watch your fucking mouth,” he said, not laughing anymore. I looked up at him. I looked at the others. They were all serious now. I turned to skinny Lewis with his big round head.

“Lewis, you know I didn’t call you anything.”

Lewis didn’t say anything. He stood there with his arms crossed. He gave me that same blank stare that he gave me in the classroom.

“Listen, I didn’t mean what I was saying, okay? I was just doing it for class and because I wanted to see Stephen Gary get crazy.”

“Lewis,” said Jackson. That was it, just “Lewis,” like they had already talked about doing something and now was the time to do it. Lewis looked at Jackson and then at me, but he just stood there.

In a slow, cold voice Ezra said, “Lewis, break off this motherfucking honky.” It came out of his cruel face like a rocky stream.

“Lewis, I was being an idiot. I was just trying to make Stephen crazy. You saw how crazy he got,” I said.

“Why’d you want to make him crazy?” said Lewis.

“I don’t know. I was just trying to show off. You heard Mr. Hurston, he said I was just doing what I was supposed to do.”

Lewis was staring down at me. He didn’t look really tough, but he was trying. Then he said, “Thomas Jefferson was doing what he was supposed to do, and he done raped his slaves.”

“What?” I said. “What does that mean?”

Lewis stepped back and then hit my nose. There was an explosion between my eyes. I fell back and hit my head against the lockers and fell into the space between the lockers and the

bench. My legs were still up on the bench, but my butt was on the cement. I held my nose, and there were tears coming into my eyes, but just as a physical reaction.

I squinted through my fingers and saw Lewis looking down at me. His regular dumb look was angry now. Unsure but trying not to be unsure. I took my hand away from my face and looked at it; there was a lot of blood on my fingers. I heard all the other guys cheering Lewis on. He still looked unsure, but I could tell he was going to do something. I pulled my feet off the bench and slid underneath it. It was really dirty down there and wet. On the underside of the bench there was some old gray gum, and at the bottom of one of the lockers it said I LOVE YOU BITCH! Who wrote that? It was pretty creative.

“Kick that motherfucker!” said the guys.

Lewis stepped back and kicked me. He got me on the top of my head, and he stubbed his toe on my skull, and everyone laughed because he said “Ow, shit” and started dancing around. I lay down there covering my face while they all laughed at Lewis’s foot. I waited for more. But it didn’t come. The laughter faded, and then they were gone.

For a while I lay on the ground and looked at I LOVE YOU BITCH! Then I got up. I went to the toilet stalls and sat on one of the toilets and waited for the period to end. Just sat there. When the warning bell rang, I stood up and looked at myself in the mirror. My right eye was purple on the inside bottom, and my nose had bled all over my lips and down my neck and onto my off-white PE T-shirt. A nice splatter across the neckline. All the kids were coming in now. Some looked at me, but I didn’t wash off and I didn’t change my clothes. I left

my things in my locker and walked to my next class, American History with Mr. Hurston.

I was there before everyone. I sat at my desk and waited. The middle of my face was throbbing. My classmates started coming in, but no one noticed me. My seat was toward the back. Finally Stacey came in and sat down. She didn't look at me because she never looks at me, but I stared at her really hard until she finally looked.

"Oh my God," she said. "What's wrong with your face?"

"Nothing is wrong with it."

"You're bleeding, Jeremy," she said loudly. "Oh, Jesus, you're *bleeding*!" Other people looked.

"I know," I said. I didn't say anything else; I just stared at her. Real hard.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" she said.

"Because," I said.

"Because what?" She said that quietly, like she was scared.

Then Mr. Hurston came in. He said, "Hello, class, new morning, same old history," like he always did.

"Mr. Hurston," said good Jerry Holtz. "Mr. Hurston, look, Jeremy's bleeding."

"Mr. Hurston, he's staring at me," said Stacey. She was right; I *was* staring at her. Mr. Hurston walked over to my desk. He put his hand under my chin, in the blood, and held my face up to his. I looked into his empty blue eyes. His eyebrows were silvery like his hair.

"What happened?" he asked.

"Nothing," I said.

"Who did this to you?"

"No one."

"Okay, no one did it, right. All right, who?"

"No one."

"Fine, if you won't tell me, I want you to go to the office right now and see Mrs. Moore." He looked around the room. "Jerry, I want you to take Jeremy to the office, to see Mrs. Moore, okay?"

"Sure, Mr. Hurston," said Jerry. He walked to the door and waited for me.

Mr. Hurston let my face go. I didn't stand up yet. I just turned my head and stared at Stacey again.

"*What?*" she said. She sounded mad now. Everyone was watching.

Then I leaned in and whispered, "I did it for you."

"You did what for me? What are you talking about?"

But I was already standing and walking toward Jerry at the door. There was Lewis walking in with his dumb look.

"Did Thomas Jefferson do that?" I said. And walked past him. I didn't look back, but I could hear people asking Stacey what it was all about.

In the hall Jerry asked me what happened. I told him I was fighting for a girl. He asked who. I told him he wouldn't understand.

"Why did you say you did it for Stacey?" he asked as we crossed the quad toward the tower building.

"What? I didn't."

"I thought you did."

"No."

"Well that's good," he said. "That would have been a shame."

“Why?”

“No, I mean if you had done anything for her.” The sun was warm on my back and reflecting off the windows of the office, a bright circle into my eyes.

“I didn’t do it for her.”

“Cuz she’s a total slut,” he said.

“I fucking know,” I said. But I didn’t know. I didn’t know anything.

We were almost at the office. The office was an old brick building with a tower in the center with a Spanish cupola. We called it the Tower Building.

As we got closer each window in the tower flashed yellow and white.

At the office Jerry ran up the stairs. He stood at the top and held the door for me. The reflection in the windows above Jerry was as bright as the real sun. As I walked up the steps my face pounded under the skin, I could feel the blood thick and sticky on my clavicle, and I stared right into the burning center of light.



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