

From the Lost City of Hurlantis to the Streets of Helldorado (Or, Franco)

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I know Franco is in a fucked up place because he still refers to his ex as his girlfriend by accident when his mood is chipper. It just slips out, like a squeaky fart, and no matter how much he clenches up after that it's already too late. Things are never the same after someone hears you fart.

Sometimes, it's best when he rambles on about how she was a good one and how he should've done better. It means the nigga is focusing on the issue. Sure, it's regret, but at least he zeroes in on the object of his pain. When he's silent I get worried. That's when a nigga is liable to do something that puts him on page three of the newspaper. Some of the boys think he's doing well because he shows up to parties but I know he's in trouble. A vet knows a vet. The way he glazes over at bars mid-conversation means I need to get him home quick fast. It's in the silence, when his eyes go dark, when he is slow to reply. That's when a nigga is fighting the tiller, liable to get storm-clapped, wake up on the shores of the Lost City of Hurlantis—demons, dementia, desperation, and all.

He is still cut up about her. It's in everything he does. The way he misses a simple pass on the court means the nigga is thinking about Carmen being in the stands, seeing her face where it's not. When our team takes an L he sighs and trudges to the sideline, waiting to see who's got next. This is the same Franco who used to go coast-to-ghost on niggas, nearly untouchable when he was in the zone, snatching ankles, sliding defenders, swishing from all corners of the court. Now he's a liability. He could walk into a Cavaliers game and feel right

at home.

For the first three months the whole crew was on suicide watch. Me, Lindo, Rinzlo, and Cicero—the Caretakers. We took turns going over to his house to make sure he ate and washed his ass. We phoned his workplace to make sure he checked in. On weekends we took him to the gym, the go-kart racing park when it was open, the dam for some braais, the lookout spots, high enough that the spread of Windhoek’s city lights looked moderately impressive. We even went to the monthly salsa party on Independence Avenue. We did things we never would’ve done by ourselves, hoping it would lift his spirits a bit. Comfort in company, or some shit like that. Nothing seemed to work. Six months later the nigga’s heart was still tottering around, punch-drunk from lost love. I almost wish Carmen had the decency to put him down for good when she finally decided to leave.

Today gave me hope, though.

Franco took part in a twenty-kilometer run. When he called to tell me he was at the starting line I couldn’t believe it. Carmen had been trying to couple-goals the Two Oceans Marathon in Cape Town with him for years. Franco’s answer was always, “What are we running away from?”

So today at half past madness in the morning I actually drove across town to see my nigga scrape himself across the finish line. Homie was coming apart the entire time, body shining with slave moisture, chest sounding like he was inhaling a pack of razor blades. But he pushed on through. There’s no fuel like high-octane heartbreak to make a nigga do the impossible. I thumped him on the back. Behind him, the marshals started taking down the route markers.

“Well done, Franco! That’s my nigga.”

“Thanks, man.”

“This shit’s crazy. You didn’t even train, man.”

“Just felt like it.” He looked at me sideways, then looked away. “Felt like something I should do, you know?”

“Nah, fam, I don’t know. If I run three kilometers in any direction there’d better be a train to take me back home.”

“We said we’d do one of these things together.”

“Who’s we?”

“Me and C—”

The nigga needed a moment to pull himself together. We both pretended it was his body making up for the oxygen debt. I went to fetch him some water.

That afternoon, he went and got a new haircut. Nothing basic, he went and got a line up with the premium fades on the side like only barbers from Central and West Africa can hook up, the ones in town near the Ellerines taxi rank where they blare Wizkid and Patoranking onto the sidewalk. Maybe the nigga was on the mend. There is no finite time for recovery. Some niggas take longer than others. Some never heal, some master the shit and wander through life like functioning alcoholics, heartsore, sour as fuck. But they still show up for work, they still date, they even marry, they have kids. I guess if there’s a closet a nigga is always going to find room for another skeleton.

I hoped reinvention would be heavy with Franco when he got the fade. The next step in all of this would be him switching up his wardrobe, leaving his loose-fit relationship jeans for something newer and tighter. New sneakers, new clothes, new cologne, new swagger, new pussy times eight—these are a nigga’s twelve steps.

How do I know this?

I'm the Sage of the Six Nigga Paths.

Lindo, Rinzlo, Cicero, Franco, and I walked the first path together. It was called foolishness. Back in high school all we did was get into fights, on the basketball court, on the soccer field, in the mall parking lot. We were boys-will-be-boys kind of boys, all from Windhoek-Worst, eager to rep our hood like we had seen the American kids do. We didn't have 21st and Lewis or cool street names like that. Just streets named after scientists and dead composers. So we were trying to make a name for ourselves before we had to go home and do our chemistry homework.

When we grew older there were other paths: wrath, grief, lust, loneliness, and redemption. I walked them all.

One time, when I was stuck on the grief path, I left my girlfriend asleep in bed and snuck into the lounge to call Franco. I told him I just wanted to talk. He said, "Sure, dude. We can talk."

I talked a bit about my mother. About how when she passed on I realized God was average middle management at best and just plain cruel at worst. And how I felt like I was letting her down with small things I was doing or not doing. My voice broke and I held the phone away from my mouth so he could not hear me crying into my hand. When I put it back against my ear he said, "It's all good, man. If anyone's gonna get through this it's you."

I did. Just took some therapy and shit.

Looking at Franco with his new haircut, his effortless pretty boy looks, the pout of his lips and his pensive silences that made girls go mad, I thought about telling him about therapy. I decided against it. If there's another thing I know it's that niggas don't deal, they deal out. Every nigga has to walk his own path.

That was me then.

This is Franco now.

We clasped hands and bumped shoulders.

“Dope cut, Franco,” I said. (The compliment shop had been working overtime for six months now.)

“Felt like it was time.”

It was about damn time.

Then we all went to get pizza at the Debonair’s, and our other boy, the moron, Lineker, the one who never knew when to shut his mouth, said the grapevine was rustling and word on the creep street was Franco’s girl was dating someone new. Me and the other Caretakers winced and looked at Lineker hoping to God Belial would flame-tickle the nigga’s balls for eternity. Lineker never even put in his fucking shift as a Caretaker but here he was making a nigga relapse. Franco froze at the till, eyes swimming. He ducked to the bathroom quickly. I ordered a Hawaiian for him.

“Lin, you’re a fucking idiot, man,” Rinzlo hissed.

“What?” Lineker shrugged. “I thought that’d help the dude move on, man. You know, since she’s also moved on.

“It doesn’t work that way, Lin,” I said. I pinched the bridge of my nose in the universal way Sage niggas do—with the pinky finger out—to let other niggas know you’re tired of their shit. “Just don’t fucking say anything when he comes back.”

“Did you niggas know?”

“Of course we knew, Lin.” Cicero shook his head. He was the one who’d found out about

Carmen switching up. He'd dropped into the chat group and said we needed to be ready to go to Code Red. "But we didn't need to let the nigga know. Fuck, man."

"Information is a nigga's worst enemy." Rinzlo casually leaned against the counter. "It's bad for morale everywhere."

When Franco came back into the atrium, homeboy's long-ass eyelashes looked like wet spider legs after rain. He managed to square his shoulders, though, prop up his chest. The false steel in his voice made my airways tighten with pity, like I was watching *The Iron Giant* fly off to meet inevitability all over again.

"Who is it?" Franco shivered as he said it.

The other Caretakers found the devil in the menu's details.

"Yo, Franco, I don't think that'll help, man." I tried to head him off. Niggas have this obscene fascination with the truth, especially when it will harm them.

"Who is it?" He turned to Lineker.

"Bronwyn."

I made a note never to hang with Lineker ever again even though I'd been asking myself the same question.

Yeah, we all knew Carmen had a new man, but we didn't know who it was. I'd been itching to know his name. Vultures can never resist a carcass. But, also, fuck Lineker.

"Franco, I'm sorry, man." I put an arm on his shoulder. Cicero and Lindo tried to launch a heated discussion about toppings, bacon versus ham. Franco didn't budge. He was set on performing emotional seppuku.

“How long?” he asked.

“Maybe three weeks,” Lineker said, ignoring the death stares we were all giving him. He shrugged. “Maybe longer. I don’t know. Just heard today.”

Franco’s face became a satellite image of Africa at night. The lights were few and far between the spaces of his being. The rest was filled with darkness.

The nigga was back in the void.

The other Caretakers and Lineker hoovered their pizza and tagged themselves out of the ring, paying their bills, vanishing like genies after a third wish.

I was left with my nigga Franco.

At his place he was ethereally calm. I regretted not nigga-proofing his house. Realistically, I thought, how much damage could a spatula do? Could he choke himself by swallowing a whole eraser?

He went to the kitchen and got himself a beer. I boiled water for tea. I made it black, no sugar, no milk—a new path for me. He sipped his beer slowly. I blew on my tea and tried to keep the conversation light by talking about how crazy the recession was, how people were being retrenched all over the place. I told him how Angie was pushing promo codes for high-waisted jeans on Instagram for extra cash, how Lindo was thinking of part-timing as a physical trainer. I told him about Rinzlo’s shady investment scheme that was strangely shaped like a pyramid. Everyone was trying third, fourth, and fifth side hustles just to survive. I said I might have to sling crack to my students’ parents because, Lord, I didn’t know how they dealt with their own spawn. I realized Franco hadn’t said anything the whole time. His brow was furrowed.

“Bronwyn? Really?”

That is niggas for you. They see a cliff and they hunger to break their fall with the jagged

rocks below.

“Yeah, I’m pretty surprised too.”

I was and I wasn’t.

Bronwyn is a nigga we kind of totally absolutely play ball with on some Sundays when the NBA highlights get our blood racing. He’s always on the fringe, the last round pick. Even now when I conjure up an image of Bronwyn’s best plays I can’t see him making a successful dribble or a fadeaway jumper. Even under the hoop with no one bearing down on him the nigga could fumble a layup. I looked across at Franco. I could tell all he was doing was picturing Bronwyn with Carmen.

Peaking in the Top One of Things a nigga Would Not Like to Think About is his girl with another nigga. It’s never the sexual thoughts that send him into the Bermuda Triangle of heartbreak. It’s the million and one little things they used to do together or the things he never did with her that come to mind immediately. Like the time the flu had her leaking fluids and all she wanted was some food brought over but a nigga lied and said work was dragging on so he couldn’t? Some other nigga is going to nurse her real good. That time her dumb friend needed help moving house but a nigga was too busy watching *John Wick* for the eighteenth time? Yeah, somebody is going to triple jump their way into that opportunity.

When my girlfriend left, all I thought of was another nigga curling into bed with her, holding her hand under the sheets like I used to. She called me Teaspoon. I told her it was a dumb-ass name. And when she left, I wanted the word obliterated from the dictionary. There could only be one Teaspoon and I was he.

“Man, I’m sorry, Franco.”

“It ain’t your fault, man.”

“Yeah, but it still sucks, bro.”

I am right, and so is he.

It sucks. It is not my fault, but it's definitely Franco's.

Carmen caught Franco cheating with her cousin, and even though I haven't managed to coax the full story out of him, I'm certain there were other girls. But, damn, her cousin. That's the kind of cold nigga shit that makes Windhoek women sour for years. And niggas from Helldorado are trash. That's where Franco lives now. Women would be better off finding niggas from stable, institutional beige neighborhoods like Avis or Klein Windhoek or Eros. But the sticky, humid fuckboy tropics where it rains tears and insecurity like clockwork? They need to leave them the fuck alone.

Franco, my nigga, got caught. He lied about it. Then Carmen called her cousin in from the next room and the nigga had to slam on the apology brakes real quick.

Skrrr! Skrrr!

She left him. It was the right thing to do.

But, Lord, I've never seen anyone apologize like Franco. He went to her place, chest ripped open, offering her whatever she could get her hands on. He went to her work and embarrassed her, crying like a motherfucker. He went to her church. He sang louder than the most stalwart choir auntie, off-tune. But the nigga sang. He even showed up at her mother's house, trying to apologize but the zaliwas not having it. She told Franco it was between him and her daughter. Then she proceeded to do some gangster shit: she broke the Seven Seals of Motherhood and summoned her daughter onto the stoep and told them they needed to talk it out like grown-ups and not to come back into the house unless they had sorted out their mess.

Carmen had called me to come and get Franco before she heard her mother putting a double-step, chicken-and-gecko-blood, three-incantation binding spell on her ass.

“Hold on,” she said all of a sudden. “I’ll call you back quickly.”

She did not. I was worried.

I drove out to get my nigga.

But when I got there the war was already over. There they were on the stoep holding hands like they weren’t the anthem for doomed youth.

Franco never told me what he said to her but it must have been the very Words of Creation because Carmen forgave him.

That’s the one thing the missionaries got right when they landed. They managed to stamp automatic forgiveness into every nigga’s soul. Forgive and forget. That was the game plan. First give them Jesus and the Sacred Power of Forgiveness and put the Fear of Eternal Damnation in them. Then take the land. And make sure the forgiveness gene is passed down from poor father to pauper son, dispossessed mother to despondent daughter, so in three hundred years’ time their children can’t come back to claim their shit.

Forgiveness runs deep with girls from south of the Tropic of Capricorn. They don’t have options in their dusty-ass desert towns. The petrol station serves as a mall, date-night restaurant, and community hall all rolled into one. Not far away is a church where they preach about turning the other cheek. Toss boredom, brain-scrambling heat, seeing her mother ladle generous portions of pardon from the failed marriage potjie pot, and the Big Ol’ J. C. together and a girl’s going to grow up ready to excuse any transgression against her.

Carmen came from one of those towns of latitude unknown where rape was recreational and addiction was a vocation, one of those places with names ending in -fontein or -kraal or -dorp. She knew the many names of sheep. She could open a beer bottle just by looking at it. Homegal was always going to grant a pretty city boy like Franco that Desmond Tutu amnesty.

She didn't even make him go through the kind of public purgatory white girls make a nigga go through, letting him know he fucked up, inviting him to dinner with her whole family who also let him know they know he fucked up. There is a way of passing the peas that lets a nigga know his girlfriend's grandmother despises his guts. That's how you know white girls are serious about dating a nigga, they take him back. When a white girl gives up you know she was just going through a phase because dating black niggas is a lifestyle.

Not even a week after Carmen saved him from the Lake of Sulphur and the eternal pecking of livers Franco was back in her guts and, then, because this is a nigga we're talking about, her cousin's.

Niggas, man. Niggas.

The second time around, Carmen wasn't having it. That's why my nigga has been sad for so long. That shit was supposed to be automatic. That is how the Lord's Prayer goes: "As we forgive those who trespass against us!"

By his estimation, Franco had at least ten more forgiveness tokens remaining. But Carmen left for good.

She chose her mental health. And, apparently, she chose Bronwyn.

Yeah, she went for a nigga in his social circle, but that is just part of the game in the Oh-Six-One. You will break up with a girl and then your cousin will bring her to a wedding. Niggas will change barbers and have the common decency to find someone new on the other side of town, but if they break up with a girl they will start hollering at her best friend the next day.

Karma being what it is, Franco should have known better.

We did our part to help the nigga recover. We through-passed some company to him who could nurse him back to health. Cicero introduced him to a colleague who said she wasn't looking for anything serious. Lindo had a shy friend who'd always had a crush on Franco. I

called up that one woman who had a thing for me but things never added up for us. On our one-sided date Rinzlo showed up with Franco and I slyly handed her off for him to run to the end zone.

I told them not to catch feelings. I told them my nigga was going through a breakup. No matter what the arrangement, no matter the extensiveness of the contractual clauses, no matter how broken a nigga is, women from Windhoek will get out their porcelain glue and jeweler's glasses and try to put a nigga back together. All the king's horses and all the king's men have nothing on women from Nam'.

It's actually foolish the way women think dating a nigga fresh out of a relationship can end well. Maybe they think it's like lying in someone else's warm spot in a frigid bed—half the work is already done. That's what Angie says: "At least you know the nigga has feelings."

Recently broken-up niggas should be treated like Chernobyl. After forever has expired, it will be fine to settle there again. But, no, Franco was howling at the full moon with that directionless nigga sorrow and women found it cute.

At the very least Franco should've let some of the women scoop his bits into a dustpan, make sure the hurt was contained. But, no, the nigga wasn't interested. He just wanted to lie in bed with the curtains drawn, letting his beard that didn't connect become more raggedy each day while I dealt with all the angry women who blamed me for their hurt.

I did my part for Franco. I counseled, I encouraged, I soothed, I even tried to pass the blame biscuit to his ex.

Damn right it wasn't my fault.

But it was definitely Franco's.

"Do you think she's serious about Bronwyn?"

"I don't know, Franco. Can't tell, man."

Bronwyn wasn't a bad nigga, really. Sucked at ball, couldn't for the life of him say something funny on or off the court, but he was chilled. I never heard him say a bad word to anyone or about anyone. I never heard his name in the streets. He was not a starter, but maybe that's what Carmen needed. After all, if you want to date an All-Star you need to deal with All-Star Weekend.

Franco slouched on the couch. I sat on an ottoman and shuffled through the day's newspapers on his coffee table.

"Was I that bad?"

At times like these a Sage nigga has to be a lantern-bearer for those lost in their own treacherous dark.

"Franco," I said, "you're my nigga, man." He relaxed. "But you were the fucking worst."

"Nigga, fuck you!"

I kept cool. "Your anger's compass has the wrong north," I told him.

"Fuck you and your sage shit, nigga. Nobody needs your palavering."

"You need it more than most, Franco. But, listen, I ain't Morpheus and you aren't The One. I can't code a matrix around you forever. You need to fix or fold, my nigga, and I can only help with one of those."

He sighed.

"You made it through," he said after a while.

"What?"

“Your breakup.”

“Did I?”

We looked at each other for a long while.

“You know what?”

“What, Franco?”

“Deep down I think she still likes me.”

I stared the shit out of the sports page.

“You don’t think so?” He was looking at me.

“I don’t know, Franco. I—I think you should just focus on yourself for a while, you know? She’s with Bronwyn now. That’s a sign of something. I don’t know what exactly, but it’s a sign.”

“Yeah, but that’ll pass.”

Franco leaned forward, elbows on his knees, chin resting on his balled fists.

“She’ll come back.”

Then my nigga Franco started crying.

O, Franco.

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