

TRACK 1. CIRCLE OF STRIFE

FRANCO POINTED THE GUN at that point in his life all others had led to. His father once gave him a toy gun and that one full of lead too. His father. The hero and villain that danced in his head. But for Franco's money, the true monster...sat on the bed. The one...who had assaulted his son.

Franco's finger on the trigger, time to squeeze—

In walks his main squeeze—

And now there were three. The good, the bad, and the ugly. And if the good was Julie, which one was he? Ah fuck it. Life wasn't always pretty, was it? Franco squeezed the gun tight—

Little Julie stood upright. Speakin of pride that cold fall night tellin Franco to forget this part his heart of darkness cuz he'd been blessed too—MMA star and father of two. She wrapped her moonlit arm around him as his dark side drowned him. Tellin him save the rage for the cage, let's turn another page—

Franco. On some Jekyll & Hyde, some Billy Joel "The Stranger," transforming like Kanye—was anything stranger? Or was the same true of Franco himself? Goin mad in an eternal battle. With his conflicting self. Franco took a last breath from beneath his hat his shades his windbreaker—a caped crusader.

Tom Sheridan

About to take justice into his own hands...

Julie pleading to scrap the plan...

Franco holding the gun.

Weighing which one.

Made him more of a man.

TRACK 2. WALK OFF

COACH FRANCO SQUATTED. Sweat beading from his forehead. His crows' feet patterned like the fencing behind him. "When things are goin your way. It's easy. To dance like Ali. Wrangle like Ronda. But it's times like these when you see what you're really made of. When you're at sea and God's coughin thunder. Mother Nature's whoopin up waves. And you got no sails. No visibility. You're just...crawlin on the deck. Tryin to feel for that spinnin wheel. And if that ain't enough...the Devil bubbles up. Sayin, *So you think you're tough?*"

Franco's calloused finger pointed. "Now your devil's right over there. *Ain't goin nowhere.* You can't run. You can't hide. *You gotta look that devil right in the eye.*" Franco took a breath. "Got it?"

A blink from his 10-year-old daughter. The softball player in a "Pink Valentines" visor. Glancing at her devil in a blue helmet. Three more loading the bases.

Coach Joey stepped over. The Jersey guy's buff biceps on full display thanks to his cut-sleeve pink T. "Or how bout this?" The big man took a knee before his goddaughter. "You throw your best pitches. Maybe they're balls. Maybe they're

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strikes. Maybe she hits a friggin home run. Whatever it is,"
Joey shrugged his hulking shoulders, "none of us are gonna
drop dead."

Kyd giggled. "Okay."

"Let's play ball!" shouted the ump. His mask in-hand
behind home plate.

Kyd, in her new cleats and new fielder's mask, made her
way out to the mound. Took center stage on the pristine
field. Her exurban Jersey teammates defending in matching
attire.

"Nice job scarin the shit out of her," Joe noted.

"I was tryin to motivate her. Like you do with me."

"You gotta," Joey rolled his hands, "give her a way
forward. Not scare her with the devil n shit!"

Coach Franco soaked in the sage advice. Soaked in the
loaded bases. The rest of the opposing team hanging on their
dugout fence. Chanting—

"Pitcher pitcher you're so basic.

Pitcher pitcher check the bases.

Pitcher pitcher did you notice?

That they're Herbie—

Fully loaded!"

"It's times like these," called Franco—

"Yeah like your last two fights!" snapped Kyd as she dug
her cleat into the dirt before the rubber.

Coach Franco leaned back. Into the fencing—

Recalled—

Crashing into fencing. The buff opponent pummeling the old
man packing a few too many pounds. Hook. Uppercut. Knee.

POETRY MOTION

Franco staggering away from danger. Banged up.
Breathing heavy. Looking up at the clock... *Round 5.*
1:57...1:56...

Meanwhile his opponent SMASHES a roundhouse into
Franco's knee—

Down goes the old fighter.

He tries to get up—collapses.

Tries to get up again—hops on one leg—holds onto the
fence.

The ref's seen enough. Waves his arms.

Franco hops over in protest. Head coach Bobby Brazil
pulls him away.

The ref then between Franco and the buff youngster.

Raising the young man's hand...

"And *new* middleweight champion..."

Franco squatted at the softball field fencing. Kyd's pitch. A
ball. The catcher threw it back as Franco's mind threw back...

A leaner Franco touches gloves with a 170-pound
welterweight.

The welterweight dances around him.

Franco rotates to stay square. Eases around on his
reconstructed knee. He backs that knee off in anticipation of
a roundhouse—

The kick comes in high instead—to Franco's head—

Down goes Franco—

His opponent pounces—rains hammer punches—

Franco covers up—

It rains harder.

Until his shielding arms fall...

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The ref waves his hands.
The victorious fighter takes a victory lap past Franco—
Lyin in the cage like Nick Cage—*Gone in 60 Seconds*.
The front row TJ, Julie, and Kyd share looks. Their
glances up to the Jumbotron confirming the one-minute
finish.

The softball coach shook his head as he rose to his feet.
As Kyd's opponent unleashed a CRACK of her own.
The opponent circled the bases—a hop in her step, arms
waving in celebration—like Franco's last opponent—
The slugger jumped on home plate. Her teammates piled
on. The team's third base coach rushed past Franco. "Way to
go Blue Mermaid Unicorn LOLs!"
Kyd stuffed her glove in her softball backpack, darted
away. "I quit!"
"You can't just...quit!" called Franco.
"You did!"
Franco flashed back to that last fight—
Falling to the canvas.
Dropping his hands.
Closing his eyes.

TRACK 3. TJ LA NJ

TJ PACED THE STAGE. Mic in hand. Cutting through fog.
Strobe lights illuminating the Hollywood crowd before him.
Midwest blondes who left their long sleeves behind. Local
Latinas. South Central sisters. Valley girls of all variety. All
unified in youth. Long hair. Lashes.
Young bucks pranced around them. Skinny actors on the
rise.¹ Sunglassed mortgage brokers who never stop grindin.
Six-seven ball players. Feelin the dude a foot shorter—
"Alright, one more LA."
"Mal a Boo!" called a baller.
"Mal a Boo..." agreed others.
"A new one—" tried T.
"Boo...Mal a Boo..." concurred the clubbers.
TJ sighed. Glanced backstage. At the stilettoed young
lady. Sadie. The A&R rep responsible for T's rep. Mouthing,
"Mal a Boo..." Motioning, *Let's go...*
TJ took a breath. "Alright. On two. 'Mal a Boo.'"
The DJ dropped the beat.

¹ In their humble personal opinions.

The clubbers raised their hands...

*“So many girls in my life
who needs a wife—”*

As T again sung with a chip on his shoulder at a club in
Boulder...

And once again in South Bend...

Now the same old show was just about to happen. As T sat
backstage in Manhattan. Sunk in the couch. Sulking.

“You ready?” Sadie saddled the arm. Hovered over him.
Cocktail dress crawling up her lithe leg. Her acrylics tickled
his neck—complemented her soft hand like salt to a margarita.

TJ turned his attention to the old notebook on the coffee
table. The speckled black-and-white college rhyme book he
thought he’d given up. Till he needed an album’s worth of
songs. For a label that wanted a college act. A fraternity
rapper. *A frapper*, Sadie had joked. Followed by telling T his
only choice was whether he’d be a frapper for the label. Or at
Starbucks.

Everyone’s got principles till it’s time to pay the bills, T had
rationalized when he cut that first album. Followed by a deal
with himself. *One for them, one for me*. T would blow up with his
first album then call his own shots for album two. But the
only thing that blew up? His plan. Yeah he’d culled some
critical acclaim for his lyricism. As for actual fans. A
smattering of college kids and club crowds he was winning
over here and there.

T took a breath backstage. Exhaled air as cold as his
realization. *He still needed the label. To break him bigger the second
go-around*. He took a whiff of the room—stale whiskey wafting
from the walls. The “world-renowned” club’s backstage a
world-renowned dump. The place resting on its laurels like
Rip Van Winkle.

Sadie spun her lithe legs across T’s lap. “Hello?”

He sat up. “What about the new verse I mentioned? It
gives ‘Mal a Boo’ some heart.”

“Heart? That’s the last body part anyone wants!” Sadie
motioned out to the coed crowd gettin down—

TJ swung her legs like a turnstile from his NYC subway
days. When he’d hustle back to Jersey to cozy up to Kamara.
Only these days he was without his bae. She on a research
trip since May. The pragmatic one in grad school. Left the
music dreams to her boo.

The one now standing—back on his heels. Looking up at
Sadie in her high ones. Five-six turned six-foot. Slender
fingers caressing her hips. “What are they grinding to right
now?”

TJ peeked out at the neon-lit twentysomethings. Getting
down to Post Malone’s “Wow.” If TJ had more than a
second, he’d explain that yeah the beat was lit, the lyrics too,
but as an artist, they didn’t represent what T was trying to be.
But in a second...T was going on. A final cross-country stop
to promote his debut album. *High Education*.

Sadie’s scarlet nail turned T’s chin to her attention. “What
does Post put on the counter?” Sadie asked of the song
playing as her lemon-colored contacts lasered in. “A dozen
roses?”

“Some big butts,” T exhaled with a laugh.

“And you’re gonna follow that up with some song with a
sappy ending?”

TJ eyed a girl dancing—her Roy Purdy breaking down to a booty shake.

“Are you gonna let that poor girl down?” Sadie crooked her head. Pursed her ample auburn lips.

“Alright. This one’s for her.”

Sadie stamped her approval on T’s cheek. The surrounding area flushing just as red as T hopped out—

He grabbed the mic from the exiting emcee. “Alright New York, coming at you from...‘Mal a Boo.’

“That’s. My. Boy,” exclaimed the dude rising from his VIP couch—arms wide, forearm veins popping as he held popped bottles. His black Bulgari shades atop all white. All tight. From his Henley to his hemmed pants. Bare-ankled in his Louboutin loafers. Lenny “Lightning in a Cage” Carrera. Aka Linc. Standing as a couple young ladies lounged on each side. A third on her way over—

Sadie. “Gimme the Goose gimme the Goose,” she rified in the vein of Biggie’s “Gimme the Loot.”

“Ah old school alright.” Linc poured the brunette a drink. Then settled back in his seat between the blonde and the redhead. That’s how the fighter could remember the music biz trio. Cuz they all looked the same otherwise. Bright lipstick. Dark cocktail dresses. Long hair they kept brushing away to maintain their display.

Linc sat with his elbows on his knees. Vibing to T. His short sleeves giving way to tat sleeves. His forearm cut with calligraphy:

L i n c

The blonde on his left caressed it. “As in Abraham Lincoln?”

“As in my name yo!” Linc laughed.

“Seriously?” fired the redhead across the blonde’s bow.

“Lightning in a Cage,” clarified Linc.

“I thought your name was Lenny—” began the blonde.

“My nickname yo!”

The redhead fired again, only with more slur this time, “*Surriously?*” Her cranberry vodka just as tipsy. Limp wristed and...

Drizzling on Linc’s dress pants. “What the—you two are crazy yo!”

“Guess you’ll have to take them off.” The redhead wiped a cocktail napkin at his crotch.

Linc eased back down in his tight white pants. “Chill yo. My boner’s about to be all over TMZ n shit!”

The blonde and the redhead reunited in laughter. Sandwiched him further.

“Get a room already,” concluded Sadie as she guzzled her Goose.

“Don’t worry I got one. Gotta check my boy though—” Lenny threw his hands high over his shaved head. Vibing as he sung along with T—

*“Cuz I’m young today
And I’m in LA—”*

“We’re in New Yurrrk—” interrupted the redhead.

“It’s a song yo! He lives in LA.” Linc continued to vibe. Before his championship belts propped atop the booth. The left one’s gold plate engraved with, *World Bantamweight Champion*. The right one, *World Featherweight Champion*.

T continued the rap on-stage—

*“Wanna see Beverly’s Hills
Give Holly some wood*

Tom Sheridan

*Write Santa for Monica
Make a pass at Dena...*

Linc clapped with delight. Sang along with the hook–

“Mal a boo mal a boo mal a boo.”

“What’s that one by the way?” Sadie leaned in from her third-wheel seat. Pointed...

Linc’s laughter went cold. He stared down at the tattoo forged into his left forearm...

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“Does it say, No? On?”

“It don’t say shit,” cut Linc. “Been meaning to get rid of it.” Linc finished his drink. Slammed his glass.

TJ stood at the backstage exit. On his cell phone. An afterparty raging inside. “Hey... How am I?... Cold.” T clutched his phone-holding arm. “How are you?”

“Hot,” began Kamara. “Couldn’t sleep. Had to come out and sit on my hammock.”

“Ooh I’m picturing Camila Cabello. On her album cover.”

Kamara knew the pose. Camila spread eagle. Her tropical dress covering only what it had to. Her dark hair streaming well past her hoop earrings. Her body glistening with sweat.

POETRY MOTION

Kamara meanwhile. Her hair fraying further by the day. Sitting on the hammock—her thighs pancaked. Belly folding. Her skin a deep brown. “Little heavier. Little darker,” laughed Kamara. “Sunscreen’s no match for the equator. That’s what Ecuador means by the way.”

“Equator,” finished T.

“You should see me down here. Studying the ancient Las Vegas civilization. *I look like a Las Vegan!*” Crickets in her background...

Laughs from T.

“And how is *your* Las Vegas culture going?”

“I’m in New York, but yeah...” TJ glanced back to the backstage cosmopolitans. Dancing like they were at the Cosmopolitan. Sadie about to mix cosmopolitans—holding the magnum bottle up—“I got the Goose, bitch!”

“Did you talk to them about your next album?” inquired Kamara. “*Your* concept...”

“*My* concept...is not ready.” T took a breath as he stared down the rat-infested alley. “Theirs is...”

Sighs on both sides of the phone.

TJ watched as rats picked apart a dead dove. “I should get goin. I’m freezin out here.”

“Okay...”

Tom Sheridan

“So... Bye...” concluded T.

“Bye. Home soon enough...”

Click. Into the gun click of “Taste.”

TJ made his way. Through the party backstage. Saw Sadie grooving—swaying her hips lower and lower. Her curling finger calling him over...

T pulled out his phone. To silence it. Forget the world. Get lost in the Tyga hygge. But there was a text from: MOM. *Hi TJ. You're in New York? Can you meet at Demetri's in the morning? Eleven?* Mom. Always so considerate. If it was up to the early bird, they'd meet at six. At a diner out by her in the sticks of Jersey. Instead she'd offered to split the difference. Meet just down the Turnpike from T's current location. Back in the Francos' original hometown. Woodbridge. The Wood. T realizing that no matter how far he traveled, that would always be his hood. He typed back: *Sure. What for?*²

And as Sadie Benny whipped him to the dance floor...

T read the response.

Made his way to the door.

² Having first written *sure what for* then editing it to meet Mom's standards.

TRACK 4. PHIL FRANCO

FRANCO SHOOK THE OLD MAN'S COLD HAND. Let it fall back to the hospital bed.

A monitor aside tracked the old man's heart rate. A saline bag hung like how the old man used to hang his hat. The old man who now needed help just breathing. Tubes running from his nose. A machine doing the inhale, exhale for him.

“Look like ah...you seen a ghost ah...” floated The Frog.

Franco had a hard time looking. Yeah there was the discolored skin. The bloodshot eyes. The flattened hair of a man who'd always taken pride in his poof. But it was somethin else about the face. It was the same face Franco had seen the night before. When Kyd was showin him n Julie some aging app. The three of em havin a good laugh lookin at Kyd aging like Julie, Julie in turn aging like her old lady. (Rest her soul.) Then it was Franco's turn.

The face his had aged into looked a lot like the one before him. In the hospital he was born in. On the old man wilting away before him. *Cuz they're both Jersey guys. From the same area. Lotta guys got a similar look*, Franco had explained to Julie n Kyd the night before.

Franco now looked toward the Newark downtown. All the new constructions in the world weren't gonna stop the inevitable. Another life lesson from Franco's "uncle" before him. *Step-uncle* as far as orphan Franco was concerned. Step-uncle turned dock boss. Mob boss if Franco was bein honest. The Frog bookin bets. Young Franco collectin debts. And yeah Franco had put in honest work down the docks. But even that was part of The Frog's bigger ruse. The union deal with its executive earmarks. The trucks that "got lost." The pension fund that invested in crooked guys "going straight." The Frog justifying it all. *You think my contract's nice? A Wall Street exec wouldn't wipe his ass with it. And so a truck gets lost once in a while. Keeps the insurance behemoths in business. And the loans? Wiseguys gone good. Ain't that good for everyone? As hard as we work down the docks? For all them conglomerate cows?*

Franco tracked the man's gaunt face—as many lines as his life's story. The whites of his eyes gone red. But the hazel halos all the same.

Franco's hazels meanwhile. They hid behind a bush worthy of Bush. The band's heyday the last time Franco had let it go so long.

"You're 'bout...skinny as me ah..."

"One seventy," Franco countered.

"Shoulda...gave me the fifteen you shed." The Frog scraped two fingers like he was hitting at blackjack. "What kinda man ah," The Frog tapped his checkered gown, "falls below a buck fifty."

"What can ya do? The disease..." Franco couldn't bring himself to say *lung cancer*. The disease The Frog *could've* done something about. Six million cigs ago.

"Whether it's next week or next month... you know ah...what I'm gonna do ah..." The Frog gave Franco a grave look. "Just remember me—" The Frog broke into a cough.

"Take it easy." Franco cracked his neck over his use of the old saying. One of many sayings he'd learned from the emaciated man before him. Franco took a breath. Tried to...*take it easy*.

The Frog looked out on the gray NJ day. "Remember ah...when you were born here."

Orphan Franco crooked his head. "What?"

The Frog gazed at the 45-year-old's face. Yeah there were some lines. But his jawline was as jagged as ever. His muscular neck bulged from his t-shirt. His fit frame sculpting it. "Life worked out pretty good ah—" The Frog convulsed into another cataclysmic cough.

"What you do mean you remember when I was born here? Met you when I was like four fuh—" the orphan bit his lip, held the f-bomb in— "four years old." Between Franco havin a daughter, being in the public spotlight, and learning how to express himself through therapy (somethin he'd never tell The Frog in a million years), the wizened, wiser man had dropped droppin f-bombs.

Franco watched the breathing machine click. Like final ticks on the old man's game clock of life. And here he was. Angling for some kinda last-minute shot. Or worse. Was he chuckin a Hail Mary? Askin Franco to come up with the catch...

"How many times...I look you dead in your eyes ah..."

Franco's eyes peeked back from behind his hair...

"How many times ah...people mistake me for your father?"

"We're Jersey guys. We got that look."

The Frog's bloodshot hazels gazed. *Really?*

Franco shrugged like when he was five and tried to deny this same guy. Back then tellin Little Franco to drink his milk. "It's why you gravitated toward me, no?" rationalized Franco.

“Birds of a feather.”

“Birds of a nest ah...”

“What the...” Franco bit his lip. Leaned into the opposing hazels. “What are you sayin?”

“I’m sayin. I ain’t your uncle ah. Step-uncle whatever.”

The Frog caught his machine-abetted breath. “My brother Marco...your foster father ah...he’s—” The Frog wheezed.

Franco waited on the old man like a parent waiting on a stalling two-year-old...

“He’s your uncle...your *blood uncle*.”

Franco looked the old man up and down like Indiana Jones discovering a disaster...

“And he’s only got one sibling ah...”

The turn of the doorknob—

The doctor and nurse approached in scrubs—

“Good morning, Phil,” opened the Asian-American woman.

The Frog looked to Franco. “Know how I lived a long time ah?”

Franco waited for it...

“The lady’s the doctor, the guy’s the nurse—”

The old man’s joke now a jolting cough—

The professional duo laughed. “Very funny, Phil,” conceded the doctor. “As always,” noted the well-berthed nurse.

Franco crooked his head. *What was his therapist talkin about? Something about character bein situational? This old man’s a comedy act in here? To Franco, he was the most serious man he’d ever met.* “Not now,” Franco said, raising his hand. “Two minutes. Please,” managed the man on edge.

“He’ll give you an autograph,” added The Frog.

“No one wants autographs no more,” snapped Franco.

“Selfie?” half-joked the young doctor.

“Sure. Meet ya at the front desk.” Franco motioned to somewhere—*anywhere*—other than that room.

The doc shrugged in agreement, headed that way—

“I want in,” noted the nurse in tow.

Franco watched them go. Pointed a finger in the old man’s face. “Say what the hell you’re tryin to say.”

The Frog mustered a machine-assisted breath. “Your mother ah...was a dishwasher down Tiffany’s. The old bar n grill.”

Franco rolled two fingers. *Get to it...*

“Got hot n heavy with her...” The Frog waved at the world passin him by. “The way I was raised...milkmen’s babies...you don’t say nothin. I mean, I seen a redhead raised by Ricans.” The Frog’s bloodshot eyes glanced Franco for a laugh. Nothing. “So you’re born ’74. I’m married. A 22-year-old fool that was foolin around with this broad. And she’s...not exactly a citizen. Barely an adult herself. Family pressures her to put you up for adoption. Drags her back to Brazil.”

Franco squeezed his hands into his hips. A locale less lethal than The Frog’s neck.

“You start bouncin around the system...I start to grow up, get to know people around town.” The Frog coughed.

Caught his breath. “My brother’s back from ’Nam losin his goddamn mind ah. Figured a kid would be good for him. A kid we could raise together—” The Frog breathed his hardest yet. The machine worked its hardest yet. “Kid turned world cham—” The Frog convulsed into another cough.

Franco scanned the old face. *Looked just like the fub-effing-face he’d seen the night before.* That silly aging app. That was apparently right on the money...

Franco looked his newfound father right in the eye. Had

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all of two words for him...

“Fuck. You.”

Franco stormed away.

The Frog’s final shouts swirled like a twister–

“It all worked out ah...” The old man fought off a cough.

“Could you ever forgive me, Franco?” More coughs.

“Remember the rodeo, Franco?”

The Frog mustered the energy...

To shape his hand like a gun.

But the only place it pointed.

Was the back of his son.

TRACK 5. DEMITRI’S

TJ APPROACHED THE DINER’S FRONT DOORS. The “Meet Me at Demitri’s” sign. Demitri’s. The Woodbridge, New Jersey diner that had made memory after memory for the kid over the years. There with Mom and Dad after Little League games. TJ sittin there in his Yankee uniform eatin French toast at two in the afternoon. Same diner T and his crew had gone to after the eighth grade dance–tradin disses over disco fries. Same diner they’d years later barge into after the bars closed. But in between. The Francos had moved out to Branchton. *There was a fuckin diner out there too. A diner that looked just like this one.* The associations triggering T. Triggering a memory. Of the last time he’d stepped into a Jersey diner. Four years prior. Back in 2015...

That summer had started on such a high note. TJ drivin outta Jersey. Just startin to make his way in LA. When he got the call from the detective. *We found the guy...*

So TJ flew back. Met them at a diner booth in the back. T tucked to the inside. Surrounded by the trio. Their business