

1. ALAN VEGA SOUNDTRACKED FANTASY

Twelve miles outside of Austin, there was a Circle K. And Tango didn't know that we still had those, he thought that we had moved onto 7/11s and Shell stations, oh well. A pity! Tango tried to be discreet with the pure fact that he wasn't on his way to central Albuquerque because he had the 9am coffee shifts.

It was a self-booked prophecy, he was a boy and his guitar—he wanted that sweetheart six-string to see the coasts, even if it meant building a housing that joined nylon and arteries in a glorious tangent of macabre—. His compositions wrestled in between the gleam of 1990s alternative and post-depressive Beethoven (Strauss dipped his hands into the honey too, mostly because of his Eastern European inclinations...but let's get real, the kid is probably digging up a cassette of Schoenberg and playing that over his inner monologue). Tango was born, learned to walk, spat and ate at handfuls of Backeris until he was three in the city of Vienna, Austria. His heart lies there, but he glued together the pubescents and the iconoclastic twenties in Palm Desert, California. Raised on sweat and sun-streaked through each end of eyebrow and leghair—his head hair remained dark and teeth white—. Tango planned on just singing tunes in dive bars, but part of him was waning towards monologue performances. He had a Panasonic RN-106D he typically used for recording crude renditions of to-be-songs, what an unlikely fortune would the processor's programmed on-voice sensor, amalgamating a grasp at the machine to streaking on the paint layers of sound, would prove to be. Tango threw the matte stone against the passenger seat after finishing off a bare bones demo in the trunk, there was a hawk overhead and he wished upon a star that he could've retained any screeches formed from the hawk's soar.

The next time his flesh vessel met sheet metal vessel was after a very disheartening trip from takeout. Tango was trying not to eat meat, on account of trying to lower his blood pressure, and maybe diversify his diet a tad, but his chest was tinted and shellacked with caffeine and ibuprofen, he was halfway to his knees by sundown. He was having an auditory and sensory hallucination of twine wrapping around his ears, a loose end spiraling down his canal and starting reeling all his nerve endings past the stirrup...and that was all very abrasive. Kung Pow Beef would have to suffice as the nutritional (mostly filling) remedy. Then came the waterworks and the abrasive screaming match he held with himself in the Pontiac, "There is no single shred of commitment," this is funneled through mouthfuls of egg-laden fried rice, and debaucheric amounts of sesame-tinged meat chunks—throw in some bamboo shoots and you've got dinner—, "I can't manage without completely lapsing and exhausting myself! What will my fresh hell leave for me when I remove my torso husk and see nothing but sauteed shrimp and Corona Extra? Am I a sum of personalities or snack foods?"

Tango found the tape still running at a red light miles down the road and gave a heave of the body, that alluded to a chuckle. It was all so silly. Listening back he felt like he discovered what underpaid rock journals call the "sound" of his style. There was room to dance around his mahogany like Muddy Waters while he strained his throat with thoughts about his shithit diet. That was the music that could make him drive faster and wake up earlier—he's exploring the works! He's making coffee with infused flavors! He's thinking about building things and using the word "soft" and "warm" in reference to recording equipment!—, whereas his tonal chords had made him not touch alarms or create enamel plaques about tomorrows. His show in Albuquerque would open with fingers tapping somewhere between

the fourth and the ninth frets and his falsetto going for a humdinger, “This gas station bathroom seems like the perfect spot to test if I could slit my wrists with my car keys. But I’ve just taken my first shit in two days and I might’ve got some under my fingernails. I don’t want that kind of infection, and bugs scare me!” Wait the film in my head is off it’s reel.

Behind the counter Francis Fortress was chewing on two pieces of folded-over grape bubble gum, and had one hand putting pressure on a graphic novel—she was waiting for the unwashed kid to come out of the restroom, and she didn’t want to look like she was slacking off—. She liked cakey dark eyeshadow, and sandy cherry lipstick, so Francis kept her face less stressed to be approachable (also the habit of cynicism was growing dry). She didn’t like her job, but she didn’t like showing that, it wasn’t fair to those just passing through. The novel was tempting, mostly due to the art style being more breakaway than other novels she would crack open.

She used a fine pencil to trace the drawings, that’s how she learned to draw. It wasn’t a passion, but it supplied an escape—especially one that wouldn’t attract attention, kid likes to draw, why all the fuss?—from thinking about buying real estate in the Mojave Desert and setting up the walk-in clinic she wanted. She wasn’t a doctor, she was just a people person, favored the spirit of kids piled into a tin box, wheeled out into reflective rock formations, clinging to cactus and mouths stained of jamaica. A rattlesnake bite or extreme dehydration could really sour those apples, so a walk in would help with that dimension. It was a pretty style-barraged dream, the parameters that would most likely evolve would surely be that of a different audience. Francis was aware of that dimension when she would verbalize these feelings, it’s too unfortunate that her co-workers seem to be wrapped up in their own personal concerns regarding Francis being “such a kid”. It was all pretty fair criticism, and good natured ribbing until some slug-like anachronist piped up about ethnic others. That really popped Francis, it was such an insult to the very spirit of wide spread health, she recalls the fury she wished she released, *If there’s people that need it most, it’s those struggling for economic survival in the crusty blood-lust that sprawls along the...well the upper-middle of the Americas*. A cut-paste diatribe, but she imagined it doesn’t resonate with losers, or something to that degree. It was venom in her, she’d sooner boil his blood than kiss his bruise. But again, it’s all a ramble upon impending choreography of attending a medical or business institute (at least opening up a book or two). Yet she was balanced amongst the mystique of a place haunting somewhere between a slab shack and a bustling anti-metropolis. Suburbs kept parents coming, but promising dive bars with exclusive pool tables held by bald men who probably eat glass and drink rainwater, kept the population of old men and fragile masculine heterohomosexuals. But there were some nice hot springs. Francis was too afraid to swim there, she didn’t want to catch any brain-eating bacteria, get things all Event Horizon (extra gore explosion, sans retroactive hell demon-type alien—it was one of those movies made on a tight schedule, so cut them a break—).

Tango undid the deadbolt (first time unsuccessfully) and emerged from the ceramic coffin,—she thought, *Why is he holding his keys?*—gave a nod and a mouth-sealed smile. Francis didn’t smile back, but she tried to seem nice. She saw him get into the Pontiac and it made her laugh to herself. He’s a real snakebite kid. He’ll probably fall in love with a girl smelling of cactus flower, he’ll probably derive enjoyment more from having turquoise on his lapel, than a community by his shoulders. He’ll have content! To hold, at that! The gloss of a printed photo—two friends not facing the camera, one turned back and smiling (their face overexposure white) probably holding something like a ginger root (oh! If he’s lucky enough, they’ll also be holding a camera)—versus the static of a phone capture. Sweet, sweet paraphernalia, that’s what life is leading to.

The glister off the Pontiac was frayed by the sun of the Texas heat, this kid doesn't live here, complete drifter I'd call it. She didn't want to be uptight about it, but she knew about the salamanders that slid their way through the surrounding Austin areas, expecting a chile-coated San Francisco. They scatter and grab in their tails at the first sight of a sincere Lone Star. Francis was also adverse to the culture, yet she felt better than them due to her comprehending the context better. Her co-worker Mica peered their head around a stack of snack treats behind Francis and gazed out at the Pontiac. "Living the life...in style Francis? Or is he not gonna make it out of the station?"

"No, he's gonna be able to get out of the station. I bet he probably knows something about engines," he doesn't, "and that car will probably run longer than any of us will."

"So you think this kid is as legit as the car?"

"Absolutely not. Also...I don't know what that means, but I'm going to disregard it. He's just using his money to fulfill his aesthetic desires. Nothing wrong with it," she wanted to keep drawing because she didn't like talking to them about boring things. Mica and her were alike, but Mica still practiced that characteristic of co-workers that Francis felt a full-blown aversion to: that they needed to conversate. But time was continually wearing down, she was almost off her shift and then came her later day, where she planned on making the most out of her employee discount.

Tango was using fumes to pull out of the gas station, when he made a realization. His set in Albuquerque was going to be forty-five minutes (can ya believe it? He's never even been to the place and they're putting on airs) and he needed some more material. He drove thirty miles, talking to himself the whole time about how it makes no sense that we can't seem to ever have conversations without referring a material object that only exists to humans. Its quoting when saying, "we can't seem"—the eternal "we" or "them" that people seem to so interested in—. If one is gonna talk about their day, they'll probably talk about a "coffee maker" or "clothes", things that are purely human in nature. Animals and other beings don't feel the need to extrapolate on inventions, unless for survival. Hell animals cannibalize each other for nutrition—Tango always found the higher intelligence possessed by humans to be so innately hilarious because while it enables us to make groundbreaking discoveries, humans are also able to do such monotonous things with it that are just so deeply rooted in self-appeasement...and then as a big ingeniously sinister prank we know too much so we are constantly on the brinks of metaphysical quandaries, and existential panic—. Yet we decide it's a good use of our time to go from Mr. Coffee's to Keurigs because we just fucking can (there's that "we" again! Gah! Who are they?! And who said that I'm with them!). After his sixty-five mph trek, in an effort to not be seen by anyone that he encountered at the gas station (last thing he needed was for strangers to pity him, "Oh are you living in your car?"), Tango busted out the Panasonic for another noise conglomeration. Starting on the sixth fret, asphyxiate the throat to maybe an A2 (half-step dissonance!)? He hoped the bar had an ATM.

With his heel pointed skywards, his knee, juxtapose with relaxed position, Tango's fingers and cuticles made sudden swinging contact with the nylon. He closed his eyes, so he could belt, "Damn! I've never seen something like this in moments! They'll call me anachronistic, experimental and courageous in the face of genre. I don't know! That's not up for me to decide and this is all a projection. Regardless of the way the opinion chips fall, it's just not as groundbreaking as anyone would like to admit, I can think of three bands on my iPod doing the same thing, and this is just what I want other people to want to think about me! Gee, he sure was conceded up there on stage, but the kid sure is honest! Maybe you'll find it vulnerable and want to grab a drink with me afterwards, and we can all make plans for lunch. I'll

undoubtedly ditch, because I have to be in Salt Lake City by six tomorrow, and I have a lot of ground to cover.”

After his set, Tango perched himself solitary against the bar, snuggling a vodka soda between thumb and compressed forefingers. A soft-heavy (with a tad of clammy) hand motioned across his shoulder. Tango reflexed, it was a man older than him, obscured by patchy beard, limp beanie, thin frames and face tattoo? The cartoonish man said, “That was a neat set, with all the different things you experimented with,” what is this? Fucking chemistry?

“Thank you!”

“Yeah, the spoken word was great and visceral! You know?”

He was grabbing some adjectives out of his party bag, that means he actually liked it. A small joy began to arise in Tango, “Yeah, you know the band Nada Surf? The spoken word stuff reminded me of their song, ‘Popular’.”

Tango didn’t know them. He offered more appreciative thanks, a handshake that said, “I am doing this as a courtesy and a formality”. Tango soon felt the chill that was adhering his hand against the glass, so he downed his drink so he could take in the smokescreen and burned out string lights that the bar had to offer.

Tango was ever so slightly keeping the corners of his mouth in an upward stress from receiving that very measured compliment. He was ready to unite key and ignition, but he was interested in this band that supposedly retained his similar noises. The marriage of audio device and auxiliary cord birthed out the spillage of the swan song in question. What the fuck? Tango sunk in his seat, cyclic chord progressions? common time? singable and accessible chorus? Was he really this distanced from the avant garde? There he sulked, praying that he was in for a grated, overblown, $\frac{3}{4}$ signal, he was hoping for US Maple-type of drippy and nebulous. Instead, he got song structure. This was a level five self doubter, now he knew that his little post-irony dialogue was nothing but the choreographed truth.

Lower than a waste of spilled tomato paste, this would surely cue an end to the road trip. Didn’t have any resolve right? Tango would say to himself that this isn’t happening, due to the fact that he may retain a glimpse of fraud, people were still nice to him. What did that pinhead at the bar know anyway? Why did he have to base his self-perception on someone who made the choice to talk to an opener at a dive bar in Albuquerque? Could you imagine that people spend their whole lives just going to a bar and “hanging out”? He started laughing, what a kid he was! Running across the desert, popping his head in and out of cities, leaving a sonic breadcrumb trail, just like the original pioneers of noise and roll! Laughter grew to hysteria, let’s mix in some liquor! “No!” He was screaming to himself, but he couldn’t hear. This delusion was a powerful one, there was the ol’ face clawing. The ol’ kicking at nothing. Tango was doing the tango of dreary manic bodily manifestation (on ice!). The spazmic like status his body had trapped him in was that of a bicycle with a stuck chain, infinite repeats of toiling to reach no sincere destination. Relief set in when this was all put to bed with a peek in the rearview. Seeing himself, wide-eyed with hands clasped at himself, eyes red and skin bumpy. He started monologuing, “This is ridiculous, I should probably just go to bed, or eat something. When was the last ti...I can’t say. I guess I’m just one of those people that just stops eating! You remember Tango? ‘Oh who, that pile of skin and bones!?’”

There were three kids sharing a jug of Carlo Rossi sitting against a parking block with their attention fixated to the car with what appeared to be a man having a seizure. He was sitting there, like he was listening to his steering wheel tell a story, then all at once his torso sputtered and twisted, his arms

launched like missiles that slid against the surfaces of his jawline and outlines of his skull. They dropped their cigarettes, and put down the jug, their attention (and possible ideas of things to set on fire) eclipsed by the tangents of the flesh occurring in the Pontiac less than a few meters away. One with long hair and a braided sweater stood, dragging his feet through rubble and rocks approached the Pontiac window. By the time he was an arms-length the fury had ceased, and there was the muffled noises of...of a conversation. He knocked against the window, the man froze like a raccoon struck by a slung piece of garbage, he tensely rolled down the window, "Hey. Are you doing okay man, do you..."

"Oh my god," Tango felt what he could only arrive at...ridiculous, "I'm so sorry to concern you. I'm totally fine, I was just having. Mood swings, you know?"

The kid licked his lips and stretched the areas surrounding his upper lip, "Yeah, ok. Are you gonna drive?"

"...Uh, yeah in a minute"

"I don't think that's such a good idea."

Wow. That was really sweet. Tango felt that other warming sensation that he had gotten from the man with the complexion of barbecue chips. There may not be the spaces he wishes to occupy, but there will always be space for him in the world. Even to some shitdrivel kids drinking Sangria. Tango looked up and smiled at the boy, lighted the ignition and drove away from him.

Inside a motel room Francis set down her purse and grabbed a book out from the top drawer of a cabinet, lined with a floral design carved into the wood. She opened it to where the book's spine started to bend and lose it's adhesive. From there she was able to recover a baggy, with yellowed tape that connected it to the page in question, filled a quarter way with angel dust. She clenched the edges of her mouth around the top of the bag and scrunched her back down to be at eye level with the table and used two hands to handle the burgundy-tinted landline phone that had a soiled cord that no longer wrapped up properly. She dialed the number, she started humming "St. James Infirmary" and by the end of the first refrain, she got an answer on the other end. With verbal speech compressed by the frayed ziplock, "Hello kiddo, it's Franky,"

The voice sounded distant, as if muttering to himself, "What in the fuck..."

She spat the bag down onto the duvet, "It's your drug dealer."

"Jesus Franky, how much fucking smack are you doing,"

"I'm clean Burtrum, I was just multitasking. It's the new in thing, we've all got so much to do, I can't believe I spent any amount of time doing one task with both hands"

A small breathe, it was one of those mouth pushes. Can't tell if they're steps away from a laugh, or if they've lost so much of their patience that they can't even muster language, "Anyways Burtrum, I'm in town. Well...your town." *Which I hope to the bugs in this mattress you can appreciate, you little spiddle sucker,* "And I'm going to be having a drink at Conquest in about..."

"How about in an hour?"

"Sure. Bye", she hung up because she really did not enjoy speaking to Burtrum at all. If anything was really amiss with the directions or the plan, there would be a non-timbral vibrato floating out of the time-worn speakers that hugged the receiver. She was just about to sell the final baggy.

Arlo Fortress lived in the bungalow that was adjacent to the brown grassy park that had sand instead of dirt, buried mounds of dog shit with the residual smell of birds. It was where Francis stood, trying to sell the last of her brother's absolute psychotic amount of snort-ables that he left in the wake of his death. Arlo was a tree-climber, would throw scissors at teachers and gave his girlfriends stolen goods

from the pet store on their birthdays. Shag carpet hair, always seeming to wear a leather jacket with silver studs, he didn't smoke cigarettes but he reeked of them. Francis loved the kid, but she knew what a complete clown everyone thought he was, his life was that of a wandering drug mule with the most lackluster sense of kindness—he'll buy you a liter of soda if you're thirsty, but he'll forget to visit you in the hospital—. He moved away from their Austin-eclipsed town after he failed the GED test. Apparently there was a strange allure to him about Albuquerque. Maybe he needed to be somewhere with more lizards. His death was definitively (let's use this term a bit liberally here...there's not exactly a huge "trust" of people working in the police department amongst squads of kids known for loitering outside Safeways and hocking drugs into the school systems) murder—which completely made Francis lose her marbles. This wasn't her beautiful, loving brother who she'd drop inclinations and put dreams on the back burner for, but his life wasn't equated with that of a passing meal. Also the kid was on a slippery slope, murder was just insulting, so she was out for blood—, most likely caused by his shithit friends. One of them in question, she had on speed dial, Burtrum the complete freak. She sent a stray hand into her sunken pleather sling bag and took a glance at her reflection in her handheld knife. It wasn't particularly a bloodlust, but she felt the sentiment that a janitor did (a type of Stockholm syndrome, it was in her heart to mop up the messes left in the wake of those with no heartfelt considerations, and although she was off the clock, a quick sweep couldn't hurt). This was all some Alan Vega soundtracked fantasy, the knife returned to its comforting concealed spot. It's such a pipe dream to be the femme fatale, but this was the beckoning beacon that stood before her. There are always things one wants to change about themselves, but a certain amount of melodrama television programming is enough to rot a brain and cause a haphazard purchase of an antique lamp. Yet at the end of the day she had personality, no matter how many people described new self-help tangents to "change herself" (did she ask?) there was something endearing about the fact that she didn't have anything to try to prove to anyone, she knew that every quirk—no matter how borderline rambunctious—was all brush strokes in her self portrait. One spends a lot of their life being groomed by others, and that was getting on her nerves. To a degree it lent a hand in the social arena at events like parties, her sincere aloofness was magnetizing to those that prefer projection to investigation. Yet she would've strongly preferred to not be the object in the room, (it's a little charming when you're sixteen, you feel like some kid is going to learn ukulele for you...but then you approach your twenties and you're getting really tired of hearing all these dude's interpretations of *All My Sons*) but Francis had to focus. She needed to coax someone to buy the last of her supply, she might needed to present herself as a bit of an object, or even just as a friend. Either way, she had to drop genuine for a minute so she can sleep at night without dreams of drug bags.

Tango was standing on the roof of his car trying to readjust the jagged antenna to a clean ninety degrees, rather than its buckled-in (like someone gave it a sucker punch in the abdomen) stature. He typically preferred the familiarity of CDs, but he was growing weary of his stack and wanted a little countryside flavor, maybe a hint of NPR (he started getting a bit of a cold sweat, is NPR like a regional thing, or does everyone have it? He was doing his best to recall stand-up bits that could offer some corroboration...they have a website, everyone has to know about this right?). It was around then that Tango's phone started to grate against the tin of the hood with harsh and snappy vibration intervals. Tango almost tripped over his feet—he pictured a real judo kick to the ankle, landing knee smashing through windshield and forearm kebabled through antenna, one slip up and it could be more than a vision—hopping from roof to ledge (am I gonna cave the motherfucker in and be knee-deep in engine?) and snatched the device. "Yeah, I'm in Utah, what's up?"

“Well fuck, I thought you were still in New Mexico,”

“Not anymore, I also don’t want to hang out with you, if this is the direction of the conversation,”

“Ok, painfully blunt, that’s pretty superficially mean,”

“Yeah...I know, I’m sorry. I just got the shit kicked out of me because my car hit an armadillo”

“I thought you were in Utah?”

“You wouldn’t think they’re indigenous to Utah right?”

The man on the other end hung up the phone, the heat was rolling in and the phone made a thin film against Tango’s sunworn cheek, making indents in the smudge from his prickly facial hair (that was growing in fast, unrelenting, and most of all...ingrown). Clinging, not dissimilarly to a spider, to the sides of the car and propelling his torso through the gap of the window, Tango managed to aphix himself within the driver’s seat. In the passenger seat rested a crumpled paper bag, diving a hand in Tango pulled out a pear. Upon the initial bite, Tango felt the indisputable sandiness of the (accursed, how dare it) fruit. He longed for greater textures and flavors, something more resounding than a bite in between destinations. It started to transform into an apparent question of whether or not Tango did anything but commute on this tour, always early enough for the bartender to feel bad enough to offer an extra free drink. It sparked a little sadness in him, what was it all for if it all arrived at this? Growing up without siblings, and parents that were victims of the horrors inundated through stock trade business tower job fields, landed him with a very calming sense of reservation. His upbringing was always being flanked with suggestions of instant gratification, or self-assembly (anywhere between small print paperbacks and model trains). He was off put by strangers with course blood, that would try to spark chatter in grocery lines, he preferred the ping-pong of inner monologues and ramblings, discourse meant a self-removed type of improvising (usually one surrenders whatever they wanna say to just appeal to the daunting task of socializing, I’ll just nod and agree, maybe throw in a glance at a ridiculous tabloid to es skew anymore prying into actual forms of connection). It was a solitary joy, but that would do him no favors in his pursuit of the road rash tour life.

The taupe plastic leather was starting to deteriorate, resembling a drought stricken crop, or a black metal band’s logo design. But that’s the way he liked things. The stained ceramic aside him was filled to the quarter mark with (now cold, due to the fact he got himself into a whole email-checking-”hey fuck it, I’ll just unsubscribe from this, why do I subject myself to so many emails” type of deal) coffee. His menu cast aside, a fresh painted sign that he was ready to give an order to whatever apron-clad kid—or quite possibly...single parent on the brink of going full Andrea Yates—was sent out to take his order. Sitting dead center of Tango’s field of vision, sat a practically ivory-clad family of upper elite Evangelicals, who just returned from Sunday mass (providing Tango for a sense of what time it was). “Petulant! I never thought that the Fergusons would be the members of a cult!”

The little girl with combed bangs scooted forward, “Mommy, what was the word that Mr. Lipp was saying?”

“Don’t worry about it sweetheart”

Her husband leaned in close to her ear, but he was no good at whispering, “I think she’s old enough to hear the word ‘orgy’.”

“Charles, I’m worried it might glorify it,”

“There is certainly no glory in that. Lydia do you want a cranberry juice?”

“Blood of christ!”

The parents giggled, Tango almost felt a bit of a knot in his stomach. There was some joke going on, but it stemmed a little farther than his comprehension could reach. It was kinda maddening. Charles put his napkin in his lap and the sound of his soft, dry hands rubbing together was like sandpaper against the grain of maple, “My, Angelica could you please hand me my billfold?”

“Why they haven’t even—”

“I wanna play some music on the jukebox”

Tango was a little taken aback by this, until of course he heard Glenn Miller, the pastiest of jazz music. I bet Charlie and Angie aren’t exactly the ministers favorites for listening to secular tunes, but I guess religion is getting more new age, and there is a bit more empathy going around. The waitress came by and glared down at Tango’s table, “Can I help you?”

At this same instance Tango was magnetized to the family conversation,

“Why, we never go out on the town!”

“There is a gentle sanctity in offering one’s mornings to the Lord, undoubtedly for some many years, that I think he’d be smiling down on for supporting those that find their sense of godliness behind a spatula,”

“I’ll get the filet, it’s a celebrated meal after resurrection,”

“Daddy, what is rye?”

“Just get wheat sweetie,”

Tango had to snap out of it, “Is there dairy in your egg—I’ll have biscuits and gravy...scratch that last thing I said, thinking out loud. Sorry”

“Ok.”

She strode off, pen in hand, order on paper, judgements are too negligible for the fact that there is a surplus of idiots bound to succeed Tango’s presence (and mumblemouth). But he still felt remarkably foolish. He started to sip the coffee, but practically within a matter of moments, the waitress was back with glassware that emanated the scent of burnt caffeine juice. She poured while the mug was still in his hand, and she walked off without a word. This is getting hectic, he felt like he was in trouble. In the next moment, the unanticipatable happened (but of course it was bound to happen, because Tango could not remember the last time he was even remotely lucky), Burtrum Wagner walked into the diner and immediately made eye contact with Tango. “Utah, huh?”

Tango put his face in his palms, the lie had backfired so badly that it didn’t even last more than twenty-four hours. “Burt, I’m seriously just grabbing some food before hitting the road,”

Burtrum’s swagger was directly related to his size-too-big Chelsea boots and a handful of tequila shots that went straight to his dome, “Ok fucker, then I’m taking a seat.” The Evangelicals scrunched in their booth. God was testing them now more than ever.

The waitress brought Burtrum a water, Tango wanted some water, where the hell was his water? “How can I convince you to leave me alone,” he lowered his voice because the religious family did not look like the type to shy away from taking a photo of his license plate if they were to find out he was a sinner, “because I have coke, I really do not need any other drugs...or more coke, quite frankly.”

Burtrum peeked over his shoulder, as if to make eye contact with someone cross court, and noticed the Sunday best. His gaze returned to Tango with wider eyes, “Yeah, I get you,”

Tango yawned, “So you’re listening to what I’m saying? That there is no extra curriculums? I’m just gonna have a nice meal with you and then I’m on my way?”

“You don’t even want to come to a party tonight?”

Tango choked back some fresher brew, “Party? What the fuck? Did we just finish midterms or something--”

“Stop, seriously, you have issues. And it would seriously benefit you if you were to come and hang out at this party, and relax for like five minutes,”

Tango finished off the last of his coffee, he was starting to walk towards the door when he realized that he can’t just walk out of this diner, he’s already downed at least two cups of coffee. The incredible amount of nonchalant that would evolve was to be marveled, but it wasn’t the time to make this large of a statement in the middle of a...jesus what the fuck is this place called? Tango turned to the waitress, with force she pointed to the direction of a dilapidated sign that displayed nothing more than “MEN”, not even a drawing. Tango ventured toward it to find a door with no handle, he was a bit apprehensive to push it, but it was only fair that he had the right to use the restroom—also the pure pain he would endure from the waitress explaining to him how the door worked—so he pushed the door, to reveal a man staring himself in the mirror, shaving himself with a butter knife. It wasn’t so much of a shock, for the sake of things people do their best to put themselves together, but this was like a sixteen-year old, who had a bit of grease in his hair, but other than that, looked as well adjusted as the eye could gage. A bit bizarre, mostly distressing. Tango spun his heel to head back to the booth that awaited him. His food was sitting on the table, Burtrum also had food by him as well—Tango felt like at every turn he was violating some sort of unspoken rule in this restaurant, and for some reason the fact that Burtrum (who hadn’t even been here long enough to even warrant a menu) had a plate of food in front of him was sending Tango into a spiral of carousel proportions—. Tango sat and made broken glass eye contact with Burtrum, “Ok, where’s this event.”

2. LAVENDER FLESH

Tango’s screaming was careening into yips of unabashed shame, he began slamming his tied up hands against the aluminum innards of Burtrum’s van. “Burtrum Wagner! You are a coward and you have no table manners, untie me!”

“What do you suppose we do after that? I suppose you just wanna sit down and have a conversation?”

“Burt. I’ll bite your neck so hard, you’ll bleed like an idiot! If you untie me, drop me off at my car, yes my car! Not the middle of the desert! We can call things square,”

“Nah dude, you don’t just tell me to fuck off, then appear in the middle of Duda’s,” given the probably inappropriate circumstances, it was a bit unusual for Tango to have an “a-HA!” moment in that instance, “acting like you don’t wanna party, or get high, or cruise through to my new hangout spot like we used to every summer in the desert...fucker!”

Taking a parallel step in the directions behind where we’re facing, let’s get on the same timeline. Tango—mid-20s white male, dirty shaggy hair, extreme pushover tendencies, known to fits of anger, if seen again...call his mother—last felt secure wrapped in the fraying insulation of Duda’s, entered the car of Burtrum Wagner and they drove at top speeds to what could be described as a “shit-shack” in the middle of the desert. There were Igloo-brand caravans hoisting beverages from end to end (like a freakish telephone line) of the cavernous hallways-upon-makeshift-carpet-walls that implied every area where you took a step was inside someone’s bedroom. There were sights, sounds and smells that only lead Tango down a labyrinth ending back in vivid color films strips of hobbling cross-campus, or ingesting smelling

salts, amidst daydream clouds of boiling pasta and marijuana. That's the communities that Tango wanted less hand in, but Burtrum was trying to submerge him back into...this party, a ceremonial dip!

They both went to a community college in the desert, attending the same clusters of beer-clad pseudo-adults witnessing rock bands play G and D. Tango met Burtrum at one of these ruckus sound-pushers, Tango's favorite of the local bands was playing. They were dripping of paisley, and wore long overcoats—sequenced and planned out matching outfits, each musician had a microphone and would have *this member* or *that member's* song where they'd sing the lead—, a band known as Truss Rod. Tango was forgiving of the phoned-in name for the fact that they were every bit of Chocolate Watchband, as they were Goblin, as they were Broadcast, and it proved to be such a fruitful collage. High off the moment, Tango felt sociable—beauty of the occasion all fell to the eye of Tango's beerholder (himself, of course)—, there were people to chat with, network with some dwellers who witnessed such an occasion (parties may seem like poison to the child who favored RuneScape over playing games of hopscotch in the front yard, but it was a chance to make all these poor suckers witness to your magnitude, rather than have to partake in some level of talking stick story-sharing). Burtrum, a visual art student whose paintings were the product of years against the grain of acrylics, he went for the textiles. Tango admired his unique wardrobe of self-composition, they spawned fledgling ideas of designing logos for Truss Rod, even shirts (glorified as the North Star of roadies). Tango would drive home after these parties—yes, you're following right! Drunk as can be, rubber would hit the gravel...but hey, he still has all ten fingers and toes—chatting up an imaginary interviewer about the days of being strung out on caffeine and ADHD medication, filling rooms full of blueprints for shirts, pants, all sorts of things. How their creative ventures with Truss Rod got them “the in” with other bands to be their art directors.

On came a clarity of Tango picking out a discoloration under his fingernails that was the birth of several slashes at oranges, amidst an afternoon restructuring of the fraying chain that adorned the gizmos and spinning wheels of his bike—like the interlocking pistons of metal fetish, Tango's bike was some aggregate of smoking cigarettes behind the bike shop that was a arrow's end from the greasy spoon where Tango was able to pick up a check or two from corralling hordes of brown-tinged mugs, plates with onion drips and the napkins containing the excesses of people's faces—, top that all off with a spritz of careening and crawling the face of a picket fence haphazardly erecting from dirt that was compounded within a field of burdock and poppy mallow. His eyes darted along cuticles and traced down to the freshly pruned peels of dead skin that tried to escape each edge where nail curled to tip to print. His daze was thrown in his face by the announcement of a final “thank you” uttering from the Dickies-clad three-piece, who proceeded to heave and haul grey and black cabinets containing tubes and shredded wiring that was the result of upturned amps being another ashtray. His eyes focused their view to Burtrum's palms pressed against his wallet, spread-eagle against the Lifetime folding table, there was an absence of the usual cat-tail overgrowth of \$1s, \$5s and the occasional \$20 that would permeate the creases of the sagged leather. Apparently the drugs, or merch, or “whatever in god's name we were doing pressing our weight against the folding table like we're on the perch of Empire State staring at the ant people scurrying about, like how tiny they are doesn't matter”. Tango wanted to ask a question, but he felt like that Burtrum didn't want to be reminded that he had just went in on some trade-off with delayed result, his fingers feeling the strange fabric, yet compressed, feeling of the dollar slipping from the closest relationship one can possess: physical, to a resignation of ownership, shipped off to a new pocket. Tango started to get a chill along the contours of his torso, he thought about all the times he had been out for a walk, and how nice the breeze felt against his clothes, the way shoes had a certain tactile bounce with

pavement, how pleasant it all was but it seemed like such a drag when his childhood dog would need to see more than the molding in between each eggshell wall, Easter yellow door that ran along Tango's parents home. How he would release him to the yard, or to the corner and back, how deeply he felt he could not be bothered by the commands of the hound, to be dragged from corner to corner in search of smells and flowers and signs of insect life crawling, clamping, squeezing nectarine nourishment. But here came the goods: the fresh vision of bags filled quarter of the way with the beaming reflections that framed a workup for the rest of the night. Burtrum turned to Tango, "Have you ever done—"

"I don't care. I just feel too good right now, I could get an IV of chewed up bologna right now and it'd surge like a flood gate of serotonin. Gimme the snortables, or chewables, or whatever comes next, we'll just hope I don't get a blond—I mean, a blood clot."

Tango's dreams were a runaway cowboy, that shot out a lasso that gripped his ankle and dragged him through mud and rocks. A vivid memory of Tango's shoes (that cast a reverbing "clack" with each step, heel-toe-heel-toe) communicating along the tile of the Arts building at his college. After a morning of phone calls and visits to student centers, all Tango had to do now was hand in his paperwork—scribbled upon in the car in between red lights, yet it still was the best his handwriting ever looked—of resignation to the dean of the Arts department. What he wasn't expecting was the building to turn into a mirror maze, he would trail down one hallway until the intrinsics inside cued for a turn to see what lay ahead. Corridor after corridor, he felt like an idiot, he walked past every door but couldn't locate the door with the dreaded sign for the dean. But, it had gotten to be much too late to back out now, the echo of clacks filled the hallways, doors protruding due to trash-can doorstops only made him feel more ridiculous than previously. He swore there were people staring at him from every direction, there was no way this could be happening. Each turn gave way to a collapsing perspective of lockers eclipsing doorways, with the inscription of the same three names that he'd sworn were the names on the doors in the next hallway. But the last hallway become this hallway! *Wait, am I turning left...*, his thoughts lingered, *or my past selves left?*. Just as he was about to ask the girl playing viola in the closet where to go, the sign stood in front of Tango like a beam of light at the end of a cavern. He touched the door and gave it the slightest of heave, he felt the familiar resistance of a sealed lock and immediately turned with intentions to dodge out the emergency exit doors. But something was set off in him, he couldn't bare being here anymore. He tried sliding the 8.5x11 under the bottom of the door, only for the result being a crumpled first attempt, but he resigned himself to the discombobulation of the situation, so he just shoved the (now folded and creased) fucking paper until it was completely under the door, out of sight. Tango then made the effort to disappear around a blind left corner.

That day was the first day of the rest of his life. The sun was so bright that it was downright sinful that he left the house without his shades. His favorite coat (he wore it in honor of his incredible achievement, his triumph of the will!) was fluttering back in the hot wind, he shed it to save himself the clinging of sweat against the interior polyester, creating a secreted mesh between fabric and skin. Tango's Pontiac had been chewing up gas the past few days with excursions back-and-forth from craft stores and the like, so to spare Tango's wallet—and this whole "dropping out" performance was apart of a commitment to his artist dreams, which meant saving for supplies—, he opted for a hopscotch of public transportation (his car sat in a trolley station parking lot...he was too stubborn to walk a mile of stop light crosswalks). The first call he made after a good fifteen minutes of anxious phone checking, looking over his shoulder glimpsing at the coffee cart (*if I wait in the line, is that the moment where I spend too much time focused on beverages that I miss my bus, and set off the feedback loop of missed buses?*) before

boarding the bus, was Burtrum. “Ok my friend, consider me a delinquent because I’m no longer apart of the public education system...specifically the college level.”

“Wait what?”

“Wagner, I dropped out, you nincompoop”

“You...why on Earth?—”

“What? ‘Why on Earth’, excuse me—”

“If I knew—”

Tango was starting to have the breathe move from, in through his nose and out through his mouth, to stopping short at his throat.

“Tango...did you just actually go through all the steps? I’m not trying to stress yo—am I the first person you told? Are you seriously...”

He could feel the breathe sliding forward
and backwards, with
all the sensations
of going from steady
to
erratic
to practically

nothing.

“Tango?!”

...

“Hello?”

Tango snapped back into consciousness, his delirium behind him, there was room for a fresh start, “Ok. So in your calmest voice, I know that’s asking a lot, but can you tell me why you’re getting kinda short and sporadic about me dropping out?”

“Well, I think it’s totally fine. Follow your heart, all that, namaste. But I sorta figure, you’re calling and telling me this because you feel like it has some importance to Blonde Clots—”

“Yeah motherfuck—...I mean, yes Burt. I dropped out because I thought that was what we were accounting for. Taking full time to work on the clothing, the art direction, our own little company,” by now Tango had for sure missed his transfer point, but he’ll be halfway to La Quinta if it means sorting his affairs out, “and moving it out to bigger cities, following it,...am I starting to ramble or am I just spewing all my dreams into your ear, and you can only think about how I’ll have to work at Burger King if this all flops?”

“Well, you seem to already get what I’m getting at, right?”

“Has cocaine penetrated your skull?” Tango stood up on the bus, as if that made any impact, “You idiot. We have had so many ideas about what we could do and you’re sitting around like I’m cracking wise? I’m sorry that I’m getting so agitated, it’s just that I feel like the ugliest girl at the prom—”

“Is there going to be a way to calm you down?”

And goes and goes, this conversation landed (1) Tango in the middle of some unbeknown part of the desert, and (2) Blonde Clots (an ill-fated name, and an even more ill-fated clothing line) deep in the shitter. Burtrum and Tango have talked in only splintered fragments since then, but time is as effective of

a bandage as tied-up gauze lacking medical tape (don't push it buddy, your shit's gonna bust). Best friend turned to "we're not talking right now", turned to phone in a contact list, turned to "Hey next time you're out in New Mexico," (people seem pretty bent on moving here), "hit me up for some drugs". What leaves one to think of on a sunny day, is the fact that most likely this whole stint has been bubbling up under Burtrum's skin for a good amount of time. A Baccalaureate doesn't change the fact that his best friend shipped off to follow his dreams and might end up surpassing Burtrum. Although "surpass" is a funny word. But the matter at hand is that Tango is testing the limits of Home Depot's clearance rack rope (and the result of Burtrum's buried memories of Boy Scout rope tying seminars). What always spawned doubt in Tango, which eventually reared its head after Tango's noisy shoes took a click-clack in the compass angle of "making it happen", was that Burtrum wasn't one to think things out. This trait made a red carpet debut as Burtrum was stuck at a residential stoplight with a hostage rolling around his trunk like a bouncy ball (full of meditated rage, with a vantage point to burst). Tango used the force of his malnourished physique to attack the tin doorway that adorned the back of Burtrum's van. After a good few thrusts the door gave way, but Burtrum was anxious, and possessed a feeling that he could scoot through the intersection safely (he'll take a traffic ticket, red lights are just for looks). The van towered the size of a basketball player, so despite pushing reckless beyond abandon, the car behind Burtrum was trusting that whenever he went: that meant green. Unfortunately for Tango, that moment came right as he got his inertia working, which came at a climatic slam against the door he was launched out of the van into the car behind him (Tango's mind went a million places in that moment (1) go through their windshield and have a loose fragment shear my jugular, (2) slam so hard on their hood their engine explodes into an inferno, (3) crack my skull, (4) they're on the safe side, so they're far enough from Burt's van that I just go straight under their wheels... (326) my leg is under the car, launching the full force of my body (specifically my face) against Burt's rear bumper...(889) the back of my head is skewered on their antenna... (1,000,000) I just push too hard on the door and my guts get rearranged and I die right there). Lucky for him, his body functioned as a meatsack, slapped almost with no regard from one surface to the next. He lay in the middle of the asphalt, Burtrum's diesel spewing off into the clouds to avoid association with the tattered man in the road, Tango spitting blood from his mouth, but sporting a back pain no different from the type he experiences from sleeping at a Holiday Inn...*but I bet the ambulance is already on the way.*

Francis smoothed the wine red lipstick against the corners of her mouth, she constantly had the problem of stopping too soon, and making it seem that she possessed a sharp gradient look. Grappling onto a brush in the other hand, she smoothed a current of glittery phosphorescent blues and purples against the circumference of her eyes. She didn't really care too much to create too defined of looks or appearances. This was all for an act. Francis took one final look in the mirror and said to herself, "Well this would be good if I was *trying* to look like a bug."

Francis was set on going to a nightclub, where she would meet some old friends of her brothers, in hopes that they finally realize "what a cool chick she is" (this was all a formality of playing into the classic male gaze, slather on some crude attempts at looking like Natalie Portman in *Closer*, talk about your unconventional opinions, say something a little gross). Trailing them back to a house, where they'd invite her to another house, until she eventually got close enough to an intimate setting with her client: Burtrum Wagner. She was expecting him at Conquest during her shot-of-whiskey-wait-it's-3pm-this-is-ridiculous mental gymnastic competition, but he ditched her. There was apparently a party going on in a few...an hour a go (she was more than happy to take house party over

nightclub, it cut out all the contingencies of trying to make your intoxication chamber look “professional”). The possibility of drinks being free there was alluring, also the music they’re playing might not be as abrasive, and come to the think of it: the more she verbalized it to herself, the more she realized that she would just rather go to that shit show. Now presentation became everything, otherwise she’s just another guest—this is more deliberate than anyone wants to admit. How are you presenting yourself? What’s going to cue the camera click? So many decisions that will warrant passing compliments/glances/complexions. By the end of the night everyone’s hair is stringy and half of one’s face is sunken in, everyone reeks—, and that won’t work. After all she’s spent all day contemplating murder in cold blood and if it really is *that* easy to go off the grid. Running her fingers against boxes of rat poison, price checking one brand of toilet cleaner against another, dressing up the appearance of the bag to have less of a tint from extra substances and more of a “time-worn” look. Also it’s not her drugs, not her apartment, not her friend, so the alibi doesn’t even require Office Assistant. In general she wanted to wash her hands of the matter, as the day had been taking a mouthful of unsavory shades.

She doesn’t usually think about Arlo, or really anyone deceased for that matter...not even Elvis, but today she remembered his face pretty well, she remember how much he played kickball when they were in grade school, how the girlfriend he had in middle school was old enough to get a Master’s degree, when he got a tattoo of Koko The Clown. There was a pretty placid memory of her going boating with her friends in high school, they brought a bottle of sparkling water, a baguette of sourdough and nail polish, one of them brought a speaker, insisting that they listen to this Archers of Loaf record. Francis liked the reflection in the brown, stagnant lake of their twisting portraits that slapped against the ripples of the disrupted tranquility caused by the contact of oars. It felt all melty-dreamlike, at the moment where out of the pockets of her vision she discovered Arlo and his friends firing bottle rockets on the other side of the shore, she thought that she was experiencing Baby’s First Optical Hallucination. It was all too real though, it was a gleeful afternoon of gunpowder being dispersed across the spit mountains that could be called a pond, that the merry little high school Francis was drifting along, captain of the S.S. Burgundy Rose Toe And The Hollow Loaf. It didn’t agitate the gang too much, for the fact that Francis couldn’t resist the flexing pull of the giggles. She was probably laughing so much because she was thinking about how she’d always come home to find Arlo sticky and in his underwear, having not left his chamber of video screens and incense in days. But lo and behold, the kid had a posse! It wasn’t until now, as she tried to burn off her fingerprints to avoid getting the book thrown at her, trying to play dress up for someone offering their house as a beer dumpster, whether or not Arlo enjoyed all his seclusion. Or what compelled him to be more chained to the hollow insides watching films play out, than scramble for fresh air with dogbreath teens that were well within his bounds of merriment and friendship. She never considered her brother to be someone that gets lonely, she mostly considered him just a dreg sucking oaf, who prefer the debris of Coke cans and Benadryl sleep to forging foot trails through back alleys and spinning webs of girls, foods to dine on, liquor to pour along the glasses of a gaggle of troublemakers, all much like Arlo himself. It was all a swamp she was trudging through in high heels, what would give her less compression is a leaf blower gust to the waist, if not to pull herself out, at least make it more bearable: cue social dynamics.

When she stepped into the party (wearing a velvet dress, it hung against her body like a towel fresh out of the shower) there was a cracked amplifier with a dirty tan-tattered auxiliary cable connected to someone’s cracked phone facing inward, but this all sat curiously outside the door. Further discovery prompted that this was the functioning doorstop, and that it didn’t provide much ambiance...other than the

fact that she walked in right as “Tenebre” was playing. The first person she locked eyes with was Sam West, the local goon who had used her car to drive his friends to Joshua Tree (it returned smelling of cramped bodies arranging playlists and there was clots of candle wax everywhere), he also had a nasty habit of eating kimchi before talking to people, and washing his clothes in too warm of water. West put his hand out and Francis’ fingers struck every gap to form a clench, “Francis Fortress, you should call yourself Francis Fornication, Francis WellDressed, Francis Fine, because you’re the only one at this party who has probably showered today,”

She shot her hand against her torso, “Oh that was a stinky sentence. Can I trust you won’t talk to women like that?”

“Are you a woman now?”

Hymen flashbacks, accompanied by Sam West being more misogynistic than usual, “Have you seen the kid who hasn’t combed his hair in months? Denim jacket presumably, looks like he’s about to break out in a sweat, treats me like a ghost of my brother?”

“Trombone Wagner or Flavor of the Week?”

A burst of a sharp ringing sound—Francis was ready to get on her knees and pray that was the shitty speaker’s gasping breath, but was unfortunate to discover it was stress-related—that turned Francis’s temples into a rotor cabinet, “Sam West, I do not want to talk about Jasmine.”

Arlo’s former girlfriend, who spiraled into such a cluster of desperation after the love of her life’s death that she began to alienate and to treat strangers like beautiful blank canvases. It doesn’t do much to half-heartedly dissect a troubled woman’s neurosis—as often is the case with anyone trying to slither their way in as an form of romantic interest, or Oedipian troublemaker (or if you really want a spine-chiller, imagine someone in the throws of a screenplay meeting Jasmine and thinking that she’s the muse they need...I get sick just thinking about these kids propelling trauma victims as dynamic iconoclasts for the purposes of fiction)—yet it stands that Francis was the one to try to lend an unconditional hand in this traumatic time. Francis was a genuine wave in a riptide of people that knew her as “Arlo’s girlfriend”. The trouble that inlays, is that Francis isn’t too big of an emotional puzzle, things that fracture the window of her emotional perception are another suture in a kaleidoscope (*I guess I would say my fear to leave the bumfuck of Texas stems from fears of heights and tall buildings...neat right?*). Some people just happen to take things...you know, hard? This is a frontier that Francis didn’t have the horse for, there were too many snakes in this one, she started feeling bad about herself, starting commending behavior that wasn’t progressive, there was the makings of a real Basquiat of an emotional blueprint. So she went for the door. Jasmine tried to follow, but the damn thing won’t budge, and every unanswered text message adds a layer of wood. Sam West clearly knows the history, he’s playing jester in Francis’ court, trying to get a rise before he’s sent to the guillotine—*also, “Flavor of the Week?”*, *golly when did Sam West start hating women, I think I might have to kill him too*—. “Wagner is going to show up later, for now fill up a Solo cup until anger becomes a really easy feeling to access,”

That’s about all the Sam West she could stomach for one interaction, she wasn’t exactly in the mood to be treated like a fussy baby. Francis shifted her weight so she could tip toe across a zig-zag of carpet debris, although...a final inquiry first, “Who’s house is this?”

Sam pointed at a man in a stained Tchaikovsky shirt, “I’ve heard his name get tossed around a few times, but I don’t have subtitles on, so I didn’t quite catch it”

A shrug of the shoulders cued the take-off towards whatever booze could be scrounged from the house that seemed like one vast hallway. The more she stepped, the more it felt like the walls weren’t

different, but the textures and shapes of rooms were changing, definite decor and aesthetic alterations—eventually she walked so far she must've hit a backyard, because the fucking roof just ceased to be looming over—. A dripping Charles Shaw muddied the complexion of a dark elm table, adorned with a similar waterfall of Olde English and Sauza tequila. The volume of wine left in the Charles Shaw was the philosopher's problem: half-way. Yet this award winning three dollar wine made no difficulties going past taste buds, straight to adrenaline gland. This would be the holdover until that coward with the googly eyes and the deviated septum appears through the scratched threshold of busted screen door/tapered mahogany combo. And as if today was doing her some sort of grand favor—aside from the beginning two hours of her shift where a pigeon was stuck inside and shit all over the Clif bars—, Burtrum Wagner and...some greasy kid still wearing sunglasses, stepped into the can-hazard of a frayed living room. Wagner lights a cigarette to make the walls more yellow, and his guest just wandered off. Francis took off her shoes and took a large gulp from the bottle, the translucent jade that blocked her vision provided a distorted caricature of the victim in front of her—*what a joke! He stands there like we're fourth-grade neighbors, ready to play kickball and make a blood-pact. No idea that I see right through all this shit, and not in the way that our parents think they know when we are in our room calling boys or masturbating. This is real—*. “Burt! Your mother's home,”

Wagner immediately tosses the cigarette on the ground—carpeted floor—and stomps it out (a passing glance from a guest is a mixture of admiration and disgust...steam cleaning can't remedy charisma), “Frankie, I feel, and this is from the bottom of my heart, so bad!”

She runs the edges of her fingernails against the contours of his eyebrows and along the cartilage make-up between his eyes, she pulls her hands back and puts them at her sides, “I'm actually mad though, but I don't really have time to start screaming at you. Lemme just get money and I will *maybe* share a dance to a Funkadelic tune with you or something,”

“Listen, are you sure you don't have a little extra?”

Francis furrowed her brow, she lunged a hand down at her side to make sure her purse wasn't stolen yet, “Now listen, I have extra. I don't have ‘extra for Burt, the guy that leaves me to talk to gecko people at a bar with bad Yelp reviews’, but I have extra”

“I am serious! I am actually very, and truly, and did I say ‘really’? Sorry”

“Sugar,” she paused, *why did I call him sugar? Is this a normal voice to do? How do I make this more silly and less appropriative*, “Burty. Baby. My fire!...No. Go get fucked”

Burtrum slid against the tug of the rug back a few paces, made a few glances at people in the corners of the room, smiles all along their faces, his attention returned to Francis (who had already slung her bag against the crook of her arm, a sure sign of walking), “Ok. Usually I give you a story, or more money—”

“More money works, that's actually very convincing—”

“Wait, I actually, for once in my life. Have learned something today of substance. It has really fucked with my afternoon, and I think it's a pretty appropriate excuse for why I haven't exactly been punctual in the wake of it,”

“Hmm. ‘The Speech Of Burtrum Wagner’, more info on this passage, see: ‘Usually I give you a story’--”

“It will provide closure. For you personally,”

“My mom and dad are talking again?”

Burtrum's face twisted a little. *Abort! The joke hopped above his head, he thinks I'm laying into something heavy. Oh god, please say something so I don't have to bury my tracks,* "No," his voice got quieter, "it's about your brother."

Francis slid a loose hand across her sternum and landed her fingertips along the crease of her bag, the ascending acrylics played with the edges of her knife. "Francis, there is no doubt in anyone's mind that your brother's death was unnatural. Completely setup. Totally influenced," a full hand now was in the bag, a loose grip against the shaft, "and this person, who multiple sources are now beyond certain killed your brother. And the sole reason why I'm at this party tonight, and it's to fuck with that guy."

Wait what? A nervous twitch prompted Francis left foot to turn angular, there was an abnormal reduction in pupil size. *This is guaranteed to be the biggest lie I'll hear tonight, but it's only half past nine, I'll bite.* "Ok, I'm interested,"

"I was on my way over to see you at lunch, when I got a call from a friend that I shouldn't come to this party tonight. Because Yank has a habit of dropping roofies,"

Also another pressure point, clearly we've not hit apex, there's plenty of road to cover. What Francis feared more though was that she just drank a mysterious bottle at a party that apparently features a serial date rapist. She definitely felt her heart rate go up, if that's any form of sign that she didn't drink something foul. "I'm sorry Burt, I don't want to be mushy, but this community is really starting to turn around if that is what goes through the grapevine—"

"That's not it though! Yank is this emotionless motherfucker who I'm trying to allude to! Drug dealer that just throws PCP, narcotics, benzos, all put together in a chemical stew and then tosses the baggy at your brother. For a fucking gag. Throwing Arlo under the bus just to see what would happen,"

"Burt, this giallo is great and everything, but I really would love to know who Yank is. And are these facts?" *Ok do I do tears? I feel like I need to seem interested,* "I mean this isn't like some gossip for the ride home. This is my dead brother, who's funeral I've been to, who's apartment feels weird to me—dude! This whole town even—"

"Facts? These are nothing but them, this kid is through and through havoc raiser. Yank? You want to know him? It's that motherfucker in between the kids in the striped shirts, with the party favors,"

Francis' 180 revealed a reenactment of a pitch of Babe Ruth proportions, jean-outfitted buzzcuts, along with winged-tip eyed girls with lavender flesh catching glittering dime-bags, that exited the hand of...Tchaikovsky t-shirt. Francis took another swig, "That guy? Why don't I go talk to him, he seems chatty,"

"Absolutely do not do that. For any reason, one being the whole dodgy, Rohypnol deal. I'll probably go talk to him, secretly I'm trying to catch Yank's death bag. A kid I used to know is in Albuquerque and basically since I knew him, he's been spreading stories that I'm a scumbag and 'ruined his life' while he's out here touring the US. So not really married to the vibe,"

Francis cups her hands against Burtrum's hands, "I think that this whole angle you have with the Yank person is sweet for me. Sincerely I do, but I can talk to him," *Ok now play "inconsolable"*.

Burtrum's face twisted, "I don't really feel—"

"You can trust that I'll be safe,"

"This seems very, very unsafe,"

"I'll get you a death bag, eh?"

Burtrum felt a slight heave in his stomach, there were all sorts of bugs running around, "Fine, I can tell you really wanna do this." Thank god Burtrum Wagner is absolutely one of the worst people she

knows. Otherwise there's no way in hell anyone would allow her to catwalk over to a predator. There was a point she was still pretty stuck on though. Burtrum seemed so insistent that the whole troupe is game to write off forensic science, and dive head first into a community's cracked up conspiracy that someone covertly ended Arlo Fortress' life in a flurry of macabre. Not that she felt cracks along the glass lining of the coffin this story had made him, but that no one dared to take a hammer to it, or even as to tap on it. Parents assumed what the mortician said: overdose. And who's the one with the 401k, and who are the ones all standing with their knees buckled in from drinking whatever they can find that hasn't been guzzled or drained? It just all seemed like a lot of hubris, and she was starting to get crow's feet from being so cynical and bitter. All this day was turning out to be was a clostrophic headache that not only did no one really know Arlo, but Francis herself just decided that she already did, but never bothered to really get around to *actually* have the regurgitating Jeopardy-like fountain she so confidently assured herself was just in her back pocket. What's his favorite food Francis? That one has been really crawling around under her skin the past few hours, coming real short on the return for that one.

Burtrum nodded, Francis downed another gulp of the wine, until the bottle held only a mouthful left, in between swallows Francis said, "Will you toss this in a garbage can for me?"

When she passed him the wine bottle, Burtrum felt something else in the transfer, he felt a small baggie against his palm. Treats!—it had spent enough time ruminating around in her bag, she wasn't exactly trying to wait 'til Christmas for this stocking stuffer—She smiled at him, "Thanks for the tip, it'll definitely come in handy."

3. LOUSY DOCTORS

Francis walked down a hallway upon hallway of guernies, nurses, patients, and anything out of the corners of her eyes that had a heartbeat and a pulse—one's that were unfortunately fading or erratic—. It was a familiar site of when Arlo had measles in the soda pop drenched middle school days, when their father tanned and didn't burn, broke his wrist on a construction site, when Francis had pneumonia. Not her favorite sights and sounds, but in a way they're a type of nostalgia. And today's been a day where Francis has been in a real flashback foothold—she paused and took a moment to push some saliva back down her throat, it's been more than a day. Yet the sun doesn't shine right, nothing about the Earth has been rotating correctly. There's some sort of orbital dissonance, because how in god's name has the five minutes she spent unable to uncap her mascara due to an assault of images of her stockpiling pillows and blankets to make a soundproofing triage of what's going to be the most effective in removing the sound of Arlo watching gorehound movies in the neighboring room, and how that was when she wasn't old enough to make a Facebook, but now she can rent a car and her brother resides three plots above a mausoleum, and all that has felt so much longer than the hours she spent running across fields of conversation, eye contact and human connection that lead her to this moment of walking aisle by aisle, checking on if she killed a man, twelve hours later...next time on MythBusters I guess—.

Tango thought about being at the party, Tango thought about talking to a guy about how all tools are phallic shaped. How investigation is almost beseeched, one feels that you are introduced to things as a child, then until one is eighteen one is given time to establish familiarity, from there on out it's one knows or one doesn't. It's more unique to have never had a potato when one is twenty, rather than to think that a screwdriver is "strange looking" because it violates the idea of familiarity. They know what it is, why are they now surprised by it? Do they need to repeat grade school? Tango and his accomplice were discussing

how it was weird that we laugh about it, but really do wonder if these shapes are just social norms—that looming expectation of familiarity—, or if they really are the most practical ways to design a tool—he felt really strange, it was like talking to wall of plexiglass, the conversation felt so sincere and honest to him—. Then he felt Burtrum keep tugging on his sleeves, the nylon was whipping at his skin, the undeniable flexible tension of it all was building and building. The sensation reminded him of high school, when he'd accept dares to drip candlewax on his skin so girls would think that he was brooding. The reminder of when he rode up on his amalgamation of bike gears and wheels and tires to be welcomed into the warmth of a basement den housing sounds and unsteady vibrations. The familiar stench of the same shoes that always pounded the dirt together, the increasing tenacity of one to stand within a certain amount of feet from anyone possessing a backpack or dreadlocks. The drugs he put down his throat, the bills he would trade off that felt like moments of high school he should've spent circling his cul-de-sac. Times were there were so many people in a cramped room, and he could only make eye contact with someone who kept snarling in his direction, people to his right sneering at his friend in the pinstripe jacket that was talking about how he stitched it together himself. Burtrum ignoring him when he said that he was thinking about moving to Seattle. Compounding micro-incidents flashing like glass and tin wire camera bulbs, each digging with sharp teeth digging deep like a tactile and hot physical bite. Parts of his wrists starting to get numb and compress. He didn't feel bad about the nylon earlier when a redhead kid was asking to feel the texture of it, when his mind wandered away from how alien and disoriented his placement amidst this growing and self-digesting puzzle pack party. It was a jacket that Tango's dad had when they lived in Austria, there's a picture—with a large Earl Grey drop dead center of it, damn babysitters—of his dad wearing it, baby Tango in his arms. It was a very stupid sense of sentimental, the jacket was ugly and was always shedding flakes of polyester and nylon. He tried to spruce it up with some enamels, but in the end it still was moth fodder. He was going to start on this tirade to the redheaded kid, but their pupils were enormous and the whole part of the room had a Four Loko energy resonating from it. But with the scrape of Burtrum's hands, red from his rings, Tango knew that he was being dragged into hell, (level six, the doctrine sat in a dime bag) he knew that the laundry room, illuminated with an iKeeA touch lamp, is not the place to do cocaine. He knew that Burtrum had an empty wine bottle because he was just gonna hit him in the head with it. In freshman year there was a girl, who possessed all the right ways of swimming and weaving through Burtrum's dusty hazel peepers, communication was anything but avoidable with this one. Too bad for this bucko when he saw her tangled and wrapped against some other guy, Butrum finished off a handle of whiskey, smashed the glass on both of their skulls. He wondered why they always cared so much about girls. Figures.

No one in a scrub knew anything about anyone called "Burtrum Wagner". One of those, "I don't want to admit this, but it was actually an incredibly accessible thing to admit" feelings, she was glad that things really didn't turn sour. The anxiety of different textures of blow and laundry detergent, the endless internet searches of how hard snorting something could really damage one's brain. Remembering how she would read anatomy books, how strange each pathway of the body functioned like subway systems, filled with rupture points like stacks of dynamite. Could've very well been the fact she woke up to the Twilight Zone episode where all the doctors and nurses are pigs, she never did really get how that episode was that progressive, there was a lot of old-time television she disagreed with, but that episode felt familiar. She did have these buried neural pathways, soaked in moving colors of Burtrum and Arlo, running aloof down the main street, scattering loose wrappers of Slim Jims and party poppers. A distinct memory of Arlo being locked in a stupor, Burtrum cutting his sandwich in half so Arlo could have something in his

stomach. Francis really didn't know why Burtrum had to make up that whole Rohypnol thing, Yank was an asshole but he kicked everyone (seriously, *everyone*) out. Maybe it was a rumour he genuinely believed. And if we're really dwelling on it, let's click on the powerpoint,

“Your house?”

Yank had a hazed expression on his face glued somewhere in between confusion and a smile, “You trying to rent it out?”

She ran her fingers through her hair and decided to just for the jugular of the matter, “And I take it that all these handouts are signs of...hospitality?”

Yank giggled under his breath, “You know when you do something,” he blinked more than anyone probably should, “and as you're doing it you're thinking, ‘oh no’. And then it happens, but you've already made your bed? Yeah, that's usually rough, but it's a very uphill battle when you're trying to go to sleep and you just passed out a bunch of molly to people who have so far, been pretty cliquy...also don't seem the type to wanna talk about reality, but just whatever dumbfuck sugar coat world they're off at.”

“Trying to make friends?”

Yank rolled his eyes, “I mean that's what this is all about right? ‘Yeah, grab yer shit, file in with yer fluids and come make a trash can out of my rumpus room, eh?’...God I wish people would just start hating it around here, ya know?”

Francis turned around to see slumped selections of sign-of-the-times kids, beer litter and the likes of someone probably bringing some sort of pet (I hope it doesn't have wings). “Where's your bedroom?”

“You're standing on my dirty jeans.”

“Well...I'm going to put my shoes back on, because I think the busses are going to stop running. Door closed behind me you can trust that. What should I say, that you're in here having an anxiety attack, vomiting, fucking some sweet blonde with long legs?”

“Definitely not the last one. Wouldn't want people to think I would have sex with anyone here, but the first two were very above board,” he poured the remainder of his drink into a trash can, “what's your name?”

She saluted, “Francis...farewell Yank.”

As she was walking out of the room he called out, “I'll call you.” (yeah, ok buddy)

While there is no doubt that hospitals are public spaces, Francis felt slightly distressed by the fact she didn't really get questioned with how many corridors she had been down by now. Out of the corner of her eye she had a weird tug on her chest, she saw Burtrum's friend from the party: sunglasses kid. It wasn't sentimental as much as it was a cruel reminder, no one can escape the medical necessity of having to be boxed in amongst white walls and slung curtains. A lot of neurons started shooting like fireworks: he's so young, what could he be doing instead, how often, is this common? Looking at textures and shades, jacket clearly dripping with thrift store particle, paisley shirt that was beyond faded, still wearing his stupid sunglasses. It was unnerving how much he reminded her of Arlo. The sweat particle cascading down her back called out on a slap-back delay, “this is what happens in healthcare”. She felt weird, like for the past year she had been carrying around this glass sculpture and now she's realizing how heavy it is, it might be time to put it down, the whole dread of the scene could even corroborate a full on drop. While all this seems like hyperbole—so that's it? No more clinic over one hospital surf?—, there is a bit of concession in the fact that what she saw did a fair amount of circuit bending to her brain chemistry. There was a story Francis read when she was a little girl, it was probably not meant for kids, but she

thought it was because it was from a dog's perspective. It was the dog's birthday, but it wasn't excited because it knew that it was going to continue to live this guilty, domestic life of gluttony and physical affection that was always taking driver's seat over giving the dog its freedom to be feral. The family sat around to sing the dog "Happy Birthday", but it couldn't stop crying, not in the way where tears fall down like hot splashes from the faucet, but moans and yips. And the family just kept cooing because they thought the dog was singing too. The hamster wheel stopped running in her brain because hospital staff started picking up the pace, they had to call in more people, he looked sad. She didn't see his car parked outside—one thing Francis never forgets is a face. Living the life Pontiac isn't always that smooth, I guess he was headed the same way—he was probably brought here in an ambulance. Watching Burtrum's friend, in that tattered, dusty jacket mouth adorned with dry blood and a chipped tooth, push petulantly against the arm of a nurse bringing down a needle into his arm, he let out with a weak groan, "Knock it off you lousy doctors, I don't want to be here."