

Charles' Story

Characters

Gary Bean *Our hero, an actor presently employed part-time in the Recovery Center as a “performance therapist.”*

Charles *A new patient at the center; we have met him before in GIRL ON A BED. Father of LAURA.*

Monica *CHARLES’ wife, with whom we were first introduced in GARY’S WALK; her voice is often part of the CHORUS.*

Chorus *Usually VERNON, LAURA, MONICA, or all three. CHORUS lines are in italics.*

Angela *A teenage mother; a client at the Center.*

Todd *We were introduced to him in TIRADE FOR THREE. A film producer, now a client at the Recovery Center as well. An old acquaintance of Gary’s.*

John (Shirley) *English, a young client at the Center.*

Dr. Nin *An Asian man. One of the Center’s chief therapists.*

Antonio *Our Hispanic friend, the Angel of Death. Here he is working as a gardener.*

Vernon *An old friend of both GARY and TODD who makes phone calls to them. Part of the CHORUS.*

Laura *CHARLES’ and MONICA’S daughter, deceased. Part of the CHORUS.*

Scene

The Malibu Recovery Center, overlooking the Pacific.

Charles' Story

1.

Vernon *Our boy Gary climbs the steps to the Malibu Recovery Center—a mansion overlooking the Pacific—and there, of all people, he sees his old pal, Todd, reclining in the bright sun. Shocked pleasantries exchanged, Gary hesitates a moment and then lies down in the lounge next to Todd's.*

Gary I tried to call you.

Todd When?

Gary I think it was years ago.

Todd You think?

Gary It was years ago.

Todd Where was I?

Gary In Hollywood, I guess.

Todd Hollywood?

Gary I guess.

Todd Long time ago.

Gary Well, I was on the ropes when my kid was killed? In the park? Downtown?

Todd Oh. I remember. I'm sorry.

Gary I live in Victorville now.

Todd Where is Victorville?

Gary It's in the desert. East of here.

Todd East?

Gary Way east. I'm glad I ran into you.

Todd You ran into me?

Gary I mean, you know, here.

Todd Why?

Laura *Awkward pause. Gary sits up, looks around at the Malibu Recovery Center, at the Pacific ocean, feigning interest in his shiny surroundings.*

Gary What's that?

Todd You didn't hear me?

Gary I was looking for somebody. Oh, there he is.

Laura *Points. It's Charles, at another lounge. Gary waves. Charles waves back.*

Todd Charles. You know Charles?

Gary Yes.

Todd He's new. Just got out of detox.

Gary I know.

Todd He shouldn't be here. And he wants to go home. They should let him go home.

Gary I've met him. I know him.

Todd He should go home, save his money. And you?

Gary What?

Vernon *Gary leans back again, with a sigh, as though reclaiming lost rights.*

Todd I said, and you?

Gary I work here. I'm one of the part-time therapists.

Todd Therapists?

Gary I do performance therapy.

Todd I'm not going to ask you what that means.

Gary Okay.

Todd Because I don't want to know.

Gary Fine.

Laura *Gary sighs and whistles a tune as Todd looks him over carefully.*

Todd You clean and sober?

Gary I don't drink, I don't smoke, whatever.

Todd Whatever what? What do people mean by whatever?

Gary I'm alone and I don't go to meetings.

Todd You're alone and you don't go to meetings?

Gary Yes.

Todd So what does that mean?

Gary The answer to your question is, yes. I'm clean and sober, I even gave up smoking.

Todd Thank you. I don't believe you.

Gary Then don't believe me.

Todd I don't.

Pause.

Gary I did give up smoking.

Todd Good for you.

Gary And I do have a job here.

Todd That's good.

Gary I used to be worried about my acting career.

Todd (*Politely*) I see. Now you're not worried?

Gary I'm not so worried, no.

Todd Good. At least, I think that's good. Is it?

Gary What?

Todd Good?

Gary Yes.

Vernon *Gary thinks: So I don't have to hit on you, thank God.*

Gary And you?

Todd What? Me, what?

Gary You're still doing movies?

Todd Of course I'm still doing movies. What else would I be doing? Movies are the art of the twenty-first century.

Gary I do performance art.

Todd Excuse me, but what the fuck is performance art?

Gary Actually, they're little plays. And I do all the parts.

Todd Good, I see, so you don't have to bother with actors.

Gary I am an actor.

Todd Right, right. What about what's-her-name?

Gary Who? You mean Marcia?

Todd Marcia. Wait, I know. She's with our old buddy, Vernon.

Gary Well, I don't know, actually.

Todd You don't know if she's with Vernon?

Gary I don't know lately.

Todd He calls me all the time, Vernon.

Gary Still?

Todd Always.

Gary He used to call me too, Vernon.

Todd That's odd.

Gary And he used to call my dad.

Todd That's odd, too.

Gary He's odd.

Laura *The phone rings.*

Todd That's him, Vernon, now, on the phone.

Gary Are you taking it? Are you going to take the call?

Todd Hi, Vernon.

Vernon Todd, how are you?

Todd I feel great.

Vernon What are you doing?

Todd I'm looking at the ocean.

Vernon Where are you?

Todd Rehab.
Vernon Again?
Todd Again.
Vernon How long?
Todd Thirty days. I detoxed already.
Vernon They treating you all right?
Todd They treat everybody all right. It's like a country club here, with meetings and various meds. There are marble floors, a marble staircase, tennis courts, a gym and a view of the Pacific, plus personal therapists and a chef.
Vernon Maybe I'll check in myself.
Todd You can't afford it, Vernon.
Vernon Never mind. I'm not interested.
Todd Your friend Gary is here, too.
Vernon Gary? What's he doing there?
Todd He does performance therapy.
Vernon What the fuck is that?
Todd I don't know what it is.
Gary And I'll also do a performance.
Todd And he'll also do a performance.
Gary He can come if he wants.
Todd You can come, if you want, to his performance.
Vernon No.
Todd He said, no.
Vernon Who gives a shit about his fucking performance?
Todd Call me later, Vernon, he's sitting right here. Whoops.
Lost him.
Gary Fucking cell phones.

Todd We're lucky, you know. We're sitting around up here overlooking the Pacific, while the underclass is getting the shit kicked out of them. There are gangs you wouldn't believe. They're on an international scale. Murder, drugs, slaves. You know much about it? They're like professional, like in another era. They live like by another code. And they're visually oriented. Very cinematic. Fascistic. You don't write, do you?
Gary I do, yes.
Todd Of course, performance. Anyway these guys, Mexicans, Salvadorans, they wear tattoos, makeup, they kill with ritualistic pleasure. Very cinematic. You should write something.
Phone rings.
Todd That's Vernon.
Vernon What's up?
Todd Sky's up, Vernon.
Vernon I'm returning your call, Todd.
Todd Let me tell you why I called.
Vernon Go.
Todd There's these guys, gardeners, you know, Spanish?
Vernon Gardeners?
Todd They look like they're gardeners, but they're not gardeners.
Vernon What are they?
Todd They're killers.
Vernon Back up a minute, Todd.

Laura *One of the gardeners, who, unsurprisingly, turns out to be our death-dealing Antonio, is approaching.*

Todd I can't talk right now.

Gary Excuse me.

GARY nods to ANTONIO and crosses over to CHARLES.

Todd I'll call you back, Vernon, or you call me.

Antonio What's the matter with you, you don't like Latino people?

Todd No. Is that all right?

Antonio It's all right with me. But you, you're going straight to the shithouse.

Todd I don't have to talk to you. You're just a piece of shit around here yourself.

Antonio Yes, to the shithouse. Burnt. Toast. Remember, you heard it first from me, Antonio. You'll die with smoke up your ass, amigo. You are toast.

*ANTONIO gives TODD the finger and keeps on going.
The GONG sounds. TODD rises and goes.*

*

2.

We're at a therapy session, presided over by DR. NIN.

Dr. Nin So we just sit quietly for a moment, and then we go around, and check in, and say how we feel, how we look at the day in front of us, and how we're feeling about ourselves, briefly, and then we'll share, and you can pass if you want to, but I encourage you all to speak. Charles?

Charles I didn't use much of anything, like I told everybody, but I have a bad back.

Dr. Nin Are you an alcoholic?

Charles I don't feel like I am, no.

Dr. Nin Does that sound like denial to anyone?

Angela It does to me.

Todd It doesn't to me. What the fuck's denial?

Angela Classic denial.

Todd It's a lose-lose. You might as well admit it even if it ain't true.

Charles Which is what I did. I raised my hand.

Angela I didn't follow that.

Todd If you say you're an alcoholic, you lose, and if you say you aren't, you're in denial.

Angela So?

Todd So you might as well say you are, which is what he did. Charles.

Angela Why?

Charles Well, I don't know why.

Todd Was it your wife?

Charles I don't think so.

Angela Oh, great.

Todd There's nothing great about that. You want to listen to a bunch of bombastic, self-righteous speeches?

Dr. Nin Anything you want to talk about, Todd?

Todd No.

Angela Like why you are here?

Todd You know why I'm here and they know why I'm here and I know why I'm here, and I'm not asking for my money back—yet—so that's something.

Charles Why are you here?

Todd Because I was drinking ten bottles of wine a night, that's why.

Angela I hardly find that fucking possible.

Todd Oh, come on.

Angela Really.

Todd Guys drink two quarts of vodka a day.

Angela I can't believe that either.

Todd Because you're a pillhead.

Charles I have to say I can't believe it either.

Todd You're an innocent, Charles, like Angela here, who has an excuse because she's an over-protected wealthy teenager.

Angela I've seen shit you wouldn't fucking believe, Todd.

Todd I believe you, actually. But I don't want to hear about it.

Dr. Nin Well, we have to be able to talk, Todd, that's what these sessions are for.

Todd We are talking.

Dr. Nin I mean candidly, openly.

Angela You're intimidating people.

Todd I thought we were. Talking.

Angela You're intimidating me.

Dr. Nin Charles?

Charles I'm uneasy.

Dr. Nin Well, we still have time. Do you want to continue, Charles?

Charles I thought this was voluntary.

Dr. Nin It is. I thought you were going to say more earlier.

Angela Before you cut him off.

Dr. Nin I didn't cut him off.

Angela I'd like to hear about his daughter.

Todd You would.

Angela And I'd like to hear about his wife.

Todd Of course you would.

Angela Shut up, Todd.

Dr. Nin Anyone?

Todd Okay, okay.

Angela See what you did, Todd?

Todd I didn't do anything.

Angela Say something serious.

Dr. Nin Todd?

Todd What I want to do is stop making mistakes.

Dr. Nin Can you give an example, Todd?

Todd (*Looking off*) Mainly with my mouth. But I just don't know if that's possible.

Dr. Nin Of course, it's possible.

Angela You just have to stop drinking.

Todd Maybe it's in our brains. Maybe we can't help it.

Dr. Nin It's because you're still wet. Theoretically.

Todd Maybe it was a mistake to talk about mistakes.

Dr. Nin Maybe this is a good place to stop for now. Will someone lead us in a prayer of his choice?

Angela I will. (Lord's Prayer.)

*

3.

GARY approaches CHARLES in the lounge area.

Gary How we doing, Charles?
Charles Great. The food is good. As long as I can have my coffee, I'm okay. My morning coffee. *(Sarcastic)* I'm jumping for joy, obviously.
Gary Sorry. I'll leave you alone. Gary. We've met. At meetings. And I met your wife, Monica. Your daughter.
Charles Laura. And you had a son, if I'm not mistaken.
Gary Dan.
Charles Tell me if I'm wrong, but I think he was killed.
Gary Shot.
Charles Right. I remember now. Sorry.
Gary I met your wife on Wilshire, in the street.
Charles Yeah. She had episodes. That was one episode, she was wandering the streets.
Gary I used to do that.
Charles My Laura overdosed. I guess you knew.
Gary I did, yes.
Charles You know Todd?
Gary I do know Todd.
Charles You're an actor, right?
Gary Yes, I am. I work here. I do performance therapy.
Charles I don't know what performance therapy is.

Gary It's like we make up a performance to help us deal with our issues. I'll help you work on it.
Charles I don't know if I want to.
Gary That's okay.
Charles I don't even understand what my therapists are talking about. And I'm not going to reveal anything in front of these idiots around here. I don't mean idiots necessarily, I mean strangers, you know, I don't know these people.
Gary I understand.
Charles I think I'm going to send a message. Maybe to my wife. Monica. The Powerbooks are over there, right? In the office? Where you can go online?
Gary Right.
Charles Okay, I'll see you later.
Gary I'll see you later.

CHARLES exits.

Laura *Dear Monica, I was throwing up a lot, maybe every three minutes, all night long. I think they gave me something. Otherwise, it's very nice here, and the food is good. The ocean is gray, the sky is blue. I miss being home. I miss my home. I probably won't send this. Love, Charles.*

*

4.

TODD joins GARY.

Todd Guys are in here because they have the money. They'll take anybody with any kind of problem, no problem, or a problem with no solution. It's a business.

Gary Which one is you?

Todd Mine is a problem with no solution.

Gary What's the problem?

Todd It's a mental problem.

Gary What's the problem?

Todd I was drinking ten bottles of wine a night. Typically, I'd only start with one.

Gary I see.

Todd And you? How can you live in Victorville?

Gary It's air-conditioned.

Todd Maybe the women are the problem.

Gary I'm completely stupid when it comes to women.

Todd So am I.

Gary How are you stupid?.

Todd I think they're out to get me or they want a part in a movie or something. You?

Gary I've never been able to give over to them or step aside and at the same time I love them too much or I love myself too much.

Todd I didn't get that. Which is it?

Gary I think it's more the latter than the former. Of course, drugs and alcohol are a part of that.

Todd Of course. How so?

Gary As far as I know.

Todd As far as you know. You want to try again?

Gary It's sex. I'm a sucker for sex.

Todd Me, too. I'll do anything to get laid. And that's about the size of it. Just remember one thing.

Gary What's that, Todd?

Enter ANGELA.

Angela Shut up, Todd.

Todd Where did you come from, Angela?

Angela What about love?

Todd That's good, Angela.

Angela What?

Todd That's a good question.

Angela Shut up, Todd. (*Exit ANGELA*)

Todd Bye. Angela.

Gary Sex. It's amazing.

Todd It is. I think this whole conflict is amazing, when you think that there was no oxygen on the earth, that it was these little microbes that made the oxygen, and that all creatures have the same core DNA, and when you think about extinction and creation in the context of drug abuse, I just think it's amazing. I definitely agree with you.

Gary I'm not sure of what you just said.

Todd Sex in the light of drug abuse. Definitely a connection.

Gary Right. What is it? Did microbes have sex?

Todd I don't remember now.

Laura *A silence.*

Gary Vernon call?

Todd Not yet.

Gary Fucking phones. Ordinarily I would get paranoid right there. My feelings would be hurt. And then I would be angry and withdrawn.

Todd That was yesterday, Gary.

Gary Now it's like a buzz in my chest. I see the buzz, and I let it go.

Todd So, you're perfectly fine.

Gary I'm fine. I don't know about perfect.

Todd I don't want to do any therapy right now, Gary.

Gary Oh. Okay. Sorry.

Todd I've had it with therapy, especially the twelve-step version, which seems to be what you're into. It must be in the fucking atmosphere around here. Anyway, I'm on free time now, so I think I'll lift some weights. *(Exits)*

Gary Sure, Todd.

Vernon *Our boy lies down on the lounge and sighs. A feeling of loneliness has assailed him in his chest. He looks out at the shining Pacific, trying to concentrate on the shades of blue, the brown haze, the pink on the horizon, the grays in the sky, but he is too distracted by his emotions and sits up again abruptly, looks forlornly down at his bare feet, with their discolored toenails and the scars of too much homeless walking around, saying to himself:*

Gary Find something to do, Gary. Something useful, something helpful. Find somebody to help. No, rehearse, find someplace to rehearse. You are an actor-monk.

Vernon *Satisfied for a moment with the new definition of himself—actor-monk—Gary stands, looks up at the mansion, as if applying a sense of purposeful vision—*

he is in search of an empty room where he can practice his art—and starts slowly climbing the steps, the intention of finding a perfect physical balance in each step supporting him, morally, for a moment or two, on his way.

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5.

The GONG. We're at a meeting.

Charles What can I do? Here I am. Going to meetings. Throwing up. Confessing.

Dr. Nin How did you sleep, Charles?

Charles I slept well. They're giving me about fifteen different drugs. I can't even remember all their names.

Dr. Nin For sleep?

Charles For sleep. Neurontin, phenobarbital.

Todd Fifteen?

Charles Several. I didn't have any nightmares. Well, that's a lie, I had a terrible nightmare, I don't know why I thought I had no nightmares and I had no trouble saying that, but then I realized I had a terrible nightmare, awful.

Angela What was the nightmare?

Charles I don't know if I can describe it, but it woke me up, it was so bad, it was like I willed myself to wake up.

Dr. Nin Charles, can you say anything at all about the nightmare?

Charles Well, that's one of the things that's so strange, in that I couldn't say, really. It was like waves of horror. It had

to do with my daughter, and that's all I can remember about it. But there it was, and I woke myself to get out of it, and now I can't remember it.

Dr. Nin I'm not a Freudian or anything, but I think that's significant.

Todd What's a Freudian?

Dr. Nin I don't know, actually. Thank you, Todd.

Todd What's significant?

Angela Well, that it was about his daughter, stupid.

Todd Don't call me stupid.

Charles He's not stupid.

Dr. Nin Do you want to say anymore, Charles?

Charles That she was gone, flooded you know, in waves, and the color orange, it seemed like orange. I have no idea what that means.

Dr. Nin Does anyone?

Todd Orange. It's the color of monks.

Charles But it's like there were no events, nothing happened. And I kept seeing my hands, like this movie image of my hands, the way Muslims pray, you know, holding out their hands, like this. I don't know what that means, either.

Dr. Nin Thank you, Charles.

Charles Sure.

Dr. Nin Maybe we'll come back to that.

Charles I didn't mean to take up so much time.

Todd Oh for God's sake.

Dr. Nin Angela?

Angela I feel good this morning.

Dr. Nin Can you say more?

Angela No. I just feel good this morning.

Dr. Nin Okay.

Angela I slept well. I didn't dream. I had a nice breakfast. Usually, I don't have breakfast.

Dr. Nin Good. What did you have?

Angela French toast and bacon and orange juice and two cups of coffee, and I'm not sick. Clean and sober for 38 days and nights. Except for all the nonnarcotic drugs. And I feel I might put on weight, but I don't care, thank God.

Dr. Nin Thank you, Angela.

Todd I'd like to talk about God.

Dr. Nin Go ahead.

Angela God?

Dr. Nin But tell us about your morning first.

Todd I woke up fine. I had a nice time sitting here. It was quiet, comfortable.

Dr. Nin Good.

Todd I have no thoughts about wine or alcohol or drugs.

Angela What about God?

Todd Millions of years ago there was no oxygen on the earth. Do you know how oxygen came to be on the earth?

Charles No. Tell us.

Todd Microbes.

Dr. Nin Yes? Go on.

Todd Tiny creatures, no one knows why they started having this chemical reaction. There was only one or two or three percent oxygen in the atmosphere. Nothing could live or breathe. But somehow there were these microbes making oxygen. Millions and millions of years, microbes making oxygen, and they are still there. And now there

is enough oxygen to breathe, and things like us can live and have lungs and hearts and brains and balls.

Angela So?

Todd So where does God come into this?

Charles I think that's a very good question.

Angela It's God as a higher power.

Todd What's the higher power?

Angela What made the microbes make the oxygen.

Todd This is a slow higher power. It took millions of years.

Charles Nobody made them do it. They just did it.

Todd That's right, Charles. That's one way to look at it, but I don't think it has anything to do with microbes.

Angela Don't let him intimidate you, Charles.

Charles I'm not intimidated.

Todd No, we lost it there. This is not serious. There was a thought, and we lost it.

Dr. Nin What was the thought?

Todd Everything originates with the microbe. And there is no God. That's our thought for the day.

Angela No, it isn't. I don't agree with it. I don't have any idea at all what that means.

Todd How can you disagree with something if you don't know what it means?

Angela I do know what it means, okay? It means you're an asshole drunk who doesn't believe in a higher power, so your chances around here are nil, okay? And you may think I'm some kind of a ninny no-brainer, but I'm not, and you can take your microbes and shove them up your fat ass.

Todd Whoa.

Dr. Nin That's enough, Angela.

Angela No, it isn't. It's not enough.

Todd I don't have a fat ass.

Angela I don't give a shit. And microbes don't mean a shit and neither do you, Bud, so shove it up your skinny no-butt ass.

Vernon *A silence, then Todd cracks up, followed by Charles.*

Dr. Nin Angela?

Angela What?

Dr. Nin Session's almost over. Let's leave it in a good way.

Todd I don't have any hard feelings.

Dr. Nin Angela?

Angela Why do you keep calling on me?

Dr. Nin Say the Lord's Prayer.

Angela No, I don't feel like it. Charles, why don't you do it?

Charles I don't know it.

Angela I'll lead you. Follow me. (The Lord's Prayer.)

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6.

GARY and TODD at the lounges.

Gary You were saying?

Todd A woman, like Mom, or Sis, or the wife or the girlfriend. Or Grandma, or Auntie, or your first and second cousins, female kith and kin.

Gary Is what?

Todd Trouble is you hate 'em all, ain't it? You're nodding.

Gary I don't feel that way, actually.

Todd Then why were you nodding?

Gary I was nodding?

Todd What is it, a tic?

Gary I don't hate women.

Todd Yes, you do. I hate the men, too. We hate all mankind basically, when you come right down to it, if truth be told, like I was saying, especially on the roads, there's your famous democracy, jump in front of the other guy, ram him if you can, cut in, smash him up, especially the women in their black SUV's shouting into their cellphones day and night. Gary?

Gary What?

Todd Did you hear what I said?

Gary Women. Cellphones.

Todd What I'm saying, shouting into the phones, in the market, in the bank, in the yard, they don't know we're listening to their stupid lives, and if they know, they don't care, it makes 'em happy, they're happy that their lives are heard, they're happy that we're irritated, they're happy that they have lives. You want to say something?

Gary I guess I'm feeling funny hanging out here in Malibu.

Todd Of course, this is high-end recovery.

Gary This is definitely high-end.

Todd I was drinking ten bottles of wine a night.

Vernon *He thinks there's something wrong with his head.*

Todd There's something wrong with my head.

Gary I'm working with Charles, he wasn't doing much, I can tell you that.

Todd He irritated his wife. That was enough, apparently.

Gary Wait a minute, here he comes.

Charles Hello.

Todd Hi, Charles. Sit down. I was telling Gary about my ex-wife, Sheila. So I said to her one time, show me a picture of someone you care about and she showed me a picture of a dog. It was then I realized my nature.

Gary Which was, or is—what?

Todd Just a thing, like a wire, with neither a perception of myself nor an image being available, just a naked lie.

Gary I don't know if I followed that.

Charles I just want to go home. I feel sick here all the time.

Todd You didn't feel sick before?

Charles No.

Todd I think we're due for a meeting, Charles. Are we?

Charles Yes, we are.

GONG.

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7.

At the meeting.

Dr. Nin Let's welcome our newcomer today. His name is Shirley.

Shirley Call me John.

Angela What kind of name is Shirley? Isn't that a girl's name?

John It's English. But you can call me John.

Angela You're English?
John My father was English.
Dr. Nin Who would like to begin?
Charles Welcome, John.
John Thank you.
Angela Maybe you should start, John.
John Okay. I just got out of detox.
Todd Okay, you just got out of detox.
Charles Okay—Todd, you want to start?
Angela You seem angry, Charles.
Charles Do I?
Angela Yes.
Charles I'm sorry.
Angela Don't be sorry.
Charles I don't want to talk about it.
Dr. Nin Talking is part of the cure, Charles. The more you talk about it, the sooner you'll get home.
Charles One time, the first time I had to leave, she took the kid, she took Laura, to a hotel, down on the beach, on Ocean, and she said they're not coming back until I got out of there, until I left my home.
Angela Okay.
Charles I'm enraged right now. I'm sad and enraged.
Todd What took you so long?
Dr. Nin It's okay.
Charles I think it is the most cruel thing that has ever been done to me and, it's true, I have only just realized that.
Angela Why?
Charles Why did I just realize it?
Dr. Nin Yes.

Charles I don't know why.
Angela You were avoiding the issue. It's a kind of denial.
Charles I think I was too scared.
Angela It's avoidance and denial.
Dr. Nin That's not helpful now, Angela.
Angela Why the fuck not?
Dr. Nin Don't curse, honey.
Angela Don't call me honey.
Dr. Nin It's in the past.
Angela So what if it's in the past? Every fucking thing that happens is in the past.
Dr. Nin All right, but not everything is denial. Why do you think it happened, Charles?
Charles I think Angela is right. I think I was in denial.
Todd Denial, denial. Let's not use that word, if you don't mind.
Angela No, why did she do it? Your wife?
Charles I don't know why.
Angela You're a very nice man. I think Charles is a very nice man.
Charles Thank you.
Todd Let's go on, for God's sake.
Angela Todd, for an agnostic, you use the G-word a lot.
Todd I'm an atheist and it's just a word.
Angela Did you leave?
Charles No. For some reason, I thought I was at fault. And I didn't know what to do.
Monica *It's unacceptable. It's completely unacceptable.*
Charles Unacceptable. I was unacceptable. They let me visit them at the hotel. My daughter's standing there, she has no idea what's going on. She thinks it's some kind of

adventure. She likes the candy and the TV and the view, and Dad comes to visit, because they're short of clothes.

Angela What was her explanation?

Charles Explanation?

Angela To your daughter?

Charles Daddy takes pills.

Dr. Nin Daddy takes pills.

Charles Daddy takes pills, so he's unacceptable.

Monica *I don't want him to have an advantage. I don't want him not to have to suffer, like I do. I suffer. I don't take pills to ease the pain, and neither should he.*

Angela So how does a kid understand that?

Charles I just wanted to die.

Todd What did you do?

Charles Please come home, I said. I was desperate. I poured a bottle of vodka down the drain.

Dr. Nin Are you an alcoholic?

Charles I've been sober for a year.

John On top of the pills?

Charles I took the pills for pain.

Angela So you weren't pure as the driven snow, either.

Todd I like that.

Charles No, I wasn't, to answer your question.

Angela Are you now?

Charles They're giving me a lot of stuff to take. Drugs. I can't even remember the names of half of them.

Angela Tell us fucking about it.

Todd Anyone smell fire?

John I do.

Dr. Nin Must be one of the fireplaces. Let's hear more of Charles' story before we run out of time.

Charles She kept saying, be a man, be gallant. You move to a hotel and we'll come home. One day, I don't know what happened. I don't know why, but I gave in. I remember getting into the car, going into the garage, and getting into the car, with my clothes over my shoulder, the hangers digging into my neck, leaving red welts on my neck, and thinking, "Oh my God, Charles, this is really happening to you, you are losing your home and your family."

Todd But what's the point? What's the point of all that bullshit?

Charles You mean me?

Todd No, I mean the whole human need to inflict pain on other people. What do you think about that, Dr. Nin?

Dr. Nin I don't know. Maybe we can get into that another time. Maybe that's enough for now.

Todd People enjoy being cruel. I should know.

Angela You too, Todd?

Todd You learn to say no. And behind the no is a fuck you. Am I right? (*Looking off*) That's right.

Vernon *Todd looks off. To the hill country in the north, the wide Pacific in the west. From the north, he hears the faint whispering of fire.*

*

8.

CHARLES is approached by DR. NIN.

Dr. Nin Can I speak to you for a moment, Charles?
Charles Yes.
Dr. Nin Your wife called this morning.
Charles Monica?
Dr. Nin Yes. Dr. Jones spoke with her. He asked me to check in with you.
Charles Oh.
Dr. Nin So that's what I'm doing.
Charles Thanks.
Dr. Nin You were throwing up again last night?
Charles Yes.
Dr. Nin Why were you throwing up?
Charles I don't know why.
Dr. Nin Are you anxious?
Charles I shouldn't be here.
Dr. Nin Dr. Jones says you're an anxiety neurotic. That's why you're here. That's why you need help. He says you have been medicating yourself. Of course, you're throwing up. You have anxiety syndrome.
Charles I think he gave me something that made me throw up.
Dr. Nin What did he give you?
Charles I don't know the name of it.
Dr. Nin Was it pink?
Charles Pink?
Dr. Nin Did you put it under your tongue?
Charles Yes.

Dr. Nin You put it under your tongue and you let it melt?
Charles Yes.
Dr. Nin Right. That was the Suboxone.
Charles Is that good?
Dr. Nin That's what you take when you're in danger of addiction or coming off an addiction, according to Dr. Jones.
Charles I was in danger of addiction?
Dr. Nin Yes, because you have anxiety syndrome.
Charles But I wasn't an addict really, and I shouldn't be in here.
Dr. Nin Then why are you here?
Charles You don't know?
Dr. Nin No, I don't know. You checked in, didn't you?
Charles Yes.
Dr. Nin Because you need help.
Charles My wife checked me in.
Dr. Nin Your wife can't check you in if you don't want to be checked in.
Charles I see.
Dr. Nin I certainly understand. All right?
Charles Sure.
Vernon *Satisfied, the therapist starts to leave, then changes his mind and stops to give Charles a little more attention.*
Dr. Nin And you're not throwing up today?
Charles No. Not anymore.
Dr. Nin Good. Well, I have to run. I'm late. Gary is giving a performance tonight. Be sure to come. He'll be doing his Agamemnon.
Charles I'm coming.
Dr. Nin Good. I'll stop by medication now and I'll get our addictionologist, Dr. Jones, to give you the med for your

anxiety and you'll be fine. You should take it soon, you should take it right away.

Laura *Then take it three times a day.*

Dr. Nin All right?

Charles Yes. Thank you.

Dr. Nin Stop by for your meds in five minutes.

Charles In Dr. Jones' office?

Dr. Nin Yes, I'll be in his office. See you there. *(Exits)*

*

9.

Moments later. CHARLES joins GARY.

Charles Monica started hearing voices on the street. After Laura died she just wandered the streets. It's hard to believe disasters like that can happen in America. A daughter in the prime of life can OD and a middle-class woman can fall all the way down.

Gary What kind of voices?

Charles Laura was one. There was a doctor from England, in the 19th Century, a Dr. Frobisher. And then there was a dead alcoholic who guided her to AA meetings. He said to her, "You are in a dark tunnel and you cannot find your way, but in a few moments you will see lights, and people gathered, and these people will be glad to see you and they will welcome you. Go with them." Sure enough, she found herself in front of a meeting and was welcomed

and went in. Pretty soon, she was going to meetings day and night and then she started Al-Anon as well.

Gary And you—what were you doing?

Charles Oh, I was grateful. I didn't care if it was voices or hallucinations or what. I was glad she came home. I stopped with the booze.

Gary What are you taking now?

Charles Well, Suboxone is one of them.

Gary They've got you on Suboxone?

Charles Yes, which works for the back pain, and some other stuff I can't remember—Neurontin and a bunch of stuff for sleep. Phenobarbital and something else I can't pronounce. French.

Gary You should check it out with Dr. Jones.

Charles Thanks. I think I will.

Vernon *Charles and Gary join Todd in the lounge area.*

Gary *(To TODD)* They've got him on Suboxone.

Todd Jeez.

Gary It's standard procedure.

Todd It's a narcotic.

Gary *(Of CHARLES)* The man's an anxiety neurotic.

Todd What's an anxiety neurotic? They make this shit up. You know projection? You know the idea of projectionism?

Gary Protectionism?

Todd No.

Gary It's like protecting your markets.

Todd No.

Gary From foriegners.

Todd No, I'm not talking about that.

Charles He talks about it, Gary, like making sure your voice is heard by them, the audience.

Todd No.

Gary Right, Charles, projecting so they can hear you.

Todd No, I mean projection, where you project onto others the image of yourself. So you say the motherfucker's in a fog, he can't think straight, you're talking about yourself, how you're in a fog and can't think straight, or you say that asshole is in denial, he's in total denial, and it's you, you're in denial, you deny everything all the time, you live in a state of denial, totally, but it's not you, it's that other asshole, him, who's in denial.

Pause.

You could form a party, start a program, how people are in denial, and then we could all be saved. Right. They would have to face the truth of their denial, and make sacrifices. There you go. Face the truth and make sacrifices, and get right with the Lord.

Gary It's Greek. It's Plato. You're in a cave, and there's an image on the wall of the cave, an image of the world, a vision of things, and it's projected.

Todd Right, Gary. And the blame is on them.

Charles I don't get it.

Todd The blame is on them, on him or her.

Charles What happened to the cave?

Todd Forget the cave.

Gary That was Plato.

Todd That was Plato. Forget that. The point is: It's not on you. It's a question of blame. I blame him, I blame her. Because he doesn't know what he's doing. She has no idea. He's an addict/alcoholic, he'd piss his mother's milk.

Charles What?

Gary Let's go back a minute.

Todd They're all rootsuckers or something.

Charles What are they?

Todd They're all rootsuckers or something.

Charles Who is?

Todd Them. The others.

Gary The projection on the wall of the cave?

Todd Yeah?

Gary It's them?

Todd It's them.

Charles It's the other guy.

Todd Him, or her, the other person. But if you work hard you can get it right. Eventually. If you insist on it, and insist on it.

Charles On what?

Todd On getting it right, on getting it clear. This thing about projection—it's imposing your will, controlling the other, subconsciously, partially; so it's very awkward, the person doesn't know what they're doing, but they want you to do what they think should be done, and they think they're right. This is what happens in a marriage.

Gary You were married?

Todd Twice, Gary. Remember?

Gary Oh, sure. Of course.

Charles Well, maybe they are right. You want to clean it up, whatever it is. You know, and make the amends.

Todd I don't think so, Charles.
Charles You don't?
Todd No.

THE GONG.

And anyway, we have a meeting. Do we have another meeting now, or not?

Charles We do, actually.
Todd Let's go then.
Charles See you later, Gary.
Gary Yeah, we'll rehearse!

*

10.

At the meeting.

Dr. Nin Angela?
Angela What?
Dr. Nin You wish to speak?
Angela Not really.
Dr. Nin You have nothing to say?
Angela No.
Dr. Nin How was your morning?
Angela Fine.
Dr. Nin You sleep okay?
Angela I slept.

Dr. Nin Let's move on then. Todd?
Todd I feel great.
Dr. Nin That's it?
Todd That's it and that's all.
Dr. Nin Did you meditate?
Todd Did I medicate?
Dr. Nin Meditate. Sit quietly.
Todd I never meditate. I don't know what meditate means. I was sitting here, I know that.
Dr. Nin Good.
Todd I was just sitting here.
Dr. Nin Okay.
Todd So if that's meditation that's what I was doing, but I feel like I was missing something. Was I?
Dr. Nin I don't know. Let's not get stuck on the word.
Todd I'm supposed to say how many days, it's nine days, I feel okay about that, I don't have delirium tremens, I had no trouble detoxing, and I'm looking forward to the day.
Dr. Nin Why?
Todd Well, I think we're supposed to go to the sweat lodge today, which is something I've never done of course, not that I have any rapport with the Indians, but I have some curiosity, so I'm interested in going.
Dr. Nin Thank you, Todd.
Todd You're welcome.
Dr. Nin Charles?
Charles I had some trouble detoxing originally, I guess that was a week ago. I don't know why exactly, but I'm glad that's over.
Dr. Nin This morning?

Charles Oh, I don't know anything about meditation either, like Todd, but I seemed to enjoy it.

Dr. Nin How so?

Charles I don't know. I just kind of like the peaceful feeling you know, the peacefulness of it. In terms of the day, I'm working with Gary, Gary Bean, on this performance thing, I don't know if I'm looking forward to that or not.

Dr. Nin Can you say more?

Charles I'm nervous about it, if I want to stand up there in front of people and say things?

Dr. Nin Well, that makes sense.

Todd And you don't have to do it.

Charles I know, we'll see. I like Gary, and I think it's a good challenge for me, and he's going to be there. So, we'll see.

Dr. Nin Thanks, Charles.

Charles We'll see. But I was going to say, Angela, I'd sort of like to hear what Angela was going to say.

Dr. Nin Angela?

Angela I wasn't going to say anything.

Dr. Nin Nothing to tell us about?

Angela They asked me to stay another month. I was ready to graduate, not graduate, check out or leave, leave tomorrow, but they said I should stay another month, so that's what I'm going to do. I've already been here for two months, but that's not uncommon. It's not uncommon for people to stay here, especially at my age, for two or three months or even more. And the reason as everybody knows—maybe not Charles—is my temper. I've been losing my temper with my family, you know, on the phone, because they are such idiots. Well, I don't know if they are idiots

but they seem like idiots to me half the time, fucking stupid idiots, excuse my language, and the nannies, I lose my temper with them. I try not to, believe me, I do try, and sometimes I succeed, but I've been having a hell of a problem lately because they do not know how to be with my kids and they act like fucking idiots and they don't listen. Excuse me.

Dr. Nin No, it's perfectly all right.

Angela They don't fucking listen to me. So I end up yelling and cursing and it's a mess.

Charles What kind of things?

Angela What kind of things?

Todd Yeah, that you're yelling about with your kids?

Angela I'm not yelling at my kids per se, I'm yelling at my parents, and the Nannies, because I want them to eat right and not watch so much television and I don't want their drug-addled father dropping in on them at any time of the day or night.

Todd Well, that seems legitimate.

Angela What?

Todd I said, that seems legitimate.

Angela I think so. I just can't lose my temper. And I can't use any kind of drugs, uppers or downers or soma or whatever, to control my temper, because that's what I was doing.

Dr. Nin You were using in order to control your temper?

Angela You know I was. Maybe not completely. Maybe that's not completely honest. Maybe I liked it, also. But definitely, yes.

Dr. Nin Do you feel like you would use if you went home now?

Angela Well, that's the question. That's a very good question. I don't know if I would, because I don't feel ready. I was

yelling at them this morning, not my kids, but my mother and what's-her-name, the Bulgarian nanny who could hardly say two words in a row in the English language, I get so angry I can't even say her name, Ivanna, I don't know what the fuck she's doing, let alone thinking, but I think the temptation would certainly be there, yes.

Dr. Nin The temptation to use?

Angela Well, what else are we talking about here? I'm sorry, but it's just bullshit not to pay attention here.

Dr. Nin Sorry.

Angela The answer is Yes, even though I like being like I am, I'm glad I'm off the uppers, and so on, clean and sober. I like it a lot, it's great, but I still have a hell of a temper as some of you may have heard at various times.

Dr. Nin So it might be a good thing to stay on here another month?

Angela It might, yes.

Dr. Nin Thank you, Angela. We should probably stop right there and go on to the next meeting or activity. John, you want to say anything?

John No.

Dr. Nin Thank you. Todd?

Todd No, thank you.

His cell phone rings.

Hi Vernon. Hang on while I cross to my spot.

Laura *Todd finds his favorite lounge.*

Todd Okay. Go, Vernon, before we get cut off.

Vernon I'm going nuts. Marcia hasn't talked to me in days.

Todd You have to learn to live alone, Vernon. Do you realize

what this planet looked like before people spread out all over it?

Vernon How are those two thoughts related, Todd?

Todd You didn't answer me.

Vernon They're not related.

Todd I do it. I live alone.

Vernon Congratulations. That's why you're in rehab for the seventeenth time.

Todd Third. This is my third. We live in a puritanical country. These two thoughts are related.

Vernon How?

Todd Because of drugs and alcohol. And tobacco and sugar and the pharmaceutical industry and lying politicians and swarming populations—and —

Laura *Here comes Antonio, whistling Cucaracha—*

Todd Illegal immigration. They're all connected, Vernon. It's the maggotization of life on earth. Hello? Are you there? The line's dead.

Enter ANTONIO.

Antonio Are you talking to me, gringo?

Todd No, I was talking *about* you.

Antonio You have Death written all over you. Yellow eyes, scabby feet. You must be taking something in your room.

Todd I am. They give you all kinds of shit here. This is not a drug-free environment. And what do you do, fertilize the flowers?

Antonio Yes, and I put my stamp on people as they come and go, like this, I stamp them, live or die, or live for a minute and then die, or suffer another fifteen or twenty years, or

die like a dog, today or tomorrow, it makes no difference to me. Here comes the new one, right out of detox, his name is Shirley.

Todd Shirley? That's a girl's name. His name is John.

Antonio Shirley is a pussy artist. He'll teach you how to get a date.

Todd I don't want a date.

Antonio They sit around Hollywood sniffing coke and drinking Baileys on ice and then they go out to the clubs, pick up girls.

Todd So what's he doing here?

Antonio Same as you. He wants to clean up. Then he'll go back to the way he was.

Todd It's time for our meeting.

Antonio They have a house in the Hollywood hills, it's a business, they work out of their cell phones and they give instruction: how you talk to a girl, how to pick up a girl, what to say, what to do, how to act. It's immoral, so his heart is burning him.

Todd He has heartburn?

Antonio No, *es conciencia*, something that you don't have yet.

Todd Yeah, we'll see, Pedro.

Antonio Antonio. We'll see what?

Todd We'll see if this dude has a conscience.

Antonio Who cares? Not you. *Chinga su madre.*

Todd Fuck you too, Pedro.

Vernon *Charles enters the lounge area with Gary as Antonio passes through. They stay clear of Todd.*

Charles How come you don't come to meetings, Gary?

Gary I'm not a client. I work here. I'm not willing to sacrifice my time.

Charles I guess it's nobody's business.

Gary Recovery is the business. High-end.

Charles How do you know Todd?

Gary I'm an actor.

Charles I know.

Gary That's how I know Todd.

Charles You think he'll recover?

Gary No. He's not here to recover. He's here to clean up, give his body a rest. Like he says. And you?

Charles Anxiety syndrome. I don't know how you recover from that.

Gary Does your wife come? Monica?

Charles No. She calls.

Gary Is she, uh, you know...?

Charles In her right mind? Yeah, she's pretty stable now. She's fine. That's why I don't know about this performance thing.

Gary Because of Monica being fine?

Charles No, me, my own stage fright.

Gary Those two thoughts are not related.

Charles Fear. I'm afraid of my domineering wife.

Gary Don't worry about it. You just stand up and start talking. I'll help you.

CHARLES stands.

Okay, talk.

Charles "At any moment the shoe could drop, the cards fall, and the Queen's eye, the eye of the Red Queen, the hard, fixed, paranoid glare, could move from its secret, implacable,

silent world—onto you, you personally, accenting your profound wrong-doing, the error of your ways; it's in the fear response itself, in the frailty that comes originally, organically—an elemental failure of nerve.”

Gary That was good. Did you write that?

Charles Yes.

Gary Why'd you stop?

Charles I don't know who this guy is.

Gary It's you.

Charles No, he's more intelligent than me.

Gary It's good. Keep going.

Charles “So, I realized that when the fixed glare occurred, a moment of insanity was transpiring. A rant would follow, angry and bitter, about my faults and failures, my habits and addictions, my sins, and these blows fell upon me like hammer-blows upon a bell, clanging away, leaving me a confused wretch with his head ringing, one who could barely think a straight, complete thought, with subject, object, verb, and so on, a bent-over wretch with his chest burning shamefully, and yet still feeling separate and amazed at the event, at the manifestation of madness that he had received willy-nilly, and innocently, upon his person. The accusation of victimhood followed naturally from there.”

Monica *You act like a victim when all you had to do was take action.*

Charles Action, my ass.

TODD has been listening in.

Monica *ACTION! MOVEMENT!*

Todd Hey, what was that?

Gary What was what?

Todd I feel like I'm hearing things.

Gary You are. We're rehearsing.

Todd Should I move away?

Gary Move away.

TODD moves.

Thank you. Okay, Charles.

Charles What?

Gary We'll work again soon, Charles. That was a good start.

Charles Thank you. I gotta go.

Gary Where you going?

Charles I'm looking for Dr. Jones right now, actually.

Exits.

Gary See you later!

Todd *(TO GARY)* Who knew? Underneath one Charles is another Charles.

Gary Yes. Interesting. Me, too. You, too.

Pause.

You coming to my show?

Todd I'll be there.

Gary Good. Thanks. Half hour.

Todd Okay.

Gary See you then.
Todd Break a leg, Gary.

*

11.

Vernon *Gary's performance. He steps in front of his audience and pronounces the title:*

Gary *Agamenmon.* A tired old man, blood-stained around his neck, as though he had been hung, arrives at his home from the endless sea. He has murdered his daughter by hanging, so there are the rope stains around his own neck, like stigmata. This tells you all you need to know about his life, of which he is sick and sore of heart. He has been wandering on the boundless sea—of tide and wind and wave and meaningless rain, rain that is only rain, water lashing the soul of Agamemnon. The fires are lit, the beacons and signals, all the fires lit for the arrival of old Agamemnon—fires on land and sea, in the sky, fires for the homecoming of Agamemnon—may the Gods save his weary soul.

Chorus *What are they saying, the heralds and soldiers and guardians of the land of Argos?*

Gary “Have care!,” say the Heralds on the shore, “Wait there, stop!” say the Guardians of the cities and towns, “Stay where you are,” say the Soldiers! “Find refuge from the storm,” say the Citizens. “Go back! Go away! Come another time! You are not welcome. Agamemnon,

murderer, child-murderer, coward, old man, for your angry wife awaits you! Go away and come back another time! An avenging death awaits you, so go away to an island somewhere and starve to death, or go to some town where no one knows you and beg, sit down in the main street and wail and beg until the townspeople get tired of you and kill you.” Agamemnon doesn’t die. Agamemnon goes on justifying himself. He goes to secret meetings and lies with the other liars, who promise to save him for a price. He creeps around in the libraries of small towns, head buried in a book, not reading, but glancing about furtively, drool coming out of the corners of his mouth, eyes red, back hunched over. He has a spot in the woods with a blanket and a box and a sheet and a spear. The guardians watch him. Once a week he spends a night in the dungeon. He stinks. Children mock him. The little clearing in the woods where he sleeps stinks and the place is avoided until a child comes to light it afire with a candle and some oil given to him by his mother. Soon the forest is burning.

Todd Gary’s version of Agamemnon: the Homeless Wanderer.
Gary He must run. Fires everywhere. Signal fires for the coming of Agamemnon, warning fires from the crazed, desperate outbursts from Persephone, from Hades, from the silence of Cassandra. The earth is burning up!

Chorus *The red-throated Agamemnon must run for the sea.*
Gary Clytemnestra has seen the signal fires and she knows that Agamemnon is near. The sacrifice of Iphigenia will be avenged. She calls to the watchman: “Catch the red-throated slime! The conscienceless bastard, no better

than a thief or a beggar, so that I and the city of Argos can have our revenge! Don't let him slip away into the darkness!" "Be calm," says the Chorus, "there is only one outcome. It is already foreseen. He wears a red scar around his neck—he can be seen from Heaven or Hell—he wears a red scar as though it was he who had been hanged to bring a fair wind, he and not his beautiful daughter, his beautiful daughter taken to the depths of Hell. And for what fair wind? What is the fair wind but the flutter of a ghost, the vanity of a breeze, an illusion of movement?" "Shut up," says Clytemnestra, "and don't philosophize, keep guard. I have set out a crimson path for the red-stained animal to find his way to my door. Keep watch so that I am prepared for him. I am the righteous one, as righteous as the golden sun. Look how the path races to the sea like a serpent's tongue! Call Agamemnon! Trap him!" Clytemnestra shines with righteousness! The watchmen and the citizens gather at the shore and call to Agamemnon. The Chorus pleads once more for Pity on the poor Agamemnon.

Chorus *He has lost his soul, they cry, to a fair wind. Have mercy! Mercy, mercy for the lost, for the supremely alone. Have mercy.*

Gary Clytemnestra puts on the golden mask of righteousness and steps away, behind the infamous palace door. Agamemnon knows his fate. He will die in a crushing embrace, a strangling golden force, encircling and smashing his bones like a python. He steps upon the crimson path, hunched over like a troll, like a gargoyle. "I am Agamemnon," he says, "who brought war to Troy,

Have mercy on me." Agamemnon starts up the crimson path. Agamemnon, who hates frailty and old age and abandonment. "And yet I love women! I still love women," thinks Agamemnon as he totters like a crawfish, walking sidewise up the red road to his death. "I still love women." And he thinks of the women he has known and of the pleasures of being with a woman. He thinks of sweet breath, and of gasping and sighing, of murmurs and vows, and desperate cries, and female bodies, bodies streaming with the life of oceans, of life itself on earth. "I have known the women of Argos and the virgin girls of Troy. Even these women here, near the palace, I have known many of them in my youth. And here comes the herald, I knew him as a boy."

Herald / Vernon

I have come to escort you Father, to the chambers of Clytemnestra.

Laura *No, don't go!*

Gary / Agamemnon

You are a man now, with children of your own.

Herald / Vernon

I am, Father.

Agamemnon He calls me Father!

All Chorus *Prepare, Agamemnon! Prepare for the death struggle! For there will be no mercy. Prepare for the dark action of her bed!*

Vernon / Herald

Here she comes now, Sire! Look, the Palace door opens!

Gary And there she stands, the beautiful Clytemnestra, her

face wreathed in a golden light, her breasts exposed, her body clothed in a silken, transparent robe. “Come, Agamemnon,” says Clytemnestra softly, “don’t be afraid, come to the arms of your long-suffering wife. Come closer, my darling.”

Laura *Agamemnon! Run!*

Chorus *Cries the Chorus of Argos, but Clytemnestra has grabbed his hands, and the Herald has grabbed him around the head, and the scar-stained Agamemnon is pulled and pushed into the chamber of his death.*

Gary Thank you.

Laura *Applause.*

*

12.

The GONG sounds. We’re at a meeting.

Dr. Nin Just say why you’re here, John, and how you’re feeling this morning.

John I’m here because I was using coke and drinking a lot.

Todd How much?

John A lot.

Todd How much is a lot?

Dr. Nin Let him talk, Todd.

Todd He is talking.

Dr. Nin How are you feeling this morning, John?

Todd They gave you something?

John I just couldn’t sleep and I was shivering.

Todd What do you do for a living?

John Me?

Todd Yeah, like me, I’m a film producer, and Charles is an accountant, and Angela is a housewife and an artist, and Dr. Nin is a psychologist, what are you?

John I’m a date consultant.

Angela What the fuck is that?

John I help guys with dates.

Angela I don’t get it.

Dr. Nin Why don’t we continue on and come back to this later if we feel like it? Angela?

Angela I didn’t get much sleep last night and I feel lousy this morning. I’ve already had one argument with Ivanna. Do I live here? Am I living here now, forever? I’m sorry. I feel annoyed this morning. And I don’t want to give the newcomer a hard time but what the fuck is a date consultant? It’s just annoying to deal with newcomers because I want to feel like I have a home, a home with some privacy and where my family comes in the door and I hope they’re allowed to come today. Are they?

Dr. Nin They are.

Angela Thank God or whatever.

Enter CHARLES.

Dr. Nin Charles? It’s not respectful to the other clients to be late for meetings.

Charles I was touched by Gary’s play.

Todd How are those two thoughts related?

Charles I don't know.

Todd I can see that.

Charles I feel like I'm trapped between the terrors of infancy and old age.

Todd What?

Charles Do I have to say it again?

Dr. Nin Say it again, Charles.

Charles I feel like I'm trapped between the terrors of infancy and old age.

Todd Jeez.

Angela I didn't get that, either.

Dr. Nin Can you say more, Charles?

Charles I've been dreaming about my mother. And I'm over sixty-five and I'm afraid of dying.

Dr. Nin Well, that makes sense.

Todd I have only one thing to say.

Charles What?

Todd Can I say it?

Dr. Nin Please.

Todd It's a performance.

Charles You don't believe me?

Angela I believe him.

Todd I believe you, but it's a performance. It's too dramatic. You've been working with Gary, right? Agamemnon?

Charles It feels true, though.

Todd I know it does. It's just inauthentic. You're not scared of your mom and you're not afraid of dying, at least not all the time.

Angela I didn't see the performance.

Todd Right, the dramas are connected. But it's superficial and inauthentic.

Charles Now I'm embarrassed.

Angela Of "Agamemnon."

Todd You're not embarrassed, Charles. Sounds right, though, doesn't it? It's like what's his name, the "date consultant."

Angela I'm not sure what that means.

Dr. Nin Do you have an example from your own experience, Todd?

Todd That *is* my experience, Doc. And I'll tell you what else, we got a gardener outside who is not a gardner.

Charles What is he?

Todd He acts like a gardener, he mows and he blows, but that's not all he is.

Angela How do you know?

Todd I know it in my bones.

Charles What is he?

Todd He's an assassin. Okay?

Angela I feel like I want to say something, but I'm stupefied by that remark.

Dr. Nin Well, let's move on into our day.

Todd About the gardener—you get an image of things—a vision of things—of the masses of people migrating into our country, along with tons and tons of pollution and the planet heating up and simmering, and these migrants from the South forming criminal gangs, and here they are in rehab, disguised, in this fancy, expensive facility, because where else would they be?

Dr. Nin Thank you, Todd.

Angela That doesn't make any fucking sense, Todd.
Dr. Nin I believe that's all we have time for. On to the next activity, which I think is riding and roping.
Angela Riding and roping? What the fuck is that?
Charles Me? I have a meeting with Gary Bean.

*

13.

Vernon *Charles walks downstage to join Gary, as the others disperse.*
Charles *(To GARY)* Todd says it's all a performance.
Gary What is?
Charles A person's whole identity.
Gary That's Todd talking.
Charles I thought it was true at the time.
Gary Maybe, but the performance we're talking about is something else entirely, and we're not there yet.
Charles My performance?
Gary Yes. Let's talk some more about Monica.
Charles You stink, she says to me, you're toxic in your body.
Monica *It's deep, organic, to the core. It's coming out of your pores. Think about it. You do have options. Listen to my words.*
Gary She said that?
Charles Yes. My wife, Monica. By this time she was talking to the dead, to Laura, to the dead.
Gary Okay. Tell them who Laura is.

Charles She was my daughter. I suppose that should be in the present tense.
Gary Why?
Charles Because I will be speaking, you know, in the present, and because I think of her as very much alive in my mind, and she's still my daughter.

Pause.

Gary I understand.
Charles Thank you.
Gary Laura.
Charles Yeah. She started having problems in middle school, in LA, with the violence and the drugs, and what she thought was the basic stupidity of it all.
Laura *It's not Antigone, not Iphigenia. It's Monica. It's Clytemnestra and the murder of Agamemnon.*
Charles Did you say something?
Gary No.
Charles Laura had a huge problem with the culture. Both she and Monica.
Monica *They took away the female. They turned thirteen-year-olds into temptresses.*
Charles But I blame myself, mainly.
Gary It's good, Charles. I think we're moving right along.
Vernon *Moving right along.*
Gary Let's take a break.
Charles Let's do that.

They join TODD at the lounges.

Gary You still here, Todd?
Todd I didn't go riding. I'm afraid of horses.
Charles What do you do, Todd?
Todd What do you mean, what do I do?
Charles Are you married?
Todd No, I live alone and I like it that way. I listen to the radio and I scheme. At night, I drink a bottle of wine. No one bothers me. I think I read that in a script.
Gary What?
Todd What I just said. You smell that?
Gary What?
Todd Smoke. You see the color of the sky?
Gary Yeah?
Todd It's changed. Why? The mountain behind us is on fire.
Gary The mountain is on fire?
Todd The mountain is on fire.
Vernon *A silence as they consider this. "The mountain is on fire."*
Gary Should we do something?
Todd You haven't heard the sirens?
Gary We've been busy.
Todd Sit down. Look around. See and hear.

GARY and CHARLES sit down.

Charles You think you'll stay sober and go to meetings?
Todd No. Do you?
Charles We'll see.
Todd Gary?
Gary I want to be honest about this, and I'm trying, but it feels as though I lie all the time, no matter what I say.

Todd That's typical Gary. You hear Dr. Jones' lecture?
Charles Yes.
Todd Did he say anything? The "addictionologist."
Charles "There are pathways." Neurons. I remember that. A lot about the chemistry of the brain.
Todd Yes. Addictionology. No one knows. Only the alcoholic knows.

Pause.

People kill themselves in that situation because they're not themselves. I can readily understand that. They're lying.

Pause.

Who wasn't treated poorly? The whole world's on fire. Have you looked around? Are you in your senses? Everything is burning up. Uh, oh. It's him, Sergio, armed with a blower.

Gary Antonio.
Todd *(To ANTONIO)* Hey, don't come near us with that thing!
(To GARY) You smell the smoke?
Gary Yes.
Todd You see the ashes?
Gary Yes.
Todd The world's on fire, Gary.

Pause.

It's fitting, in my opinion. The earth will burn itself to a

cinder. It's oxygenation, after all. Just burn it all up, turn it back into nitrous oxide, iron oxide, carbon dioxide.

You follow me there, Gary?

Gary Gotcha, Todd.

Exits.

Todd Here he comes again.

Sees ANTONIO off.

It's the Angel of Death and his blower.

Enter ANTONIO.

Antonio *Como está usted, gringo?*

Charles Good. And you?

Antonio *Muy bien.* No hope, he says. Fucking writer/producer, no less. They know everything, so I guess there's no hope for you, Carlitos.

Todd Who is Carlitos?

Charles He means me.

Todd There is no hope for him. Fires are burning up the planet, including Malibu. Not to speak of his wife.

Antonio Ha ha, sarcasm, TV producer, he thinks he's smarter.

Todd I am smarter, greaseball, there'll always be television, even on Mars. I'm going to lie down someplace. Go fuck yourself.

Exits.

Antonio Mars? You'll die like a dog, with smoke up your ass! *(To CHARLES)* Like a dog. A dog, I'm telling you, with smoke up his nose. You have time?

Charles I need to go home.

Antonio No. Don't do it. Unacceptable. Wait. You have another wish?

Charles I wish I could talk to my daughter.

Antonio What would you say if you could talk to Laura?

Charles I'm sorry.

Antonio Let's go. You see smoke, orange sky?

Charles Yes, I do.

Antonio *Es purgatorio.* Now, I blow smoke, you see Laura, then, later, you forget all about it. *Entiende usted?*

Charles *Sí,* I mean, Yes.

Antonio I blow smoke, The end, okay? No argument.

Charles I understand.

Vernon *Antonio runs his blower and takes Charles to Hell. Here we are in Hell.*

Antonio Here is Laura.

Laura *Hi, Dad.*

Antonio Go fast, gringo.

Charles I love you and I'm sorry. I'm in rehab. I'm learning a lot. Maybe there's a chance. And I miss you terribly. That's all I have.

Laura *It's the American Way. The Fat Daddy comes upstairs reeking of alcohol while the pubescent teeny, who is far, far ahead of him in the knowledge of the great decline, of the meaninglessness of it all, the tubular stupidity of it all, the selfishness, the failure of empire and warmongering, the stealing from the poor, the lying, the cruelty*

and the sadism and the torture, the daily television commercial grind—look at this, she says, and laughs in his face.

Charles I've seen it, and I'm trying. Laura.

Laura *Bullshit, Dad.*

Charles What should I do?

Laura *Don't ask me. You figure it out.*

Vernon *Charles' head falls forward like he's been slapped.*

Laura *You have to pay, like we're paying now in Hell.*

Charles I am paying.

Laura *Not enough. You're having a nice time up there in Malibu. You get to act out different roles—like Mr. Senior Citizen who Doesn't Belong There—and you don't have to be intimidated—and on top of that, they give you drugs. Nice.*

Charles You have a point there, Laura.

Laura *I'll tell you what it's like in Hell. We suffer the memories. Like you. Only we don't get to forget them for a moment. We have to remember them always and forever. Over and over again, phones not being answered, doors not being opened, screaming hysterics, endless vomiting, idiocy and stupidity, Mexican greaseballs missing my vein, Daddy being scared of Mommy, the failure to be loved.*

Charles I'm sorry, Laura.

Laura *All the little self-serving impulses, over and over and over.*

Charles I do love you.

Laura *We can't forget them for a second. We gave in, and now they're on and on forever. On and on.*

Charles Can you forgive me?

Laura *Go home, Dad, and punch Monica in the mouth.*

Charles Good idea.

Laura *No, probably not. Uh, oh, here comes the death-dealing dickhead with his blower.*

Antonio Time's up, Gringo.

Laura *Don't be afraid, Dad!*

Charles Laura! Wait!

Antonio *Lo siento mucho.* For you, no charge. Just remember to be nice to the Spanish-speaking peoples.

Runs the blower, LAURA'S gone. Enter TODD.

Todd Talking to the gardeners, are ya?

Charles Antonio. He's sensitive, Todd.

Todd Yeah, yeah. Too many migrants. Too many people on the earth. Too much piss, shit, and garbage.

Charles You sound just like my daughter.

Todd Maybe she was right.

Charles Maybe so.

Todd Let's have another meeting, solve the problems of the universe with abstinence and sobriety.

Charles Can't hurt.

Todd No, can't hurt. Good point, Charles. Hey, you notice they moved the horses out of the barns?

Charles No.

Todd Well, they did.

Charles Excuse me. I don't feel good.

Exits.

*

14.

Vernon *So I get Gary on the phone as he walks into the lounge area.*

Vernon Hey Gary.

Gary Hey, Vernon.

Vernon Todd there?

Gary He's one lounge over.

Vernon Did he just look at you?

Gary He did actually, yes.

Vernon He knows it's me?

Gary Probably he does, yeah.

Vernon Did he look at you?

Gary Yes. Todd can hear you, Vernon.

Vernon Don't say my name, please.

Gary He knows it's you.

Todd Tell him I can hear him from here.

Gary Todd can hear you from here.

Vernon We heard about the fires. I wanted to see how you guys were.

Gary I'm fine.

Todd Give me the phone.

GARY does so.

Vernon? I think I'll hang up now, Vernon. Bye.

Starts to leave.

Vernon *Fuckhead hung up on me.*

Gary Where you going?

Todd It's meeting time.

Gary Okay. See you later. You going to Jones' lecture?

Todd Fuck that. The fucking place will burn down while that sonofabitch is talking.

Exits as the GONG sounds.

*

15.

At the meeting. DR. NIN presides.

Angela So what's up with the fires?

Todd Armageddon, the beginning of the end.

Angela It's not funny, Todd.

Todd I'm not laughing.

Dr. Nin We're right on the ocean, so that's a help.

Todd I'm not laughing because it's such a perfect symbol for what's happening on the earth—flood and famine, extinction, earthquake, and now wildfires, right here in Southern California.

Pause.

Can anyone hear me?

John I hear you. I think we all hear you.

Todd Is it John or Shirley?

John It's John, as you know. Thank you.

Angela We hear you, Todd.

Charles I hear you.

Dr. Nin I was just thinking of the end of Casablanca, remember, when Bogart is saying to Ingrid Bergman, our personal problems don't amount to hill of beans, or something to that effect?

Todd Yes, that's right.

Dr. Nin So I think you're making a really valid point, Todd, and I think there really is a connection, in my mind anyway, between the whole question of consumption, and global warming and CO₂ in the atmosphere, and nuclear waste, and the whole question of the pollution of the environment—

Angela Of course there is a connection.

Dr. Nin —I'm saying maybe that's the personal connection to our own sobriety. If we can bring the personal discipline it requires to stay sober and drug-free, to not consume these substances, that in doing so we're also making a contribution to the idea of conserving the resources of the planet.

Angela I like that.

Charles That sounds right.

Todd Yeah, but we can't do that, can we? I think Angela wants to say something.

Angela There's this guy around here, he looks at me like he's in love, the old degenerate, like he can't wait to get into my pants.

Todd He's a Mexican, right?

Angela Get off it, Todd. I'm not going to say. He hangs around

in the kitchen. I don't know what he does in there, actually. I'm not sure why I brought it up.

Todd Inappropriate death-lust in the coffee room, Doc.

Dr. Nin What did you say?

Todd Never mind, Doc.

John And then there's you, Todd. Todd the producer. Who makes constant cellphone calls and cynical remarks.

Todd That would be me.

Dr. Nin Say how you're feeling yourself, John. Don't talk about other people.

John Oh, I'm supposed to say how I'm feeling now?

Todd How are you feeling now, Shirley?

Angela Todd.

Todd Sorry.

John I'm glad I cleaned up. I don't know what I was doing really.

Angela What were you doing?

John I was helping guys with girls actually, you know, helping them get dates, helping them to learn how to talk to a girl. I think I was performing a service, actually.

Angela What would you do, actually?

John You know, like I would go to a club with the guy, and I'd be helping him pick out a girl, and maybe I'd talk to the girl, and then I'd coach the guy and I'd tell him what to say and how to be, you know, with the girl. It's really a service.

Todd And he pays you for this?

Angela Something smells about that.

Todd Your conscience didn't bother you?

John Maybe it bothered me. That's why I'm here. I'm living in a house, in the hills, there's three or four of us in the

business, and there's always shit around, and booze, guys call us, and that's what we do.

Angela What?

John We coach them. We get loaded with them. We help them with dates, like I said.

Angela It sounds awful, if you ask me.

John This is how I make a living. I hang in clubs, I hang in bars, I have a drink in my hand and something in my pocket, maybe an ecstasy or a joint or a tube of coke. And so I go through my life, it's like a noir movie, a night life, and I don't feel bad about it at all. Except my eyes teared up, like they're doing now.

Todd He's an actor.

John What?

Todd I said, "You're an actor, John."

John Well, maybe I am.

Angela You're a piece of shit.

Dr. Nin Angela—!

John I am a piece of shit, okay? I started apologizing and cringing and crawling and saying I was going to straighten out my life and save myself from perdition. So why did I say that shit? Why did I say any of it?

Todd Sounds like a performance to me, John.

Angela Maybe you meant it.

John Words, and then you're in your car, you're driving here and there, looking for a parking place, for a meeting, or a church, or someplace where you can confess.

Angela And that's how you found us, because you had the money, am I right?

John That's right.

Dr. Nin Good for you, John.

Todd What the fuck does that mean? "Good for you, John."

Angela Yeah, what the fuck does that mean?

Todd Thank you, Angela.

Dr. Nin It means good for you, John, you did the right thing.

Todd Oh.

John Thanks.

Dr. Nin Charles?

Charles What?

Dr. Nin You haven't spoken.

Charles We have time?

Todd Depends on how you look at it. Fire is in the next canyon over, folks.

Charles I realized I could be free of fear.

Todd When was this, Charles?

Charles What?

Todd Never mind.

Pause.

Todd *(Standing)* Excuse me, Charles.

Dr. Nin Where are you going, Todd?

Todd I'm going to get a look at that fire.

Dr. Nin Wait a minute, Todd.

Vernon *Todd considers, sits back down.*

Dr. Nin Anyone else wish to speak? No?

Todd exits.

Charles I'm embarrassed, now.

Dr. Nin It's all right, Charles.
Charles Excuse me, I think I'll go.

Exits.

John Me, too. I think I'll go, too.

Exits.

Dr. Nin That leaves us.

Angela He's the devil.

Dr. Nin Who is?

Angela Him. John.

Dr. Nin I thought you were going to say Todd.

Angela No, John. But I'm worried about Todd. We were down at the beach a few days ago, me and Todd and one of the interns, and Todd keeps stopping to look at the ocean and then he strips off his clothes and jumps into the ocean and starts swimming, you know?

NIN's phone rings.

Dr. Nin Hello? Okay. Thanks. *(To ANGELA)* That was the devil, on the PCH. We won't see him no more. Thank you, Angela.

*

16.

Laura *The lounge area. An orange glow across the sky.*

Vernon *Then the wind rises and changes direction and the fire heads for the beach, going right by the massage center and the pool, down to the PCH, where it hesitates as though afraid to cross the road.*

Laura *All the sprinklers are going and the gardeners are busy with their hoses.*

Vernon *Our boy Gary comes rushing out of the pool house.*

Gary Hey, Antonio!

Antonio We got the right one this time, boss! This is right! We got it right! The film producer himself! Mr. Todd!

Gary *(Not hearing)* Amazing! Fire passed on right by us!

Antonio ¡Sí! What luck!

Gary The fire came close—up to the windows!

Antonio Okay?

Gary I'm fine. You hear that?

Antonio What? *El Fuego!*

Gary No, I thought I heard a voice!

Antonio *El Fuego!*

Todd It's just absurd the whole thing, the whole thing lacks dignity, the biological imperative, so we make up for it with the money and power, money and power and status, and entertainment, can't forget that, as the future will record, if there is a future, and if there isn't, so what? Who cares? There is the endless of endlessness or nothing at all recurring all the time or out of time, I don't know, do you?

Yes, it's a question of survival, after all, as the fucking English discovered by having an empire and public education—survival of the fittest, and there is no actual record but the abstract genome after all.

And so on. No more stupid mistakes.

Antonio Nothing I am. Fire coming through like the wrath of God. Oxygen. Fire coming through IS the wrath of God.

Todd Now here I go out I go here I go now I go out here good-bye.

Antonio (And he walks into the fire. He walks directly into the fire, my friends, and he's gone.)

Vernon *A pause, then Charles encounters Antonio on his way down to the PCH.*

Antonio Hey, the fires, gringo!

Charles It's safe, now, on the PCH.

Antonio Not for long. Amigo. Not enough water. Bugs running around looking for wet. Crusts drying off their backs. You know how it is, birds eat 'em off the ground.

Charles I'm going home.

Antonio *Mira, compadre, qué pasó con sus manos?*

Charles *My hands?* Nothing. I burned them by accident.

Antonio *Pobrecito!*

Charles *Bye, Antonio.*

Antonio *Sí, andale pues, but I'll tell you one advice. You want to hear it?*

Charles Okay, tell me.

Antonio Don't let her hold your hands.

Charles I'm going.

Antonio *Adiós!*

*

17.

Laura *Charles enters his home and looks up at the bedroom.*

Charles Monica? Monica! Are you there?

Monica *(From above)* I'm here, Charles.

Charles Have you seen the sky?

Monica I'm not ready for you to come home yet, Charles!

Charles Did you know the rehab center almost burned down? Fire came right up to the buildings! So I came home, honey.

Monica That's nice, honey, but I don't want you here.

Charles Can I come in?

Monica No.

Charles There are fires everywhere—Malibu, the PCH, up in Agoura, all over.

Monica I know.

Charles I see you got a new carpet in the hall.

Monica That's right, Charles. So you'll feel comfortable. On your feet.

Charles Oh. Thanks. You see the light? It's a beautiful gold. Can you see the light? Golden? Do you have the curtains drawn?

Monica The curtains are drawn, Charles. I'm resting.

Laura *Golden light coming in. Orange sky, bright red carpet.*

Charles You can smell the smoke.

Monica I don't smell anything.

Charles Well. You're shut up in there, Monica.

Monica I told you, I'm resting.

Charles It feels like you're in some kind of tower, Monica.

Monica A tower? Where? Do you mean me?

Charles Yes.

Monica Are you drugged?

Charles No, Monica, I'm not drugged.

Monica Good for you.

Charles And everything out there is burning.

Monica You're imagining things, Charles, like everything out there is burning, which is obviously an exaggeration. Go to a hotel. Go to a cheap hotel.

Charles I can't do that, Monica, People are fleeing their homes.

Monica People are fleeing their homes?

Charles That's what I said.

Monica You dramatize too much. Find a place to be.

Charles I'm already here.

Monica I don't want you. You shouldn't be here.

Charles It's irrational to think that way.

Monica Are you calling me crazy because I lost my daughter because I have a husband who doesn't know how to be a husband or a father, because he's an anxiety neurotic who medicates himself? Is that it?

Charles That's not what I'm saying. We could give it another try.

Monica That's perfect, Charles.

Vernon *The door opens just a crack. Golden light streams out of the room.*

Charles Monica?

Laura *Monica comes out the door. She is dressed in a gold robe and wears a gold tiara.*

Monica Hello, Charles.

Charles What's that on your head?

Monica It's the tiara Laura wore at her junior prom, when she was sixteen. It's fake, of course.

Charles Monica?

Monica Charles?

Charles What?

Monica What's on your neck?

Charles It's a burn.

Monica Oh, you poor thing! Look at your hands! Did you burn your hands? Oh, my poor darling, let me see! Let me see your hands!

Laura and Vernon

*They look at his burnt hands.
 In the neighborhood, the dogs bark.
 The crickets and spiders and beetles are burning.
 The sky is red.*

*As the story goes,
 Agamemnon will now struggle in a hot embrace,
 an embrace
 Of fire and rage, grasped by the mournful Clytemnestra,
 She of the golden light of righteousness.*

The End