

FADE IN:

CLOSE SHOT - SYLVIA

Mid to late thirties. Something both shifty and a little lost in her eyes. She's in the middle of a reading.

SYLVIA

The gypsies have a word for it.
Amràn. Loosely, it means the curse
that won't let go. You buried the
chicken bones with the money?

INT. SYLVIA'S SEANCE PARLOUR - DAY

Purple chintz - dim lights. She wears a loose-fitting eastern blouse with wide sleeves. She's talking to a young man. Latin looking. Spanish? Italian? TERRY. An old scar from something jagged in the shape of an M on one cheek. He takes ten dirty hundred dollar bills from his pocket.

TERRY

One thousand dollars.

SYLVIA

(hands up)
I don't want to touch it. I've
just cleansed the bowl. You can
put it there.

Terry puts the money in the bowl.

SYLVIA

Did you bring the egg?

Terry takes an egg from his shirt pocket.

Sylvia takes it, studies it for a moment. Then dramatically, she cracks it open on top of the money. Blood pours from the egg. Blood and a hank of dark hair where the yoke should be.

SYLVIA

It's as bad as I thought. We don't
really have a choice.

She has a little can of lighter fluid on the table. She squirts it over the bowl, lights a match, sets it on fire.

SYLVIA

Archangel Michael, hear us and help
us.

She passes her hands over the flames. Looks at Terry.

SYLVIA

It's a very strong curse. I can feel the evil energy.

TERRY

Can you feel this?

He picks up the flaming bowl and smashes her in the head with it. Brutal. It knocks her to the ground.

The flames set one of her curtains on fire. The side of her head is bleeding. Her hair's caught fire.

Terry pulls the tablecloth from the table. Everything on it is thrown to the ground. He puts the flames in her hair out with the tablecloth. In the same move, he pins her hands back, lying on top of her on the floor. He reaches up her sleeve as he does this. He removes an egg.

TERRY

How do you like your eggs?

He one-hand cracks this egg - the egg he handed her - onto her face. Regular white and yolk run down into her eyes.

TERRY

"Amràn." *Where'd you get that?*
Google Translate?

(a beat)

You don't work *bujo* ever. *Bujo* is ours.

And he reaches behind her back and pulls his thousand dollars from wherever she palmed it. He gets up, pushing off her.

She just lies there, her hair smouldering, her face a mess. *A woman's voice (AMANDA) comes up (OVER) from the next scene.*

AMANDA (O.S.)

Lately, I've been spending more and more time with my dog.

EXT. A STRIP MALL - DAY

San Fernando Valley. A view through curtains. Donut shop, nail parlor, dispensary. Palm tree swaying in a breeze. Mailman on his rounds. *Amanda continues on the TRACK.*

AMANDA (V.O.)

I just feel like, at peace with him, you know?

INT. CHARLIE'S SESSION ROOM - DAY

AMANDA (LATE 20s) lies on a couch, talking. Looks like a therapy session.

AMANDA

Tommy, he thinks me working at Dunk'n Dogs isn't a career. And I'm like, yeah, but spotting a bunch of Sherman Oaks pricks at the gym is? I mean I know shampooing dogs for a living is kind of empty, and I know adopting a pit bull was probably me putting up some sort of wall to a relationship, but fuck, those guys bring her in for a wash and then never come back to get her. I mean, how would you feel, all clean and abandoned?

She's talking to

CHARLIE HAVERFORD. Somewhere in his forties. He seems a little tired, but he tries to look as if he's listening.

CHARLIE

The question, I think, is how do you feel.

AMANDA

Me? Like I want to spend more time with my dog and less with Tommy.

CHARLIE

Everyone has stops they make along the way. Tommy is one of yours.

AMANDA

(sitting up)

That is spot on. You're amazing.

PULL BACK to Charlie sitting at a table on which tarot cards are laid out in a reading pattern. Not a therapist's office, but another psychic parlour, unlike Sylvia's - quiet, calm.

Charlie barely glances at the cards. He's phoning this in.

CHARLIE

It's all in the cards.

AMANDA

So I should dump him?

CHARLIE

You're spending more time with your dog anyway.

(indicates the Magician)

And this card - it suggests that he's cheating on you.

AMANDA

Prick.

But she's smiling. Charlie swoops the laid out-cards back into the deck - a magician's move. Skilled.

CHARLIE

That's what the cards tell us.

(a beat)

Same time next week?

She nods, reaches in her purse - counts out three twenties.

CHARLIE

Bring your dog if you like. I'm partial to pits. It's all about the owner, not the breed.

AMANDA

Something I've been meaning to ask. Is a psychic like a therapist? Like, for one thing, is what I tell you confidential?

CHARLIE

Of course.

AMANDA

How about the part, I mean with a therapist, there's not supposed to be any personal involvement, anything like that.

CHARLIE

I'm married.

AMANDA

Do you tell your wife's fortune, see into her future? Give her advice?

CHARLIE

That's what it means to be married, isn't it?

CLOSE ON LINDA HAVERFORD

A few years younger than Charlie. She was a dancer, and it shows. No wonder Charlie had such an easy time turning Amanda down. She's dressed as a sorceress, crystal ball rising in the air in front of her - deliberately cheesy.

LINDA

*Double, double, toil and trouble;
Fire burn, and cauldron bubble...
By the pricking of my thumbs,
Something wicked this way comes.*

She makes a gesture and the crystal ball, still rising, disintegrates into a million pieces of glitter. We ARE

EXT. SAN MARINO BACK YARD - DAY

Ladies who brunch. Mimosas and gossip. The backyard is big and perfectly landscaped and manicured, as are the ladies. Two huge California oaks frame the house and tell us how long it's been here. This is several worlds away from a San Fernando Valley strip mall. Linda's the entertainment. The ladies applaud and gush. Quite a show.

EXT. SAN MARINO BACK YARD - DAY

LATER. Linda puts a perfect slice of roast beef on her plate next to some asparagus. NADINE DAVIDSON - in her 50s, what they call a handsome woman, approaches. She has a reticent, slightly damaged way about her, as if she were seeking approval for everything she said.

NADINE

I always thought it was "hubble, bubble, toil and trouble."

LINDA

A lot of people do.

NADINE

I don't really like Shakespeare. I never understand what anyone's saying, and everyone around me laughs loudly so we'll all know that they DO understand...

(offers her hand)

Nadine Davidson.

LINDA

Linda Haverford.

NADINE

You're a magician?

LINDA
I'm a housewife.

NADINE
Really?

LINDA
This? Something to get me out of
the house, and a little extra money
coming in.
(a beat)
My husband used to be in the magic
business. He designed tricks.

NADINE
That's fascinating. I never really
thought about who made the... magic
work.
(a hesitant smile)
And what does he do now?

LINDA
He's a psychic.

NADINE
Oh...

Linda looks right at Nadine. Sees something in her
expression.

LINDA
You don't approve?

NADINE
I had a bad experience.

LINDA
(a beat - registering
that)
You have to be very careful. I'd
say ninety-five, ninety-six percent
are frauds, con artists, gypsies.
Tell you to bury your money in the
backyard or something. Three weeks
later, you're still cursed and
they're in the Bahamas.

Nadine looks all too familiar with just that experience.
Linda watches her.

LINDA
With Charlie, my husband, it's
really more like insights.
(MORE)

LINDA (CONT'D)

It's honestly a lot more like therapy than magic...

(gently)

May I ask, and you can tell me to piss off, about your bad experience?

She's picked up two mimosas as they've talked and now she hands one to Nadine. Linda has a lovely smile.

EXT. THE HAVERFORD HOUSE - DAY

Charlie lives above his shop. Two story 1950s tract, across from that strip mall. In the window a neon sign - "PSYCHIC READINGS - SPIRITUAL ADVICE."

A brand new BMW five series is parked out front.

EDUARDO (V.O.)

I took it to heart, what you said about a curse. My mother, like I've told you, she used to go to the curandero...

INT. CHARLIE'S SESSION ROOM - DAY

Charlie sits with EDUARDO BERNAL. Late forties, Los Angeles Mexican, second generation. East LA accent. The man looks rich. He also looks worried.

EDUARDO

How things were going with my business, with my kids. Maria, the little one, she's always sick, and Tyler - we got his diagnosis, you know, from the child psychologist, and it was that Aspergers. And I remember that's what you saw when you did the reading last week.

Charlie nods. Eduardo's eyes well up.

EDUARDO

He's just a little guy and they want us to put him in a special school and give him all these pills and go to therapy three times a week. What kind of life is that for a kid? And then they said, even with all of that, he might never really be able to, you know, relate to people in any real way.

Like a therapist, Charlie reaches for the box of Kleenex.

EXT. HAVERFORD HOUSE - DAY

A 2006 Camry pulls up next to the BMW. Linda gets out.

INT. CHARLIE'S SESSION ROOM - DAY

Eduardo is finishing up.

EDUARDO

Anyway, and I'm sorry to lay it all out for you like this, but I trust you and so you've got to tell me. How much more would you charge me to fix my kid? Even, you know, you could move his curse onto me. I don't care. I love the little guy.

CHARLIE

A curse moved to another person. That's very extreme. I think we'll be able to help your family without going that far.

(very gently)

Could you bring me something of your son's? A T-shirt, something like that.

EDUARDO

Sure. Of course.

CHARLIE

Tomorrow if you can. I'd like to get started before this gets any worse.

EDUARDO

Yeah, great.

He reaches for his wallet. Charlie stops him.

CHARLIE

Not until I'm sure I can help.

EXT. HAVERFORD HOUSE - DAY

Linda's gotten a couple of shopping bags from her car, stopping to admire the BMW. WE FOLLOW HER INSIDE.

INT. HAVERFORD HOUSE - DAY

Linda comes in. Off the entrance, a door opens into the living room converted into Charlie's spiritual parlour. The kitchen, dining room are down the hall. Bedrooms upstairs.

Charlie's coming out of the parlour with Eduardo. He kisses Linda on the cheek, takes one of the bags.

LINDA

Mr. Bernal, Eduardo, how are you?

EDUARDO

I'm good.
 (a look at Charlie)
 Very good.

LINDA

How's your little boy? I know you were concerned with him.

CHARLIE

We think it's going to be fine.

LINDA

That's wonderful.
 (a beat)
 Did you get a new car?

EDUARDO

(proud)
 Picked it up yesterday. Fully loaded. I got everything but the cold weather package.

LINDA

It's beautiful.
 (to Charlie)
 When our ship comes in.

Said like someone who doesn't think that day will ever come.

EDUARDO

You decide it's time, talk to me first. I've got a dealer who owes me.

(a beat)

Charlie. Thank you. I'll see you tomorrow.

He smiles and then he leaves.

LINDA

He seemed happy.

CHARLIE

You ever notice, rich people like that, they're wearing a golf shirt and jeans, you can still tell they're rich.

LINDA
It's a question of confidence.

CHARLIE
You think?

LINDA
I know.
(a beat)
You have Amanda Tims before him?

Charlie nods.

LINDA
She try to get you to hit her with
the high, hard one?

CHARLIE
As a matter of fact.

LINDA
Sooner or later, you're gonna have
to go for it.

CHARLIE
I just did.

LINDA
Sorry I missed it.

CHARLIE
How was the party?

LINDA
I think I met one of Fonzo's
failures. Old San Marino money,
bad experience with a San Gabriel
reader.
(beat)
We're having drinks next Thursday.

CHARLIE
The family has some parlors out
there. I'll let Fonzo know. Maybe
she's a fence worth mending.

LINDA
Maybe.

CHARLIE
That and Eduardo, could be a good
month.

Linda is clearly not happy with this. It shows in her tone.

LINDA
Yeah... a great month.

They've moved into the kitchen as they talk.

INT. THE KITCHEN - DAY

Linda puts stuff away, carrying her frustration. Charlie helps.

LINDA
You do the pick-ups?

CHARLIE
On my way now.

LINDA
Watch out for Ted. I think he's shorting us on his readings.

CHARLIE
Again?

LINDA
Once a thief...

Charlie opens a bag of cookies, snacks. Linda grabs them from his hand.

LINDA
Those are for Nick's lunch.

CHARLIE
He's a kid. He needs a healthy lunch.

LINDA
He's a kid. He gets to eat whatever he wants.

CHARLIE
(unloading a bag)
No bell pepper?

Linda doesn't answer. He looks over. She's just staring at the cabinets.

CHARLIE
Linda?

LINDA
(pulling herself back)
You didn't say anything about bell peppers.

CHARLIE

And celery. It's not gumbo without them.

LINDA

So we'll get a pizza.

CHARLIE

I'll stop at the market when I finish my rounds.

There's some "couple subtext" here. She's annoyed, he's trying to make it right. And it's not about the peppers for the gumbo.

LINDA

Marie wants you to take a look at her table while you're there. And your sister hasn't answered her phone all morning.

CHARLIE

I'll keep her til last then. She's probably sleeping one off.

EXT. SHERMAN WAY - DAY

Three poker chips on a chain hang from a rear view mirror. Twenty dollar chips. Old, from the Sands. Charlie keeps these here, a totem. Someday, he'll tell us why.

Charlie drives. Pontiac Grand Prix, Eighteen, twenty years old. Hasn't been washed in a while. He's got the window down, kind of digging the day. He's listening to music. Like most of us, the music of his youth. World Party, something like that. Sees something in his rearview. A Chevy child/molester van. Dents, tinted windows.

He changes lanes. So does the van.

Charlie registers that.

EXT. VAN OWEN PSYCHIC - DAY

Charlie comes out of a house with a "psychic readings" sign in the window. A young VAL SURF looking guy (TED) stands in the doorway, watching him go. Music continues.

EXT. VAN NUYS BLVD - STOREFRONT - DAY

A neon sign outside this low rent storefront reads, 'DYNAMIC PSYCHIC.' The Y and the A are not lit up. Charlie's car is parked out front. He comes out, putting bills in his wallet.

EXT. COLDWATER AND VENTURA - DAY

Some small houses as you start up from Ventura. Among them, one with a "card readings" sign outside and a neon, "psychic" sign in the window. Charlie pulls into the driveway.

INT. THE COLDWATER HOUSE - DAY

MARIE, an old hippie, late sixties, flowing grey hair, stands in a housecoat holding a cup of coffee and a cigarette.

MARIE

Started farting out yesterday. I was doing a reading - it lifts two feet in the air, dumps the cards all over these kids in here on a date. Guy's hoping I'd tell the girl the Queen of Blow Him was her card, now he's pissing himself cause he thinks this shit might be real. You know?

Charlie's got a card table upside down and he's on his knees with a tool kit out, looking at a motor, a switch, some gears. Something he's done a thousand times before.

CHARLIE

When was the last time you changed the battery?

MARIE

There's a battery?

CHARLIE

(shaking his head)
Marie...

Marie reaches into her housecoat, hands him a wad of bills with a smile.

MARIE

Marie this, you piece of shit.

He takes the money. Maybe a thousand dollars for the week.

MARIE

Three cancer cures, two talks with dead pets, and nine Unfaithfuls. Nine in one week. Where's the trust?

CHARLIE

Where indeed.

MARIE
 (studying him)
 Charlie, listen to me. You're
 rutting here.

CHARLIE
 Rutting?

MARIE
 In a rut. And what you need is to
 find your bliss.

He throws a look. "My bliss?"

MARIE
 Joseph Campbell? The Masks of
 God?

He shakes his head.

MARIE
 I've got some lectures - they're on
 cassette. Your car have a tape
 deck?
 (doesn't wait for the
 answer)
 ... anyway, the point is that there
 has to be passion.

CHARLIE
 Passion. Really.

MARIE
 Not something that's been a big
 part of your life in a while,
 anyone could see that.

CHARLIE
 Just keep doing what comes next,
 Marie. That's my motto. One foot
 in front of the other.

MARIE
 That's no motto. That's an
 expression of defeat.
 (thinking about it)
 What I think, it's 'cause you come
 from the world of tricks - floating
 tables. You probably know how to
 saw a lady in half.

CHARLIE
 I do. It's still a great trick.

MARIE

I've been doing this since 1972. The Venice boardwalk. I don't see what I do as a trick. If the table moves and that makes someone feel better, that's all right. The question is not whether a crystal ball or a deck of cards can really predict your future, the question is, "Did you learn something from the answer."

CHARLIE

Deep, Marie.

MARIE

(a smile)

Getting back to my customers and the table, the guy who thought he was gonna get blown on a fake, now he's pissing himself, and you can see it on his date's face, that guy, thanks to your table and his own severe lack of balls, is not getting shit.

CHARLIE

(a beat)

Let me show you, for future reference, how to change your batteries.

EXT. MARIE'S - DAY

Charlie's backing out the driveway. As he turns back onto Ventura, he glances in his mirror. Sees that battered van again, well back in traffic. What the hell?

He turns quickly down a side street, then another. He comes out on Magnolia.

He pulls into a used car lot, slides his car among the ones for sale, leans over as if to get something from the glove compartment.

He looks up so that he can see his rear-view. He sees the van drive by. Smiles to himself. Sits up.

EXT. SYLVIA'S SEANCE PARLOUR - DAY

This one's another house - on Victory - looks like it's been there since the neighborhood was residential. Charlie pulls up out front. Parks. Gets out. We walk with him.

He approaches the door. It's ajar. That's not right. Cautious, he goes in.

INT. SYLVIA'S SEANCE PARLOUR - DAY

The overturned table. The charred curtains. He sees all that first, then he sees Sylvia. Right where Terry left her. Huddled and hurt on the floor. She looks up at him.

INT. SYLVIA'S BEDROOM - DAY

Charlie's put Sylvia in bed. He's cleaning a cut on the side of her head with rubbing alcohol while she pulls from a bottle of bourbon.

SYLVIA

He comes in - asks if his girlfriend's cheating. I say the usual shit. It looks like it. I can't be sure in one sitting. Bring me some of her hair. He flips out. Hits me with the bowl.

That's not what happened. We know that. We were there. What's she up to? Charlie takes a beat.

CHARLIE

What was your burning bowl doing on your table for a first reading?

SYLVIA

You know. It looks good. I like a little clutter. It confuses them.

He finishes cleaning the wound.

CHARLIE

I'll talk to Fonzo.

SYLVIA

Fonzo? What does he have to do with this?

CHARLIE

You're lucky you didn't lose an eye.

(a beat)

Six weeks, Sylvia. It took you six whole weeks to fuck this up. That's an all-time record.

As he wipes away a last bit of dried blood, *A MAN'S VOICE* (FONZO) COMES UP ON THE TRACK.

FONZO (V.O.)

They made four nails to use in the crucifixion: one for each of Jesus' hands, one for his feet. The fourth was made of gold, and it was for his heart.

EXT. FIFTIES MODERN ENCINO HILLS HOME - DAY

Charlie's car looks like a heap parked beside a Bentley, a Mercedes, two Harleys and a BMW motorcycle.

FONZO (V.O.)

That night, a Gypsy boy stole the golden nail, and they crucified Jesus with only three.

INT. ENCINO HOME (FONZO'S) - DAY

Charlie sitting with FONZO. Fonzo's forty. Comfortably fat, Macho. A Romani badass. A Gypsy king.

FONZO

When it was over, God came to the Gypsy boy and told him that his theft saved Jesus from the pain of a nail in the heart. To repay him, God gave the Gypsies the right to steal without moral consequences.

CHARLIE

I'm sorry. What else can I say. She's an asshole.

Fonzo's got a bottle of something murky. Slivotvitz, homemade. He pours them both double shots.

FONZO

It's about perception. A Gadjia working our scams, that sucks balls. She fucks them up, we get blamed. She pulls them off, we don't look like the only ones with the gold nail. Perception.

(a beat)

My business works better with the tricks you sell us, I let you make a little on the side. I don't want to fuck anybody up here. It's not like this was the fucking mafia or something. But perception.

CHARLIE

He hit her upside the head with a burning bowl. Set her hair on fire. That's kind of like fucking someone up.

FONZO

(a shrug)

It's not half as bad as the ass-kicking we gave you when you first set up shop. You remember that?

CHARLIE

I've got arthritis in every bone you broke. What do you think?

FONZO

You were so fucking naive. What did you say? "Gypsies. I didn't know there were really gypsies."

He slams his drink, pours another one. Charlie pushes his away slightly. Fonzo pushes it back to him.

FONZO

(fake accent)

If you don't drink with the gypsy, the gypsy get angry.

CHARLIE

Two double shots. Eleven in the morning. Go ahead and get angry.

FONZO

I got nothing else to do all day but take care of your little problem. Like I say, in the scheme of things, we need each other.

CHARLIE

That we do.

FONZO

She's gonna have to come to council. It won't be pretty.

CHARLIE

She's my sister.

FONZO

My sister, she's a fucking whore. We don't say her name in this house.

A beat - is he telling the truth, or just making a point?

CHARLIE

Like I said, I'm sorry.

FONZO

We're not gonna do any of the real
shit - scars of shame, any of that.

FONZO

Once we clear this up, let her go.

CHARLIE

She just started. She's been a good
earner, nice client list.

FONZO

And she's your sister.

(a beat)

We're the Rom, dude. We've got
traditions. It's a very deep
culture.

Charlie nods. There's a moment here.

FONZO

Don't let this shit happen again.
The second time won't be friendly.

(a beat)

What do you got for me?

CHARLIE

(a beat)

I'm gonna have something in a week
or two. Couple of things actually.
One I had Sylvia working, another
of mine. And Linda may have found
one out in San Marino.

FONZO

That's big money out there.

(a beat)

I'm pulling two of your parlors.
East Hollywood and Atwater.

CHARLIE

That's a fourth of my nut.

FONZO

I appreciate, like with your
sister, you come right to me,
there's no wiggling around and
shit, even when it comes to family.
But still, I gotta slap your wrist.

He reaches behind the couch. Charlie tenses for a moment. Fonzo comes back with a briefcase. Puts it on the table.

FONZO

Take a couple muldoons here. Ease the pain.

He opens the case. Inside are a dozen credit cards.

FONZO

Woman from Cleveland, out here to settle her father's estate. Melora's removing a "diabetes curse" from these.
(hands Charlie a Visa and a Mastercard)
Use them by day after tomorrow.

CHARLIE

What was the guy in the white van? Just in case I didn't come over?

FONZO

What white van?

CHARLIE

The one that's been following me all day.

FONZO

(shaking his head)
We don't drive vans, dickweed. We're Cadillac people.
(a nod to the cards)
Buy Linda something nice.

Charlie nods, downs the shot. He pockets the cards, and leaves. Fonzo sits until he hears the door close and then his face sets, hard. He pours himself another drink - downs it. He looks angry - brutal, dangerous as hell.

EXT. GREEN VISTA DRIVE - DAY

Charlie drives out of the hills talking to Linda hands-free.

CHARLIE

He said she'd have to do council... and we have to let her go.

LINDA

Jesus. You have to fire your own sister over a fucking egg trick.

CHARLIE

She fucked up. Like she always does.

LINDA

Still. It's bullshit.

CHARLIE

(a beat)

He took two of our parlors. East Hollywood and Atwater.

Linda doesn't answer.

CHARLIE

Linda...

Still no answer.

CHARLIE

East Hollywood's no loss. The Thais don't use us, the Armenians would kill us if we get anything wrong, and the junkies all know what their future is. Atwater's gonna hurt.

LINDA

That's a fucking year of middle school, those two parlors...

CHARLIE

We'll make do...

LINDA

... and let me guess, after he scolded you, he gave you a couple of Mastercards...

He's seen something. His face tightens. He slams on his brakes.

CHARLIE

I'll call you back.

In front of him, parked with the engine running - the white van. Like it was waiting for him to come down the hill.

Charlie gets out and starts for the van. This guy is going to feel the weight of his day.

On the side panel of the van are the words "Firm and Tight" and a drawing of a very toned arm in the "make a muscle" pose. Charlie takes that in for half a beat. The windows are tinted too dark to see in. Charlie POUNDS on the side.

No answer. Now he kicks the panel. Nothing.

CHARLIE

Asshole. Why are you following me?
What do you want?

A voice from behind. The VAN GUY was on the other side.

VAN GUY

I want to know why the fuck you
told Amanda I was cheating on her.

He's a very big guy. He hits Charlie in the gut and then a hook to the head as he falls. It sends Charlie back against the van. The guy hits him two more times.

VAN GUY

You interfering piece of shit.

The second punch knocks Charlie to the ground.

COME IN CLOSE as the van guy kicks him - really hard, in the side of the head - with a hard-toed boot. ON THAT IMPACT

CUT TO BLACK:

IN THE BLACK

A bit of the song "Fortune Teller" by Benny Spellman plays in a ring-tone loop. Stops. Starts again.

INT. LINDA'S BEDROOM - DAY

Linda sits in the dark, shades drawn. Staring at nothing. The same stare we saw when she was in the kitchen with Charlie earlier. Linda suffers from depression and she's in the middle of a spell. The ring is not going away. She answers the phone, flat.

LINDA

Yes.

Only a depressive can make "Yes" sound like a suicide note.

LINDA

I'll be right there.

She ends the call. Sits.

INT. EMERGENCY ROOM - DAY

Charlie sits on a table. His shirt is off; his ribs are wrapped. The side of his head has been shaved and bandaged. An ER DOC is re-checking for concussion.

ER DOC

I want you awake for the next fourteen hours. You feel nauseous, dizzy, start seeing double, you get someone to bring you back here.

The door opens. Linda comes in.

LINDA

Are you all right?
(to the ER doc)
How is he?

ER DOC

He has three cracked ribs and a hairline fracture along the parietal bone of his skull. There doesn't seem to be any bleeding. He has a mild concussion.

CHARLIE

(stepping in with a lie)
You told me - try your progressives at home for a few days first, get used to them.

LINDA

(to the ER doc - going with his lie)
No one likes to admit they're getting old, right?

CHARLIE

I got out of the car and the ground looked a mile away.

ER DOC

I thought you said you slipped on a grease spot.

CHARLIE

That I didn't see because I was wearing my progressives.
(pats his pockets)
Where are they anyway?
(smile for Linda)
Must have dropped them when I fell.

ER DOC

There's nothing much to do for the fracture but let it heal. But I'd like to admit him. Keep him overnight. There's a cliff effect with this kind of injury.

CHARLIE

Cliff effect?

ER DOC

You're coasting along, feeling fine - suddenly you go off a cliff.

LINDA

I'll take care of him, doctor. My husband's not going off any cliffs.

EXT. HOSPITAL - DAY

As Linda and Charlie come out. Linda is furious.

LINDA

That motherfucking Fonzo. Taking food out of our mouths wasn't enough...

CHARLIE

It wasn't him.

EXT/INT. 101 - LINDA'S CAR - DAY

Linda's car is one among many. She drives.

CHARLIE

You can't really blame the guy. Amanda comes home, throws him out cause some fortune teller said he was sleeping around.

LINDA

That's the Libra in you. The ability to see both sides of any situation. It's very annoying.

CHARLIE

I see your point.

She smiles at that. On her face - she's working her way towards something.

LINDA

We've got a rhythm, don't we? "Oh,
my progressives made me dizzy."
"No one likes to get old."

CHARLIE

Years of practice.

She takes a breath. Puts a hand on his leg.

LINDA

I'm gonna just say this now and
hope that blow to the head has made
you extra reasonable and loving.

(a beat)

My woman from the party? Do we
have to give her back to Fonzo?

CHARLIE

Linda, you know how it works.

LINDA

How it works is Fonzo throws us
scraps - if we're lucky. The
business we bring him.

CHARLIE

He treats us like family, Linda.
He was just a little upset...

LINDA

He's Rom, Charlie. We can never be
family.

(a beat)

This woman, Nadine, she could go a
half a million, a million. She's
on the verge. We could run the
Gypsy Save there, And Eduardo.
Are you kidding me?

CHARLIE

(a smile)

Remember we first met him, he said
he was in packaging?

LINDA

Don't duck the Goddamn issue here.

CHARLIE

What's the Goddamned issue?

LINDA

That you used to be somebody else.
Someone who wouldn't settle for
scraps.

CHARLIE

Not everybody wants as much as you
do.

LINDA

'cause they're bitches. Bitches or
assholes.

(a beat)

It's the 21st Century, honey. This
gypsy shit can only go so far.

CHARLIE

My sister worked one bloody egg
scam. One. Short, nothing to it.
The shit you're talking about -
Fonzo's got a hole in the Mojave
waiting for our two mangled,
tortured corpses.

LINDA

Maybe if that guy had kicked you
harder, it would have cleared away
the cobwebs.

Charlie doesn't answer.

LINDA

Seriously. How much more of their
shit are you going to eat?

She looks at Charlie and so do we. He's sure been dumped on
some today.

LINDA

COCKSUCKER!

Charlie looks at her. She's cursing the traffic which has
come to a standstill.

LINDA

Move!

CHARLIE

Linda. We live in Los Angeles.
Complaining about traffic is like
complaining about sunshine.

LINDA

It's fucking one o'clock in the afternoon. Don't any of these assholes have jobs?

They're not going anywhere. For Linda, that's a problem.

EXT. STRIP MALL - DAY

Linda pulls them in. The weed dispensary across the street has valet parking. Three cars lined up.

CHARLIE

We went into the wrong part of the self-help industry.

Linda doesn't answer.

There's a young woman waiting outside their door. GINA. She holds a little paper bag, top rolled up. She was a pretty girl, still is, but at thirty, she's getting a little tired.

LINDA

That must be the hypnotist.

CHARLIE

The hypnotist?

LINDA

(defeated)

Greg Walker at the Mirage recommended her. Says she's fantastic. I figured, in case we were going to have to get rid of Ted or something.

CHARLIE

I guess your sister would be the "or something..."

Linda doesn't answer. Charlie checks out the young woman waiting on their doorstep.

CHARLIE

A hypnotist...

Linda waves at Gina as she parks.

INT. CHARLIE'S SESSION ROOM - DAY

Charlie sits with Gina. She has a relaxed, bored way to her. She moves slowly. She wears bracelets, and as she talks, one hand lazily moves them around.

CHARLIE

Greg still as hard to work for?

GINA

Some people have problems with him.
We always got along.

Her voice too is soft and languid. Charlie finds himself looking at her bracelets. Glass beads, reflecting splintered bits of light.

CHARLIE

Carlo still making the lion disappear?

GINA

Greg said you built that trick.
I think it's amazing.

She reaches out gently, touches his forearm as if to show her enthusiasm for the trick. Charlie glances down at her hand.

CHARLIE

I sold that trick to Ford, you know. They use it at sales conventions. With a Mustang of course, not a lion.

GINA

I would think, talent like that, you'd still be out there.

CHARLIE

Wyrick builds his own. Copperfield and Blaine use Wilner. You're not working on that level, it's mostly cruise ship magicians and the occasional convention. Cruise guys don't see a lot of repeat. They just buy once. Conventions, these days they're more into some rock band from their glory days than another magician.

He seems distracted. He touches his bandaged head.

CHARLIE

Would you like something to drink?
Water or a soft drink or something?
I'm really thirsty.

GINA

You just think that you're thirsty,
because of your head.

CHARLIE
Maybe it's just my head.

GINA
You want to tell me what happened?

She reaches up to gently touch his bandage, letting her bracelets jangle in front of him.

CHARLIE
You want to get into this business,
there are some hazards. Angry
spouses, that sort of thing.

She leaves her arm up for a few more moments, the beads reflecting the light.

GINA
I want to get into this business.

CHARLIE
Vegas is getting old?

GINA
If I make one more fat
conventioner take off his shirt
and call a waiter "darling," I
might actually die of boredom.

CHARLIE
You should know, I've never really
thought much of hypnosis in this
line of work.

GINA
Your head doesn't ache now.

CHARLIE
No.

GINA
A client comes in for a reading,
the hypnotic state suggests a
certain trust, a certain opening
up, a certain surrender...

CHARLIE
I suppose...

GINA
And you're thinking, maybe this
once, you'll try a hypnotist.

CHARLIE
I'm thinking I might.

LINDA (O.S.)
Get the fuck out of here.

They look up to see Linda. She's reaching for Gina's purse.

LINDA
My husband's vulnerable right now.
You come in, take advantage of
that. That's unethical.

She looks at Charlie.

LINDA
Bring him out.

Gina hesitates.

LINDA
Now.

Gina puts a hand on Charlie's forearm.

GINA
It's all right, Charlie.

Charlie blinks. Looks at Gina.

CHARLIE
Would you like something to drink?
Water or a soft drink?

GINA
If I can do that to him, imagine
what I can do to your marks.

LINDA
They're not marks. They're our
valued clients.

She takes Gina's dispensary bag. Takes out two lollypops and
a prescription bottle of weed.

LINDA
And we don't hire pot heads.
They're unreliable.
(looking at it)
Lollypops?

She shakes her head and puts the drugs back in the paper bag.

LINDA

Looks like you're gonna be seeing a few more fat guys with their shirts off.

CHARLIE

(standing quickly)

Excuse me.

He gets up and goes into the bathroom.

LINDA

Tell Greg we send our best.

GINA

Can I have my pot back?

Linda looks at her for a long, appraising moment. An oddly sensual look. And then she says

LINDA

No.

Gina stares at her for a minute, as if she's thinking of trying something with her bracelets. Linda looks at them.

LINDA

Give it your best shot.

A last beat. Gina turns and leaves. When the door closes, Linda pops one of the pot lollypops into her mouth.

IN THE BATHROOM

Charlie is throwing up. There's a little blood in it. He flushes it quickly, then moves to the sink to wash his face.

Suddenly, the sound changes. The water running in the sink echoes in his ears with a crystal clarity.

Looking at his hands, he can see every detail of every drop, as if he had some sort of heightened vision. He rubs his hands together, hears his skin rubbing. Sees the light on the drops of water.

There is the sense around him of the world speeding past, corridors he's racing down. He splashes more water into his face. Looks up. It seems to be over. He hears Linda.

LINDA (O.S.)

Greg thinks he can pass off a second-rate act like that on us cause he's tired of banging her.

(MORE)

LINDA (O.S.) (CONT'D)
*Fuck that. Are you all right? You
 look like shit.*

Charlie rinses his face. Looks in the mirror. He's all alone, Linda is not here. He turns. No one. He wipes his face in a towel. When he's done, he looks up again.

Linda is in the doorway.

LINDA
 Greg thinks he can pass off a second-rate act like that on us cause he's tired of banging her. Fuck that. Are you all right? You look like shit.

Charlie stares at her. What is going on here? She just said that.

LINDA
 Fucking hypnosis. That's some sketchy shit.

CHARLIE
 (shaking it off)
 Yeah. Very sketch.

The doorbell RINGS. Linda looks at Charlie.

BY THE FRONT DOOR

Linda opens it. Finds two police detectives. LOU CHEN and GABRIELLA ESCOBAR. Gabriella comes on like a hard-case, but it's Lou that'll fuck you.

LINDA
 Hey, Lou. Who's your friend?

GABRIELLA
 (offers a card)
 I'm Detective Chen's new partner. Gabriella Escobar. Glad to meet you. I just moved to Fraud.

LINDA
 (to Lou)
 Do we need a lawyer on this visit?

LOU
 God, no. I just saw from a hospital report where Charlie got his head banged up. This is a social call.

Charlie has come over. He shakes hands with Lou, looks at Gabriella. Linda hands him her card.

LINDA

This is Detective Escobar. She'll be going through our trash now.

GABRIELLA

How's your head?

CHARLIE

It's fine, thank you.

GABRIELLA

Who was it, hit you? An angry customer?

CHARLIE

I slipped. None of my clients are angry.

GABRIELLA

None of them? You must be very good at your job.

Charlie nods, noncommittal.

GABRIELLA

So how come, one of your clients hits you over the head, you didn't see it coming?

CHARLIE

You know, I've never heard that joke before.

GABRIELLA

My experience, people angry enough to clock someone in the head like that, they don't stop at one try.

CHARLIE

I slipped. Now I'm gonna lie down and rest. Doctor's orders. Nice seeing you, Lou.

He turns, heads back for the kitchen.

GABRIELLA

You have my card, you want to go after his assailant.

Linda looks right at Gabriella.

LINDA
I don't think we're gonna get
along, you and me.

GABRIELLA
(a beat and a smile)
Life's funny. Maybe we'll wind up
besties.

LINDA
(ignores that - to Lou)
Good to see you, Lou.

She closes the door in their faces. Charlie has gone into
the kitchen. She goes in.

IN THE KITCHEN

Charlie's pouring himself a glass of water.

LINDA
What the fuck was that all about?

CHARLIE
They're concerned for my well-
being. It's touching.

LINDA
Very.

He's feeling weird. Takes another drink. Linda watches him.

CHARLIE
I'm gonna go get Nick.

LINDA
You sure you're all right?

CHARLIE
(a beat)
I'm fine. Really.

He smiles, trying for a game face.

LINDA
(looking towards the door
the cops left by)
Lou's Good Cop now, the new one's
Bad Cop?

CHARLIE
My experience with that situation -
watch out for the good cop.

EXT. VALLEY PRIVATE SCHOOL - DAY

Charlie in the car line.

A teacher waits with Charlie and Linda's son, NICK. Nick's fourteen, a hide behind your hair, deeply alternative fourteen.

He slides in next to his dad, pulling his phone earbuds out of his backpack to start texting and listening to music.

NICK

I think Elizabeth, you know, the science teacher, was having her period. She yelled at me twice and I'm like the only one who pays any attention to her boring bullshit.

(looking at his dad)

What'd you do to your head?

CHARLIE

A man hit me because I told his girlfriend he was cheating on her.

NICK

Was he?

CHARLIE

He hit me hard enough.

NICK

How'd you know? The cards tell you?

CHARLIE

(a wink)

Something like that.

Nick puts his buds back in, turns to look out the window. There's some sullen here, but specific to what his father just told him or normal teenage - we couldn't yet say.

INT. GELSONS - DAY

Charlie gets peppers. Nick's with him. Earbuds in and he's texting, removed. Charlie studies the pepper in his hand. There it is again. He can see every detail. The moisture, the small wrinkles on the flesh. Nothing has ever looked that green. He can hear the music from Nick's buds. He looks at his son.

The detail is astounding. Sound. Color. Have you ever "come on" to a psychedelic? Then he hears voices. A middle-aged couple.

MIDDLE AGED WOMAN (O.S.)
Catherine's a vegan now, you can't
use butter or chicken broth.

MIDDLE AGED MAN (O.S.)
I can if I don't tell her.

MIDDLE AGED WOMAN (O.S.)
That's disrespectful.

He looks at Nick. Did he hear this? Nick's got his buds in.
He puts the pepper down. As he does he sees

PILES OF PRODUCE - falling to the floor. He reaches to
retrieve the pepper.

Nothing has fallen at all. He turns.

A MIDDLE AGED COUPLE comes up the aisle with their cart. The
woman holds a pound of butter.

MIDDLE AGED WOMAN
Catherine's a vegan now, you can't
use butter or chicken broth.

MIDDLE AGED MAN
I can if I don't tell her.

MIDDLE AGED WOMAN
That's disrespectful.

Charlie looks at them, baffled.

NICK (O.S.)
Dad...?

Nick looks to be about three miles away, at the end of an
impossibly long corridor stretching crazily from the produce
aisles of the market.

NICK
Dad.

Charlie pitches to the floor. Looks as if he's having a
seizure.

His head is filled with voices. From World Party, talking
about putting that message in a box. From the people he
knows and people he hasn't met yet. "How you feeling there?
Like you got hit by a truck?" "The last thing we hear is
Linda - "Charlie, it was a blow to the head."

INT. CAT SCAN TUBE - DAY

Charlie lies on a CAT scan table. We're in there with him. The bright, sterile white.

INT. WAITING ROOM - DAY

Linda and Nick. He's got his buds in. Linda looks up as a twenty-two-year-old girl, VICKI, comes in. She's a hipster - tats, a piercing. She sits next to Nick, kisses him on the cheek. Looks at Linda.

LINDA

Your dad got hit in the head,
kicked actually, earlier today. He
seemed fine, but this afternoon, he
collapsed in the market.

NICK

He told some girl her boyfriend was
fooling around. The boyfriend
wasn't down with that.

VICKI

Is he all right?

LINDA

They're running tests now.

VICKI

(to Nick)
You all right?

NICK

I'm handling it.
(a beat)
How was Tronic?

VICKI

Kind of dope, actually. I'm gonna
be able to get you betas on Farwind
and Tactician Ultimate.

NICK

That'd be chill.

VICKI

(to Linda)
Should I let my mom know?

LINDA

If you want. You might want to
wait on him...

She nods towards the doctor who's coming towards them. He's holding an iPad on which he's got Charlie's CAT scan.

ER DOC

I have your husband's results.
(a beat)
There's nothing out of line here.

LINDA

Did you think there would be?

ER DOC

Other than the blow to your head,
did anything else mind-altering
happen to your husband today?

LINDA

Mind-altering?

ER DOC

Did he drop acid? Go into a
sensory deprivation tank?
(he thinks he's cute)
Yoga, pilates, hypnosis?

Linda registers that, even as Charlie is wheeled out into the waiting room.

ER DOC

A thing like that, it can be the
icing on the head trauma cake.
(to Charlie)
I'm sending you home, Mr.
Haverford, but I want you to take
it slow and easy. With head
trauma, there's no rule-book.

He hands Charlie a card. "Dr. Nora White - Neurology."

ER DOC

She's the best in the biz. If
there are any... lingering after-
effects, call her.

He walks off. Linda turns to Charlie.

LINDA

How are you feeling?

CHARLIE

Right as rain.
(to Nick)
Sorry if I scared you.

NICK

It's fine.

Charlie studies Nick for a beat, aware of the distance there. He turns to Vicki.

CHARLIE

Hey, hon... You didn't have to come...

She kisses him. And then someone else comes in.

FONZO (O.S.)

There he is.

Fonzo. He comes over, gives Linda a kiss, claps Nick on the shoulder.

FONZO

I hear you took a shot at the old man. Right in the head.

NICK

Me? No. I didn't...

FONZO

I'm fucking with you.

He turns to Vicki.

FONZO

God Almighty. Where else have you got ink?

(beat)

Things good, sweetheart?

Vicki nods. Now Fonzo turns to the patient.

FONZO

So what the hell?

CHARLIE

Angry boyfriend.

FONZO

Been there. Course, if it had been me, you wouldn't be sitting up. But you're OK?

CHARLIE

Yeah, guess a little concussion or something.

FONZO
How many fingers.

He flips him off. Smiles. Takes a beat.

FONZO
So you'll bring your sister over.
I'll get back to you with a time.
(right to Linda)
It's no big thing. Just have to go
through the motions.

CHARLIE
Perception.

FONZO
Exactly. Good to see the family.
Funny how a little trouble can
bring you all together.
(to Nick)
Next time, hit him harder.

And he leaves. Linda watches him go. Her face hard.
Charlie tries to break the tension, turning to Vicki.

CHARLIE
How's the new job?

VICKI
Gamers hack. If you're a game
company, you should guard against
that. They've got shit in their
system that makes Heartbleed look
like it was done by a kid who
learned programming in middle-
school. Are you really all right?

CHARLIE
No damage they can find. No brain
tumor either, apparently.

Vicki hands Charlie an iPad. Nick watches this all. He
thinks Vicki is cool as can be - but we get the idea he's
ambivalent about all of this.

VICKI
Complete data on seventeen clients.
There are four almost done and six
more I'm still waiting on.

CHARLIE
You did this at work? On your
first day?

VICKI

I was debugging the system. Files take forever to run. I had my laptop, a newly secure connection.

LINDA

(taking the iPad)

I'll get the files to Marie and the others.

CHARLIE

(to Nick)

You ask your sister nicely, she can probably get you the semester's math homework.

NICK

I do OK in math.

LINDA

An edge is an edge, baby.

Nick thinks about that. Charlie has been distracted by something.

ACROSS THE WAITING ROOM

A young boy in an AC/DC shirt waits with his worried mother. A DOCTOR stands close, checking his ears with his light. Something subtle here, a bit of color dialed in, a bit of SOUND from across the room - it's not much - but ply it against Charlie's focus, and, for some reason, it seems important.

Vicki and the others have noticed Charlie's distraction - they keep up chatter. Vicki nods to the iPad.

VICKI

Candy from a baby, dad. Six of them have already friended the fake Facebook I put up. Three are on Tumblr. A Google search, a stroll through their Gram, I've got enough to make them think you're John Edward.

NICK

Dad?

CHARLIE

(a beat - coming back)

Edward still owes me for that table I built him in 2002.

VICKI
 Seriously?

CHARLIE
 No.
 (a beat)
 See what I did there? Used humor
 to let you all know you don't need
 to worry about me. Soul attacks in
 the market to the contrary.

A "Sorry if I freaked you out" smile for Nick on that last.

CHARLIE
 Really, you guys. I'm fine.

LINDA
 Good, cause we've got to go talk to
 someone.
 (to Vicki)
 Can you give Nick a ride home?

Charlie looks at her, sensing something in her voice.

EXT. LANKERSHEIM BLVD. MOTEL - DAY

That pre NOHO no man's land out past Sherman Way. Linda and
 Charlie sit parked in her car. Linda's looking at her iPad.

LINDA
 Vicki's right. This is practically
 cheating. Maria's got that guy,
 coming back for cards and an aura
 reading, here's his linkedin page,
 his Facebook and pictures of his
 cats and his last thirty meals on
 Instagram.

CHARLIE
 Kind of takes the sport out of it.

LINDA
 The real sport is out there,
 Charlie, we just don't have the
 license.

CHARLIE
 Come on, Linda. We're doing all
 right.

LINDA
 If you call getting kicked in the
 head by an angry boyfriend all
 right, yeah, we're doing fine.

Charlie doesn't want to have this conversation again. Now he sees what they've been waiting for.

Gina, the hypnotist, pulls into the motel lot in her rented car.

CHARLIE

How hard do you want to lean?

Linda smiles and frankly, it's the first time we've seen enthusiasm, excitement on her face.

LINDA

I want to teach her a little something.

INT. MOTEL ROOM - DAY

Linda blows on the tip of a cigarette. It glows. She smiles a seductive smile.

LINDA

I really do need to know what you did to my husband.

ON THE BED

Charlie holds Gina, her hands pinned behind her back, his legs pinning hers, with his knee keeping them spread. Her hiked-up skirt revealing some thigh.

Linda looks at Charlie. He puts his hand over Gina's mouth and Linda imbeds the red-hot cigarette in her thigh. Gina's eyes go wide with the pain of it.

Linda is loving this.

LINDA

Oh, fuck yeah! That's nice.

She takes the cigarette away. She caresses Gina's cheek with the back of her hand, wiping away a tear.

LINDA

You know what? Don't tell me. I could stay here all afternoon.

Charlie takes his hand, gently, away from Gina's mouth.

CHARLIE

You put some sort of whammy on me, didn't you?

GINA

It was just a little suggestion.
For later.

CHARLIE

That I'd what? Collapse in a
supermarket?

GINA

What? No.

Linda blows on the cigarette tip again. Smiles.

LINDA

That's it. Don't tell.

GINA

I swear. It was just, you know,
open you up. Tonight, I was going
to call. A few key words and you
would decide to hire me.

(to Linda, pleading)

Then, when you got angry about it,
I could say what I said before, if
I could make Charlie hire me,
imagine what I could do with the
marks...

LINDA

What I already said, they're not
marks.

She blows on the end of the cigarette.

CHARLIE

That's it? You didn't, I don't
know, program me to go off like a
time bomb or something?

GINA

I don't have those kind of skills.

Linda blows on the cigarette again, getting the end to glow
red hot. She looks at Charlie.

LINDA

Hold her tight.

Her eyes are cloudy with desire. Charlie takes a beat, looks
at Gina's pained eyes.

CHARLIE

We're done. She's told us what we
need to know.

LINDA
I'm not done.

CHARLIE
Linda.

A tense beat between them. Then Linda smiles at Gina.

LINDA
Next time, I'll bring more toys.

And she flicks the lit cigarette into Gina's lap. WE HOLD ON Gina as the door shuts. There are tears of pain in her eyes, but there's also a strange glow.

INT. LINDA'S CAR - DAY

Linda in the screaming, screeching throws of an orgasm. She balls her fists and hits the roof of the car. Looks down at Charlie. Hits him just as hard.

LINDA
I can do whatever I want. Say it.

The way they're going at it, he'd say anything. So would you.

CHARLIE
You can do whatever you want.

She hits him again, riding him hard at the same time. They're consumed by it. Linda hits him once more and then collapses, spent, on top of him.

EXT. A DIRTY, DIM ALLEY - DAY

Linda's car parked all the way at the back.

LINDA (V.O.)
You shouldn't have let me hit you like that, you poor thing. It's too soon.

INT. LINDA'S CAR - DAY

They lie there, Charlie staring at the ceiling. Linda gently touches the side of his head.

LINDA
(finally)
You could have let me go just a little farther up her thigh.

CHARLIE

She told us what we wanted to know.

LINDA

Like that was the point.

(studying him)

You're starting to show a dangerous
"milk of human kindness" streak.

CHARLIE

It'll pass.

EXT. FONZO'S HOME - NIGHT

All of Fonzo's fancy cars and more.

INT. FONZO'S HOME - NIGHT

Charlie's sister, Sylvia, lit by a candle. WHACK! Spittle hits her in the face.

She walks up a gauntlet of Rom - men on one side, women on the other - holding a candle. One of the women spits on her, then the next. The men too. Soon she's covered with spit.

She reaches Terry, the guy who beat her up. He smiles coldly. Spits.

Linda and Charlie are to one side, watching the ceremony.

Sylvia keeps walking. More people spit on her.

AT THE FAR END OF THE GAUNTLET

RITA. At sixty, she's the matriarch of this clan. She's drop dead gorgeous. If there were ever the antithesis of the old gypsy woman from a Wolfman movie, that's Rita. She wears Armani - wears it well. She has the Buddha's eyes.

Sylvia, her face covered in spit, stops in front of Rita. Rita stands looking at her for a long beat. Cold, firm.

Then she hands her a handkerchief. EURO DISCO COMES UP (OVER) from the next scene.

INT. FONZO'S HOME - NIGHT

Ceremony over, it's a party. The KARAOKE is going strong. A bunch of young and intimidating looking young men all clustered around a guy who is now singing Laura Branigan's "Gloria." Euro disco at its finest.

Charlie and Linda are still by themselves - on Charlie's face, Linda's words from earlier - he will never be family.

They each have a paper bowl full of *paprikas*. You might notice that everyone else is eating from nice china. Plastic spoons for Charlie and Linda too.

LINDA

We've been going over there, what fifteen years, she can't even serve us on fucking plates?

She's watching Fonzo and Terry.

They're arguing in *Romani*. The intent seems clear. Fonzo's putting Terry in his place. Linda hears a "*Bagami-as pula in mortii matii*" (fuck your mother's dead relatives) from Terry and he storms off.

She takes this in. She seems to be storing away information she can use - Terry vs Fonzo - good to know. Fonzo comes over.

FONZO

Guy's my cousin, and he's a fucking asshole. What are you gonna do?
 (nodding to their bowls)
 Sorry about the bowls. Rita keeps "Gypsy Kosher."
 (seeing something)
 Hey, come here.

He's stopped DRINA. Fourteen - looks twenty-two. His older daughter. She's holding a beer. He takes it out of her hands.

FONZO

You let Nick drink?

LINDA

Hasn't come up yet. He's too young.

FONZO

Fourteen, same as Drina. Harvard fucking Westlake. All those Hollywood kids. Bad influence.
 (to Drina)
 Where's your sister?

DRINA

(sulky)
 I don't know. Maybe she's hitting the Scotch.

FONZO

Here, ask your grandmother if needs any help.

Rita comes over. She looks at Charlie and Linda.

RITA

You like the paprikas? Old Gypsy recipe. "First, steal a chicken..."

She smiles, playing with them. Then she looks at Charlie.

RITA

You feeling all right?

CHARLIE

I'm a little tired.

She seems to sense that there's something more.

RITA

A kick in the head will do that.
(a beat - looking at him)
I'm getting a vibe.

LINDA

You want to read his palm?

RITA

I'm no Shut Eye.

LINDA

"Shut Eye?"

RITA

Ask your husband.

Linda looks at Charlie. He explains.

CHARLIE

It's a magician, starts to believe his tricks are real.

Rita takes a beat.

RITA

How'd you like the shower of spit?
(a beat)
It's a time-honored gypsy tradition. Dates back to this morning when I made that up.

CHARLIE
You people scare me.

RITA
That's the general idea.

A pause. Linda pointedly puts down the paprikas.

RITA
You know your sister's not done yet.

Charlie stiffens a little.

CHARLIE
We're letting her go.

RITA
Not what I meant.

CHARLIE
Fonzo said you wouldn't...

RITA
Fonzo is a pussy.

She nods across the room to Terry and another young man.

They walk over to Sylvia who's sitting by herself on a couch. She looks up - and there's fear in her eyes.

She stands. The two men grab her. Hold her by her arms.

SYLVIA
Charlie - shit... Charlie...

Rita looks at Charlie - puts a hand up to stop him from doing anything. A beat. Linda and Charlie exchange a look. What will he do?

CHARLIE
(finally)
She knew the rules.

Rita nods, starts across the room. She stops by the catering table and grabs a beer bottle.

SYLVIA

squirms, seeing her coming. She calls again to Charlie. Linda watches him. A room full of Rom. What can Charlie do?

The KARAOKE blares - the guy BELTING "Gloria."

Rita breaks the bottle against the side of a table. Now she comes at Sylvia, deliberately, almost in time to the music.

Charlie stands, watching. Sylvia looks at him, pleading in her eyes. "Don't let this happen."

Charlie looks right at her. No readable expression.

Rita reaches Sylvia. The guys hold her. Rita brings the bottle up and loudly, for the room, says

RITA
We are the Marks family. The
Machvaya family. We don't want you
to forget who we are.

And she cuts Sylvia across the face - we watch the bottle tear its way up, down, up down - a brutal M that will leave a scar just like Terry's. Sylvia screams!

Charlie looks away. Linda does not.

EXT. MARIE'S - NIGHT

Charlie KNOCKS. It takes Marie, clearly asleep, a minute.

MARIE
Yeah, Charlie... Jesus.

She's just seen Linda and Sylvia, bloody towel to her face, standing behind Charlie.

INT. MARIE'S - NIGHT

Charlie stitches Sylvia's cheek. Linda and Marie watch.

MARIE
Gonna be a hell of a war wound.

Linda doesn't answer.

MARIE
Customers like a scar.

CHARLIE
Sylvia's out of the business.
She's not cut out for it.

He trims a stitch. Sylvia grimaces.

MARIE
I got some Vicodin.

SYLVIA
Yes, please.

CHARLIE
I'll be done before it kicks in.

SYLVIA
I'll wait.

CHARLIE
You'll scar worse.

SYLVIA
You know this from your years in
medical school?

CHARLIE
How many times did I stitch ma up?

SYLVIA
(to Marie)
I'll take four, you can spare them.
Those are some fucked up people
you're in bed with.

CHARLIE
Not if you don't steal from them.

Linda takes this in. Was Charlie saying that for her too?

EXT. MARIE'S BACK YARD - NIGHT

Charlie sits in a lawn chair, looking at the night. Man's got
the weight of the world on him. Sylvia comes out behind him.
Sits in the chair next to his.

SYLVIA
Where's Linda?

CHARLIE
She went home. Didn't want to
leave Nick.

SYLVIA
And you stayed here. Didn't want
to leave me?

She's holding a bottle of Scotch. She opens her palm. Pills.

SYLVIA
Want some? I told Marie I thought
I might need a few extra for later.

Charlie looks at her, shakes his head at Sylvia's constant hustle, and takes two.

SYLVIA

Chew them. You'll get off faster.

He does, takes the Scotch from her and takes a pull.

SYLVIA

I love cheap Scotch. Reminds me of the desert. The stuff we'd steal from Larry's suitcase.

CHARLIE

That wasn't Larry, that was Frank, the used car guy.

SYLVIA

Weren't they all "Frank, the used car guy."

Charlie laughs a bit at that. Has another pull from the bottle, hands it back to Sylvia.

SYLVIA

You did what you had to do back there. I get that.

Charlie doesn't feel good about it. He doesn't answer.

SYLVIA

And I'm sorry if I fucked things up for you.

CHARLIE

I told you, I mean I made it clear, what you could do and what was off limits.

SYLVIA

Oo... you made it clear.

CHARLIE

We've been doing this since you were twelve, hustling Johns outside the Four Queens for chips.

SYLVIA

It put money on the table.

CHARLIE

Money I had to spend to go your bail.

SYLVIA
You know what. Fuck your limits.

But they're both laughing, a little drunk now and coming on to the Vicodin. They sit in their glow for a bit.

CHARLIE
(finally)
I never liked it. You know that?

SYLVIA
Never liked what?

CHARLIE
Being the one with the limits.
Being the grown-up.

SYLVIA
(a beat)
Well shit, Charlie. Someone had to be.

She takes another pull, hands Charlie back the bottle.

EXT. - HAVERFORD HOUSE - DAY

Charlie and Linda's cars both there. Eduardo's black BMW. Down the street, that same mailman we saw in the opening works his way towards their place. Past him, at the intersection, a Caprice cruises, going slow. Hip Hop loud.

INT. CHARLIE'S OFFICE - DAY

Charlie sits staring out his window, watching the street. The mailman - the Caprice.

EDUARDO (O.S.)
This is his favorite shirt.

Charlie stands. Eduardo sits, facing Charlie. He's holding an AC/DC T-shirt. He looks both sad and hopeful.

EDUARDO
What'd you do to your head, you don't mind me asking?

CHARLIE
I slipped.

EDUARDO
Yeah. Into who?

Charlie smiles slightly. Glances back at the street.

EDUARDO

You have that checked out? Head trauma, you know, there's what they call the cliff effect...

He stands, comes over to Eduardo.

EDUARDO

So what do you do with this anyway?

CHARLIE

It gives me a sense of what we're dealing with. Sometimes that's enough.

He takes the shirt. The AC/DC shirt. Just like the kid at the hospital wore. It seems to register something with him.

CHARLIE

Your son an AC/DC fan?

EDUARDO

He used to be. Danced up a storm to "Highway to Hell" when he was little. Now, he's not so into music...

Charlie is in his thoughts. A million miles away. He closes his eyes. Linda has come in.

LINDA

Just wanted to see if there was any progress with your boy.

She puts a hand gently on Eduardo's forearm. They watch Charlie. A beat. Then Charlie opens his eyes.

Eduardo has crossed so that he's standing in front of the window. That hip hop from the cruising Caprice has grown louder and LOUDER.

Suddenly, Charlie dives for Eduardo, pushes him to the ground - lying on top of him. He looks up at Linda.

EDUARDO

What are you doing?

CHARLIE

Stay away from the window.

Something in his tone. Linda does as she's told. A long beat and nothing happens.

EDUARDO

Charlie? Can I get up, please?

Charlie puts up a finger. We wait. Wait. Nothing. Just the hip hop. A beat - then GUN SHOTS rip through the house!!! Shatter the window. Would have killed Eduardo.

Instantly, Eduardo pulls a Sauer from a shoulder holster. Rolls out from under Charlie and to the window. He suddenly looks professional, good at this.

Charlie comes over to Linda. She gives him a look of surprise, and fear. Eduardo FIRES out the window.

THE STREET

Three cars. BANGERS in each one. The mailman lies dead in the driveway. Must have tried to run and gotten caught in the crossfire. Guys in the back seat of the third car (the old Caprice) FIRE.

EDUARDO

shoots back. SIRENS now in the background. Eduardo FIRES again.

BANGERS' CAR

Eduardo's shot finds its mark. Blood spatter against a rear window. The SIRENS sound closer. The Bangers take off out there, FIRING as they go.

IN THE OFFICE

Eduardo watches them drive off, turns to Charlie and Linda. A long, Holy Fuck, beat.

EDUARDO

Are you all right?

LINDA

The man outside. The mailman...

EDUARDO

(gently)

I think he's dead.

She takes that in, Looks at Charlie. Linda has seen some shit in her day - but nothing like this. She's rattled. SIRENS now, The cops on their way.

Charlie takes a long moment. Looks at the shattered glass.

CHARLIE
(after a long, last beat)
You better go. We'll take care of
things here.

Eduardo nods. Charlie looks at the AC/DC shirt, still in his hands. Comes to a decision.

CHARLIE
Have his ears checked.

EDUARDO
What?

Linda looks at Charlie. What is he doing?

CHARLIE
Your son doesn't have Aspergers.
He's got something in his ear
that's causing him a lot of hearing
loss.

He seems surprised to be saying this even as he speaks.

EDUARDO
No shit?

CHARLIE
No shit.

In spite of her fear, Linda registers this - Charlie has just given away a gold mine.

LINDA
His hearing? That would be
wonderful. Your family will be in
our prayers.

Eduardo hesitates, then impulsively leans in, kisses Linda on the cheek.

EDUARDO
You got a good one here, Charlie.

CHARLIE
She's the captain.

Linda looks at her husband for just a moment. That struck her as an odd thing to say.

EDUARDO
I won't forget this. We're family
now.

And he leaves. Linda and Charlie stand in silence. The SIRENS are closer.

LINDA
What do we tell the police?

CHARLIE
I got this.

That tone from Charlie. Linda hasn't heard it in a while.

CHARLIE
(after a beat)
"Packaging money" my ass.

EXT. HAVERFORD HOUSE - DAY

A morgue wagon taking the body of the mailman. Lou and Gabriella talking to Linda while Charlie stares off down the street. He's far away. We're with him here, studying his distance even as Linda handles the immediate situation.

CHARLIE
He drives a white van. Says "Firm and Tight" on the side. Drawing of a muscle arm. His girlfriend is named Amanda Sykes. She'll know how to find him.

GABRIELLA
You'd shared this with us the first time we asked, that mail carrier wouldn't be dead.

CHARLIE
You're right. It's on me. We've had some bad experiences, over the years, with the police.

GABRIELLA
You're in a profession that preys on sad and innocent people. We're in a profession that defends the same. I'm not surprised.

LOU
So we pick this guy up, you'll testify?

CHARLIE
Of course.

The cops nod and with last looks, they leave. Charlie looks at Linda.

CHARLIE
You all right?

LINDA
Six months! We play this guy perfectly. Prime him so the kid's shrink is guaranteed to say Aspergers. Now you tell him it's an ear infection.

She looks at him.

LINDA
I don't get it. You save the guy's life, then you throw it all away. Jesus, Charlie, what if you're right?

CHARLIE
I am right.

And he turns to go back inside. She watches him go. There's something new to Charlie here. A swagger.

ON LINDA

Mid orgasm. As she climaxes, we PULL BACK

INT. MOTEL ROOM - DAY

Linda lies back. A moment later, her partner comes up from under the sheets to join her. It's Gina. Linda's VOICE comes UP ON THE TRACK (OVER from the next scene).

LINDA (V.O.)
The best year we ever had, one hundred and six thousand dollars. I go over to Fonzo's house, there are half a dozen cars that cost more than that sitting in his driveway.

INT. MOTEL ROOM - LATER - DAY

Linda and Gina lie there.

GINA
I feel your pain.

Linda strokes her thigh.

LINDA
He used to be another man, my Charlie. You should have seen him.

And she leans over and kisses Gina. They are still kissing when we leave.

INT. CHARLIE'S - KITCHEN - EVENING

Charlie and Nick eating Charlie's gumbo.

NICK

So the guy who shot up the house,
this was the angry boyfriend, the
same guy who hit you in the head?

CHARLIE

Seems like it.
(a reassuring smile)
See all the fun you miss, you're
wasting your time at school?

NICK

What do you mean, "Seems like it?"

Charlie takes a beat.

CHARLIE

Your mom and I, we work with
unhappy people. That's the nature
of any sort of self-help industry.

NICK

Specially one based on bullshit.

CHARLIE

Specially.
(a beat)
Sometimes unhappy people get mad.
And sometimes, part of their
discontent lies in the fact that
they have angry friends...
(a beat)
The good news is, you weren't home
and mom and I are all right...

Linda comes in.

CHARLIE

Gumbo's still hot.
(he looks at Nick)
Give your mom and me a minute, OK?

NICK

I got homework.

He leaves. Charlie still has that new attitude.

CHARLIE

It had to be his idea to leave the room. Did you see that?

She nods. Gets a bowl. Starts dishing herself gumbo. Charlie studies her. Picks his moment.

CHARLIE

We're going to take your old lady. We're not going to give her back to Fonzo.

Linda stops dishing. She did not see this coming. Charlie comes up, wraps his arms around her waist.

LINDA

Seriously?

He nods. She turns to look at him.

LINDA

What happened to you?

CHARLIE

I listened to reason.

He kisses her.

LINDA

There was this guy, Fonzo, he had His and Hers holes waiting for us in the desert.

Charlie takes a moment, savoring this.

CHARLIE

(finally)

Yeah, well it turns out, we know a gangster.

Linda takes that in, gets it. He nods. The two of them start to laugh. She puts her food down, wraps her arms around him, kisses him.

FADE OUT.

*