

An Imperfect Storm

A full-length play in one act

by John Scavone

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Characters (in order of appearance)

Cliff Hale, mid to late 40's

Dr. Reyes, late 30's to early 40's

Joan Hale, mid to late 40's

Setting: The living room of the Hales' home in a lower middle class neighborhood, and a room in a city hospital. The two blend together, being defined by furniture and differing floor treatments. A swinging door upstage serves as both the hospital room door and the door to the Hales' kitchen. The house's front door is upstage, away from the hospital room; it has a deadbolt lock, with a security system control panel mounted alongside. Near it stands a coat tree on which hang two raincoats, a baseball cap and an umbrella. A second exit from the living room suggests a hallway leading to other parts of the house. There should be some suggestion of windows downstage in both rooms, such as cutaways with partial frames and sashes; the hospital window sash is operable. Hospital room walls are real; living room walls should be only as needed, with the majority suggested at most. Furniture in the living room should include a couch and easy chair, a small desk, shelves, a flat-screen tv; the place should appear well lived in. The hospital room should have a bed, chair, night table and wardrobe, and may have other typical accouterments, such as an IV rack, bed table, etc.

Note: The ongoing storm is represented by sound and lighting effects, fading in and out.

Time: Night; the present.

An Imperfect Storm

At rise, sounds of rain, wind and thunder with flashes of lightning. Lights up on the hospital room, Cliff at the wardrobe, changing from a gown to his street clothes. Dr. Reyes enters with a file, folded newspaper, notebook and pen. Other than as indicated in stage directions, Reyes will stay in the hospital room.

REYES

Oh, excuse me, perhaps I have the wrong room.

(checks outside the door)

No, this is it, room four twenty-one. I'm looking for a Mr. Hale, Clifford Hale.

CLIFF

That's me, says so on my driver's license.

REYES

But you're getting dressed.

CLIFF

Course I am, I'd be arrested if I tried going home wearing just a stupid gown.

REYES

You're leaving the hospital?

CLIFF

No reason to stay. Wasn't no reason to bring me here in the first place. Ain't hurt, far as I can tell. Where the hell are my shoes?

REYES

On the shelf.

CLIFF

Thanks. Why they put 'em up there, I- excuse me, I gotta sit down to put 'em on.

REYES

Pardon me. Mr. Hale, I'm a little confused. Did someone tell

you you're being released?

CLIFF

No one has to tell me. I'm going and that's that.

REYES

I see. How will you get home?

CLIFF

My wife's coming to pick me up, she oughtta be here any minute.

REYES

That's interesting.

CLIFF

What's interesting about it? Wish I knew what's keeping her. There usually ain't much traffic this time of day.

REYES

It's evening, the staff will probably be serving dinner soon. She might have gotten caught in rush hour traffic.

CLIFF

We don't live that far. Whatever time it is, shouldn't take her too long to get here. Geez, I called— when was it?

REYES

Maybe she's downstairs filling out paperwork. The hospital can't just let you go, we have a process.

CLIFF

If they're worried about the bill getting paid, I still got my health insurance, it's supposed to be good for a year from when I got laid off.

REYES

We're not worried about the bill, Mr. Hale. It's just that there are forms to fill out, you know, procedures we have to go through, red tape.

CLIFF

Red tape, the whole world's got red tape wrapped around its neck.

REYES

Screws everything up, doesn't it?

CLIFF

Sure as hell does.

REYES

Well, since we do seem to have some time, would you mind if I talk to you a bit, ask you a few questions?

CLIFF

Who are you?

REYES

I'm sorry, I thought I'd introduced myself. My wife tells me my memory is getting bad, maybe I should start believing her. My name is Dr. Reyes, I'm on staff here.

CLIFF

Where's your white coat and stethoscope?

REYES

(laughs) I assure you, I really am a doctor. My diploma's on the wall in my office, I can go get it if you like.

CLIFF

Don't bother, I don't guess you'd be lying about it. Reyes, you said? That's like Spanish or something, right?

REYES

Exactly right, it is Spanish.

CLIFF

You a Mexican?

REYES

My grandparents came from Mexico. Is that important?

CLIFF

Just that you don't meet a lot of Mexican doctors.

REYES

Mostly landscapers and migrant farm workers, is that it?

CLIFF

You said it, I didn't.

REYES

Believe me, I'm all-American. I was born and raised in Chicago, attended medical school in St. Louis, and did my residency in Philadelphia. No witchcraft or crazy home

remedies, I promise.

CLIFF

Okay, I didn't mean nothing. Just like to know who I'm talking to, that's all. You ain't the regular doctor, the one usually comes around.

REYES

Who is that?

CLIFF

The guy that's been coming around, I don't know his goddamn name!

REYES

Please, there's no need to get excited.

CLIFF

Sorry, shouldn't have yelled. I'm antsy to get outta here.

REYES

I understand.

CLIFF

So where is the other guy?

REYES

I'm sure he'll be along. He's the one who actually has to check you out.

CLIFF

Then how come they sent you? I've never seen you before, have I?

REYES

No, actually you haven't. I rarely see the average patients here, I'm something of a specialist. The other doctors thought maybe I could offer some help in your case.

CLIFF

In my case? What the hell's so special about my case that needs someone's goddamn help?

REYES

Take it easy. All I want to do is talk to you, uh, to make sure everything is alright before you leave.

CLIFF

Everything's fine, I feel fine, just can't stand waiting.

REYES

That's completely normal.

Thunder, rain.

CLIFF

Holy cripes, this rain is something, ain't it? That must be what's keeping Joanie. What's it been now, three or four days straight? Been raining since before I came here.

REYES

Do you know how long you've been here?

CLIFF

What kinda question is that? Sure I know, I been here— like I said, two, three days, something like that.

REYES

Do you know why you're here?

CLIFF

I look like an idiot? It was— some kinda accident, happened on— shit, I can't think! What does it say on that chart there, hanging on the bed?

REYES

That's more a record of your treatment and progress here. I'd rather you tell me yourself if you can.

CLIFF

But I don't remember! Christ, I'm getting old fast. These last few months I feel like everything's been coming down on me.

REYES

Mr. Hale, just relax and tell me what you do remember, anything at all. There was an accident?

CLIFF

Something happened, something— it's gonna drive me nuts. Why can't I come up with it?

REYES

That occurs sometimes, nothing to worry about.

CLIFF

Was I hit in the head?

REYES

You said it was raining, start with that. Was it a hard rain, like now, or more of a sprinkle?

CLIFF

No, hard, real hard. Seemed like it'd been going on forever, too, kinda rain causes floods.

REYES

What time was it? Was it light outside?

CLIFF

Whole damn day was dark. Had been, I don't think the sun was out for— it was later, I think. What is it now? About like this. No, even later, I remember, we were done with supper, I was getting ready to go out.

*(crossing to the coat tree for his
raincoat, lights up on the living room)*

Joanie, I'm going! *(pause)* Joanie!

JOAN

(enters from the kitchen)

What do you want? I'm in the middle of washing the— what are you doing?

CLIFF

What's it look like? I got Neighborhood Watch duty.

JOAN

Tonight? In this weather?

CLIFF

Criminals won't care about a little rain.

JOAN

It's not a little. Cliff, you'll catch pneumonia.

CLIFF

I won't catch nothing.

JOAN

Yes, you will. That silly-looking hat doesn't even keep your fool head dry.

CLIFF

The bill keeps the rain off my face. Where the hell are my keys?

JOAN

Why tonight? Tuesday isn't one of your regular nights.

CLIFF

(to Reyes) Tuesday, I been here since Tuesday. *(to Joan)* Everyone else crapped out tonight. What am I supposed to do?

JOAN

Be like everyone else and say no when it's pouring rain out.

CLIFF

I'm the area captain. There's no one else I can say no to.

JOAN

Then skip it once. It's not like you're paid to be out there. If you put half as much time into finding another job—

CLIFF

I'm doing what the fuck I can about that, and you know it! Put in applications all over this lousy town and a shit load of other towns, besides! No one wants a guy my age no more.

JOAN

I'm sorry, I know you're trying. It's just that sometimes I feel like you're using Neighborhood Watch as an excuse to get away from me and the kids.

CLIFF

It ain't like that, honey bunch, honest. Where are my goddamn keys?

JOAN

Did you check your pockets?

CLIFF

They ain't in my—

(finds the keys in his pocket)

Jesus, I'm going nuts. You'll be putting me in a mental home one of these days.

JOAN

Cliff, please don't go out tonight.

CLIFF

I gotta go, it's important.

JOAN

Why?

CLIFF

It is, that's all. Where's the flashlight?

JOAN

Junk drawer in the desk. But how can it work in the rain?

CLIFF

I'll worry about that when it don't work. Shit—
*(takes a gun from another drawer, puts
it in a coat pocket)*
—can't forget this baby.

JOAN

Oh, my God, I thought we decided you were getting rid of that awful thing.

CLIFF

I didn't decide that.

JOAN

Do you really have to carry it around with you? You're not a policeman.

CLIFF

I'm unofficially official. That's the whole idea of Neighborhood Watch.

JOAN

The idea is to call the police if you see trouble, not get involved in it.

CLIFF

I'm gonna make damn good and sure I can defend myself if there's trouble. Some guy pulls a knife, I can't tell him, "Hold on, wait'll the cops show up before you stab me."

JOAN

No sane criminal will even be out on a night like this!

CLIFF

And we're back to that. At least stick to one subject if you wanna fight.

REYES

Which did you fight about, the gun or you going out?

CLIFF

We weren't fighting, not really. I mean, the gun, that's an old argument, she hated me getting it in the first place.

REYES

Why did you get it?

CLIFF

For protection, to protect my home and family.

JOAN

From what?

CLIFF

From the world, Joan, from the goddamn world.

JOAN

Oh, yes, this mean ugly world we've only managed to survive by pure luck all these years. That was your excuse for putting in an expensive security system we don't need.

CLIFF

We do need it! Chrissakes, don't you see what's going on, how bad things are getting? Maybe you just don't wanna believe it, I don't know. But the world is one hell of a tough place to live right now, and damned if I ain't gonna keep my piece of it safe.

JOAN

It's no worse a place than it ever was. I just don't understand why lately you seem to be growing more and more afraid of it.

CLIFF

I'm scared, alright, and you should be, too. Haven't you noticed the way the neighborhood's changing, the kinda people been moving in around here?

JOAN

Cliff, they're just people, like any other people.

CLIFF

They ain't like the people I know, the kind I grew up knowing. Most of 'em don't even speak English.

JOAN

You're exaggerating.

CLIFF

You don't believe me, take a walk downtown, see how many of the signs you can read. Take a gander in some of those places call themselves restaurants, they look like you could catch I don't know what, just walking inside. Cripes, the smells coming out of 'em are enough to make you sick.

JOAN

I think it's nice to have a little variety for a change. I wish we could afford to go out once in awhile like we used to, I'd like to try something different, maybe even something a little exotic.

CLIFF

You want exotic? Check out the gang graffiti all over the walls down there. Or hang out with the kids smoking dope in the park, trip over a wino sleeping it off at the bus stop-

JOAN

You make it sound like we live in the worst slum anywhere. What about the way they're cleaning up the river front, and the plans for that new townhouse development?

CLIFF

I'll believe that stuff when I see it. All you got there now is a lot of boarded up factories, where guys like me don't have their jobs no more.

JOAN

That's really what this is about, isn't it?

CLIFF

Nah, it ain't about nothing.

JOAN

Yes, it is, I can see it eating at you every day. You're worried, and you want someone to blame. But we've been through hard times before, and we've always come out alright. We will this time, too.

CLIFF

We were a hell of a lot younger before.

JOAN

Okay, so we're older and wiser now.

CLIFF
Older, anyway.

JOAN
Listen to me—

CLIFF
We didn't have two kids in high school before.

JOAN
We have your unemployment for another six months.

CLIFF
Half what my paycheck was.

JOAN
You're bound to find something else in that time.

CLIFF
Probably wind up flipping burgers for minimum wage.

JOAN
Meanwhile, we cut expenses as much as possible. And I'm going to keep looking for work, even if you get an offer tomorrow.

CLIFF
You really wanna start working again?

JOAN
Why not? I don't have to be home for the kids anymore, a job would keep me busy. Both of them have started looking for part-time jobs, too. With everyone pitching in, we'll be doing better than ever before you know it.

CLIFF
Maybe we can all flip burgers together. Eat there, too, save lots of dough on groceries.

JOAN
That's the way to think. Now we have a plan. Isn't that better than just being mad at everything?

CLIFF
I gotta go, you made me later than I already was.

JOAN
Honey, please don't leave that way, not tonight.

CLIFF

I need to walk around awhile, not think about this crap.

JOAN

Stay and talk with me, we can figure things out together. We used to be pretty good at that.

CLIFF

Later, okay? I won't be out too long. Come set the alarm after me. You remember how?

JOAN

You always do this to me, Clifford. Set the stupid thing yourself.

*She exits to the kitchen as
Cliff opens the front door.*

REYES

Do you find yourself arguing with her a lot? More often than usual, I mean. Does it seem like one of you is touched off by things that normally might not matter?

CLIFF

Yeah, maybe. Probably my fault mostly. Lately every little thing seems to irritate me. If you ask me, Joanie's been pretty damn patient these last few months.

REYES

Your wife sounds like a good woman.

CLIFF

The best. Who knows where I'd be without her? Wish I knew what the hell is keeping her, though. Maybe I oughtta call home again.

REYES

What good would that do, if she's on her way here?

CLIFF

Right, right, I'll call her cell. I got her number on my speed— wait, where'd I put my phone? I thought I— check that drawer, would you?

REYES

It's empty. Are you sure you had it with you when you were admitted?

CLIFF

Yeah, I always— maybe I didn't. Maybe it was charging when everything happened, and I never brought it?

REYES

That's the logical answer, your phone's still at home. In any case, you don't want your wife to be taking a call while she's driving, not with the rain the way it is.

CLIFF

Really something, ain't it? I don't think it'll ever let up.

REYES

It has to at some point.

CLIFF

That's what's keeping her. She's always slow driving in rain or snow, you know, extra careful. Me, I just plow right through.

REYES

You're not afraid of the weather.

CLIFF

I don't go crazy in it or nothing, but no. What's there to be scared of?

REYES

You tell me.

CLIFF

Cripes, I know I had that phone with me, I always keep it in this pocket. Could I have dropped it somewhere? In the ambulance?

REYES

Did you come here in an ambulance?

CLIFF

How else? I was hurt.

REYES

How so?

CLIFF

I was— something happened, I— I don't fucking know!

REYES

Calm down, Mr. Hale, I didn't mean to upset you.

CLIFF

This morning or whenever it— just now, I was getting dressed, and I remember the stuff from my pockets was all in that drawer. Here, I got it here, look. Wallet, twenty-six, no, twenty-seven cents in change, stick of gum 'cause on top of everything else, I'm supposed to quit smoking. Wish I could have one now. Where the hell is my goddamn phone?

REYES

I can check with the desk nurse, maybe they have it there for safe keeping. But it's really not important right now.

CLIFF

I bet they stole it. That's where it went, I bet anything.

REYES

Who stole it?

CLIFF

Them, that's who! The maid or the janitor or whatever you call 'em, one of the people you got working here.

REYES

You're very concerned about "them", aren't you?

CLIFF

Somebody steals from me—

REYES

Nobody stole your phone.

CLIFF

You don't know that.

REYES

I'll tell you what, Mr. Hale, I can order a full investigation of the staff, the nurses, doctors, everyone. If there's any evidence your property was stolen, not only will that person be prosecuted, I personally will buy you a brand new phone. Alright?

CLIFF

Look, I ain't accusing the whole damn hospital. It just makes sense that one of the— you know, there's a certain class in some of those jobs, not the professionals. You get

what I mean.

REYES

I think I do. You mean the class who perhaps aren't very educated, who don't speak English very well. At least, you never hear them speak it among themselves, do you?

CLIFF

Matter of fact, no, I don't.

REYES

I'm curious why you'd make the assumption that one of them is the thief, assuming there is one. Why is one group of people more likely to be suspect than another?

CLIFF

Anyone would think so. Like I said, it makes sense.

REYES

Because they're also the kind of people who are responsible for a lot of the world's ills, the crime in your own neighborhood, for example.

CLIFF

It's no coincidence the crime rate started going up when that kinda people started moving in.

REYES

Has it gone up?

CLIFF

I've seen it!

REYES

Were the same people responsible for you losing your job?

CLIFF

Someone was. I mean, no, maybe not those people exactly, but the way things keep changing, the way we're losing things, losing the way things used to be. Cripes, half the town used to work for that plant, then all of a sudden it's closing. Why? What the hell's everyone supposed to do?

REYES

New technology, living in a global economy, the world changes, Mr. Hale. We can't go back, no matter how much we might want to.

CLIFF

You sound like my wife.

REYES

That's partly what you argued about that night, the night you ended up here.

CLIFF

No, I wouldn't exactly say we had an argument.

REYES

A discussion, then. Would you say that subject is one of the big differences between you?

CLIFF

No, what the hell are you even talking about? Differences, sure we have differences, we're married, for crying out loud!

REYES

Try not to get angry. I just want to understand your relationship with your wife. If we know how you normally act together, it might be easier for you to remember what you were doing that night, and what happened later.

CLIFF

Why am I so damn mixed up? It was all just regular stuff, I swear. Another night, just another night.

REYES

The way you describe it, I gather you and she view the world differently.

CLIFF

I guess.

REYES

You see the world changing for the worse. It worries you.

CLIFF

Lots of things worry me. That's just life.

REYES

And it sounds like your wife is more of an optimist. She welcomes some of the changes in your neighborhood, for instance.

CLIFF

She just doesn't get what I'm trying to tell her sometimes.

REYES

She doesn't see the same need for protection you do, like bringing the gun along on your Neighborhood Watch.

CLIFF

Doesn't want me having a gun, period. That one's more of an argument than a discussion.

REYES

Is she afraid you'll hurt someone, possibly yourself? Is that why she didn't want you take it with you that night?

CLIFF

I was supposed to get rid of it. Crap, if she'd known I didn't, I'd never have gotten out of the house that night. She was pissed when she found it in my coat later.

REYES

Wait, now I'm confused. I thought you said she saw you take it out of the drawer.

CLIFF

No, it was— did I say that? She couldn't've, I took it out when she wasn't looking, I didn't want her to know I still had it. No, I remember now, I was just coming home from Watch duty.

He crosses to the front door, closes it, is about to disarm the security system and realizes it isn't armed.

Shit. Joanie, where are you? What good is having the thing for crap sake? Joanie!

JOAN

(enters from the hallway in a bathrobe and pajamas)

Cliff, is that you?

CLIFF

Lucky for you, yes. I told you a hundred times, set the code whenever I'm gone, and we always set it at night. A security system is for security, get it?

JOAN

Don't talk to me like I'm one of the kids. The door was locked.

CLIFF

That don't mean shit. If someone wants to break in here, they could smash a window. The system monitors the whole house.

JOAN

Who'd want to break in here? Any decent thief could tell by looking we have nothing valuable.

CLIFF

Except maybe our lives? Besides, there's people nowadays will break in and rob a place for kicks.

JOAN

Well, I doubt there are any criminals dumb enough to be out on a night like this. Take your raincoat off, you're dripping water all over my floor.

CLIFF

(going to the coat tree)

Okay, okay.

JOAN

Not there. Give it to me, I'll hang it in the bathroom.

(finding the gun in the coat pocket)

What on earth is— oh, my God, I thought we decided you were getting rid of this awful thing.

CLIFF

I didn't decide that.

JOAN

I don't want it in this house! What if one of the kids gets hold of it?

CLIFF

They know better than to touch it, or I'll cream 'em. Where are they, anyway?

JOAN

Asleep, which is where I'd like to be, instead of waiting for you to finish playing cops and robbers and come home.

(as she exits with the coat, leaving the gun on the desk)

Take that silly-looking hat off, it doesn't even keep your fool head dry.

CLIFF

The bill keeps the rain off my face.

He hangs up the hat, goes to the kitchen, returns with a can of beer. Joan reenters with a towel.

JOAN

Do you have to start drinking the second you get home?

CLIFF

Leave me alone. I had a long frustrating day not finding work and a long night walking around in the rain.

JOAN

There's always one reason or another. Dry your head. You'll be lucky if you don't catch pneumonia.

CLIFF

I won't catch nothing.

JOAN

Tomorrow without fail, you are taking that instrument of death to the police station and turning it in.

CLIFF

Are you nuts?

JOAN

I must be, thinking you'd actually keep your word to me.

CLIFF

I never said I'd get rid of the gun, I said I'd think about it.

JOAN

You'd better think again, and you'd damn well better— no, don't even worry about it. Knowing you, you'll just hide it someplace. I'll take it in myself.

CLIFF

What the hell are you doing?

JOAN

What I used to do with the kids when they were little.

CLIFF

Put it down!

JOAN

Look at me, I have a gun, I rule the world!

CLIFF

Gimme it now, you crazy-

JOAN

Stay away from me!

They struggle over the gun.

CLIFF

Let go!

JOAN

Cliff, you're hurting me!

He wrenches it away from her.

CLIFF

For Chrissakes, you might've killed both of us! You don't touch this gun, no one does but me. Understand?

JOAN

If you ever dare put your hands on me like that again, I'll be out of here so fast it'll make your head spin. Understand that, mister.

CLIFF

I'm sorry, swear to God. *(to Reyes)* I felt like shit. All the years we been married, I never once laid a finger on her, never once even wanted to, I love her. *(to Joan)* But damn it, you made me, grabbing the thing and waving it around like that. Cripes, it could've gone off.

JOAN

You mean it's dangerous? Someone might accidentally have been hurt?

CLIFF

Don't get smart, you know what I meant.