

4. INT. MP SURGERY. DAY.

Open on the interior of a local MP surgery. The day is drawing to a close and the room is nearly empty; a STAFFER can be seen bustling around, picking up papers, empty coffee cups and fold-up chairs.

In the centre of the room is a large folding table, behind which sits the MP, in conversation with a CONSTITUENT. The MP is in full sales mode, flashing a big pearly smile intermittently and laughing jovially.

MP

That certainly does sound tricky, John. First of all, I want to thank you for coming to me with these concerns. Let me tell you the way I see it, shall I? To me, it's all about *balance*. Times are tough - undeniably so. And while I completely appreciate and feel from you that this rent increase has come as a bit of a shock, I also feel equally certain that it will have given your landlord no joy either. After all, what human being could do that unless it was entirely necessary, or for your mutual benefit? No, no - it's unthinkable. He simply wouldn't have considered an increase unless he was at risk of being unable to retain the property otherwise - to retain your *home*. And that should be a source of peace for you, shouldn't it? Because you can feel comforted that these changes wouldn't have been made were it not absolutely *critical* to safeguard your future. As challenging as it may be, the truth is that we all have to make some sacrifices to get through this difficult period and come out intact on the other side. We're all in this together, and if we can all just dig in and show a bit of that Dunkirk spirit, things will begin to look brighter again. You're a rational man - I'm sure you agree.

He stands and extends an arm. The CONSTITUENT gets up too, bemused, and takes his hand reluctantly. The MP shakes it vigorously.

MP (CONT'D)

That being said, I'm sure I could look at raising your concerns in a more ... official capacity.

(chuckling self-indulgently)

Of course, I can't very well do that if I'm not a sitting member, can I, John? So with that in mind ... I trust that I can count on your vote?

He looks at the CONSTITUENT pointedly, still wearing that fixed grin. After a moment, the CONSTITUENT nods, a little dazed.

MP (CONT'D)

(slapping him on the shoulder)

Good man, good man!

(checking his watch)

But would you look at the time? I mustn't keep you here chinwagging all night. No, no, time for you to get yourself out of this bad weather and into the sanctuary of your lovely home! Oh, don't forget-

He picks up a campaign leaflet and stuffs it into the CONSTITUENT's hand.

MP (CONT'D)

You're a credit to the nation, John. I'm proud to represent you.

The CONSTITUENT stumbles over to the door, turning back awkwardly to look at the MP. The MP gives him a big thumbs up and another wide smile. The CONSTITUENT leaves.

The MP lets out a big sigh and flops back down into his chair. He makes eye contact with his STAFFER who is by the door and smiles wryly, beginning to loosen his tie.

MP (CONT'D)

(to STAFFER)

When are people going to learn that a private landlord is exactly that - private? The man is at perfect liberty to increase the rent as much as he likes. Honestly, sometimes I think they all think I can part the seas, or walk on water, or-

Suddenly, JANINE hurries in through the door, wrestling with a soaking wet and broken umbrella. The MP quickly straightens his tie while the STAFFER steps forward to intercept.

JANINE
(still shaking the
umbrella)
Bloody - stupid - thing ...

Frustrated, she drops it on the ground in the corner and turns, noticing the STAFFER. Embarrassed, she tries her best to arrange her hair into some kind of shape.

STAFFER
Can I help you?

JANINE faces her eagerly.

JANINE
I'm looking for Ben Thompson's
surgery - am I in the right place?

STAFFER
Yes, but-

JANINE
Hard to find, aren't you? I had to
circle the building a few times
before I could find the entrance.
You might want to put out a new
sign or something, the one on the
corner is tiny.

STAFFER
I'm sorry, Miss ...?

JANINE
Janine. Just Janine.

STAFFER
Janine. I'm sorry, but surgery
hours closed around five minutes
ago.

JANINE
What?

JANINE wheels around to stare at a clock on the wall, clearly distraught.

JANINE (CONT'D)
You've got to be joking me. Oh,
this is just great. I knew I was
going to be late, I just knew it.
My bloody boss - I told him, I said
I needed to go, but he, he just
kept ... I did think I might just
have made it, though ...

The MP is listening closely, but pretends to be immersed in
arranging some papers in his briefcase.

The STAFFER begins to ignore her, stepping away to grab another chair. JANINE grabs hold of her arm desperately.

JANINE (CONT'D)
(to the STAFFER)
Couldn't you make an exception? I
only finished work half an hour ago
and I had to walk all the way here
... I couldn't have made it any
quicker-

The STAFFER extricates her arm from JANINE's grasp carefully and takes another small step back.

STAFFER
I'm afraid not. You can always send
an email to our office instead, if
your query is urgent.

JANINE
I've done that already.

STAFFER
Well, by all means, pop in another
time-

JANINE
I can't pop in another time - it's
very urgent.

JANINE looks behind the STAFFER's head at the MP, trying to catch his eye. He determinedly avoids her.

JANINE (CONT'D)
Please? I've walked all the way
here. In this bloody downpour, too.

The STAFFER tries to block her view.

STAFFER
I'm sorry, but Mr Thompson has a
number of pressing engagements in
London, and-

The MP finally turns to look at JANINE.

MP
(indulgently)
It's alright, Stephanie. I think we
can squeeze in one more, don't you?

JANINE steps eagerly around the irritated STAFFER, her features suffused with relief, and hurries across to the little table. She takes a seat with a loud rustle of wet cagoule. The STAFFER casts a questioning look at the MP, who nods. She collects the remaining objects and leaves huffily, stacking the folded chairs against the door as she goes.

The MP turns his attention to JANINE. He grants her a benevolent smile.

MP (CONT'D)

How can I help?

JANINE

I'm so hoping that you can. You see, I came home yesterday to find that they'd sent someone out earlier that day to cut off my electric.

MP

I'm sorry to hear that. That certainly sounds challenging.

JANINE

Challenging? It's bloody awful. No notice, not a phone call, no letter, nothing - just a pitch black house and my daughter screaming her lungs out because she's afraid of the dark.

MP

Poor little mite. She must have been very frightened.

JANINE

She was.

BEAT.

JANINE (CONT'D)

Well? What do I do?

The MP leans back in his chair, pretending to muse for a moment.

MP

It's certainly a difficult situation. I can tell you one thing for sure: they absolutely should have given you notice.

JANINE

I knew it! I-

MP

(interrupting)

Unfortunately though, there is very little I can do. They need to be contacted directly. My advice would be to give them a quick buzz, and-

JANINE

I did that already - I called them straight away. Had to sit in a queue for over an hour while the battery on my phone ran down, but I got through in the end.

MP

And?

JANINE

With all due respect, do you think I'd be sat here wasting your time if they'd been remotely helpful? All they said was that they had the right to do it because I haven't paid my bill.

The MP pulls a sympathetic face.

MP

That is rather true, I'm afraid. Their rights are enshrined in law - as are yours, of course. But under the Electricity Act of 1989, a provider has the right to request a warrant to cut off a customer's supply if the payment terms aren't met.

He pulls a stack of post-it notes from his bag, as well as a shiny parker pen.

MP (CONT'D)

The best way forward is to come to some kind of arrangement with them. These companies have specialist teams for this sort of thing. I'm sure that you'll find that they're happy to help.

JANINE

They're not, though. Not at all-

MP

(ignoring her)

There are some great charities who can help you with this, too - StepChange springs to mind, but there are others. If you'd like to pop your email address down here, I'll get my office to email you some resources.

He pushes the post-it notes and pen toward her. She ignores it, lifts her bag on to her knee and begins to fish around inside.

JANINE

I've done some research, and I'm almost certain that what they're doing isn't legal. Hold on a sec ...

She pulls out a thick sheaf of papers. The MP wilts slightly.

JANINE (CONT'D)

(thumbing through the papers)

I know all about that Act you mentioned ... I went to the library and asked them to print all the info off. I couldn't understand half of it, seemed like a load of gobbledegook to me. But look - this bit, here.

She slaps a piece of paper down on the table, flipping it round to face him. She points at it. The MP barely glances at it, looking extremely awkward. JANINE doesn't notice, lost in her feverish determination.

JANINE (CONT'D)

I'm no lawyer, but it's pretty plain what it says. They're not allowed to disconnect you for any of the following reasons: if you're a pensioner or living with children under 18, or for 'reasons of age, health, disability or severe financial insecurity'. I have a three year old child, and I've got my mum living with me with advanced kidney disease. She's not quite pension age, to be fair, but she's not far off.

MP

My advice would still be to give them a call to make them aware. I'm sure they'll get it fixed for you in a jiffy-

JANINE

They are aware. I've told them multiple times. But they still won't do anything unless I pay my bill, which I can't. This is why I've come to you in the first place. For your help.

JANINE waits expectantly. The MP stares at her for a long time, then smiles generously.

MP

Thank you so much for coming to me with this. I really appreciate you placing your trust in me. Let me tell you what I'm going to do for you - I think it'll do just the trick.

JANINE

(relieved)

Great.

He reaches into his jacket pocket and takes out a business card.

MP

On here are my office details, including my secretary's email address. I want you to send me a summary of the events, just as you've done today.

JANINE

I can do that.

MP

Fantastic. As soon as you've done that, I'll have her write a letter - on headed paper, mind, so they know we mean business - directly to the energy company, and we'll see if we can't get all this straightened out. Alright?

He stands up, picking up his coat from the back of his chair. JANINE stares up at him, dumbfounded.

JANINE

A letter?

MP

(shrugging into his coat)
Yes. And I can action it very quickly, so don't you worry one bit. It'll be with them by the end of the week.

JANINE

But what good will that do?

BEAT.

MP

I'm afraid I don't know what you mean-

JANINE

They should be prosecuted!

The MP pauses and looks at her incredulously.

MP
Prosecuted?

JANINE
Didn't you hear what I said?
They've cut off the electricity
supply to a child and a sick old
woman. They're breaking laws,
aren't they? Your laws!

MP
Well, I ... I'd have to see more of
the details, and get more
information from them, too, of
course - but if that is indeed the
case, then-

It is-	JANINE	MP (CONT'D) Then it may be one for the courts. I can point you in the right direction, but I wouldn't be able to intervene.
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JANINE (CONT'D)
Why not?

The MP chuckles uncomfortably.

MP
I'm a politician, not a lawyer -
I'm afraid it's out of my remit. My
hands are tied.

BEAT.

JANINE
You're not going to help me at all,
are you?

The MP splutters.

MP
I most certainly *am* going to help
you. As I said, send me those
details as quickly as you can, and
I'll send the letter for you and
email you some more resources as
promised - StepChange, Citizens
Advice, Shelter, that sort of
thing. It'll help a lot.
(beat, thinking)
I'll also send you a link to how to
apply for Universal Credit - that
could be a big aid to your situa-

JANINE

I'm already on Universal Credit.
It's not worth the paper it's
bloody written on.

BEAT.

MP

(blustering)

Well, be that as it may, it's
widely considered to be a drastic
improvement from the previous-

JANINE

I bet you don't even know how it
works, do you?

There is a pause.

JANINE (CONT'D)

Do you want me to tell you? Would
you like to know what a great
source of support it is for a
single mother of a three year old?

MP

I ... I really must be g-

JANINE

(interrupting)

I work in a warehouse on minimum
wage, which, if you didn't know, is
£9.50 an hour. Because my daughter
is below school age and my mother
needs a lot of care, the most I can
take on is ... ooh ... 18, 20 hours
per week? To take on any more would
involve not only leaving a very
frail woman on her own all day, but
also paying basically the same
amount in childcare costs as I'd
earn for the extra work - making it
completely bloody pointless. My
money then, usually adds up to
around 800 quid a month. At the
minute, I'm renting from a private
landlord, and my rent - not
including bills - is £650 a month.
Now, if you were in my position, Mr
Thompson, and were looking at these
numbers, you might reasonably
assume to receive a pretty big bit
of support from the government to
cover the gaps, wouldn't you?

MP

(stiffly)

I would expect so, yes.

JANINE

I looked you up on Wikipedia before I came - you're a clever bloke. Had the best education money can buy, by the look of it. Gordonstoun, Cambridge, Master's at LSE. Maybe you can help me, then, because I can't seem to figure it out. Can you tell me how I'm supposed to cover my rent, the cost of food for two adults and a child - including the specialised diet of a CKD patient - heating, electricity, council tax, broadband, travel costs, prescription costs, clothes for a growing child, amongst many, many other things ... with my paltry little wage, and a monthly Universal Credit payment of just £456? Hmm?

The MP opens his mouth and then closes it again.

JANINE (CONT'D)

Because I have to tell you, from where I'm sitting, it's just not adding up.

BEAT.

BEAT.

MP

My apologies, but I ... I really must be off. I've very much enjoyed our conversation, you've given me a ... a lot to think about, to be sure ... but I have a train to catch back to London. I really mustn't miss it. Send me those details, as I suggested, and I'll see what I can do.

He grabs his briefcase and stumbles around the table, avoiding her eye. She remains seated, facing away from him. He stands behind her awkwardly, noticing that she isn't standing up to leave. There is a long, uncomfortable pause. He shakes himself and takes a deep breath, then plasters his big salesman's smile on to his face again. The show is back on.

MP (CONT'D)

Look, I'll level with you. You are absolutely right. Times are tough at the moment. We're struggling as a nation. The economy is struggling.

(MORE)

MP (CONT'D)

From businesses to banks to ordinary working people, life is harder than it was a few years ago. It should come as a surprise to no-one, what with the illegal war in Ukraine and the aftermath of a global pandemic, but that doesn't make it any less of a challenge. The important thing though, is that you're not alone. Everyone is feeling the pinch, everyone is fighting to claw back a bit of normality. And although it seems impossible right now, I believe and trust that by making the necessary sacrifices, we will get there. We will. As long as we all work together and support each other, we will push through to the sunshine and blue skies on the other side. Let's keep that Dunkirk spirit alive, push on, and have hope for a bright future.

BEAT.

JANINE

A bright future? Sunshine and blue skies?

Slowly, she gets to her feet and turns to face him. His smile fades. Her gaze is piercing, and she seems to grow in the space in her quiet fierceness.

JANINE (CONT'D)

At the end of 2019, my Mum was working in a supermarket. When the pandemic hit, she took on extra hours to help to pack the huge influx of online orders - despite me begging her not to, I should say - because, to quote her, 'think of all those poor critically ill people who need supplies and can't leave their houses.' Little did she know.

(beat)

Did you know that you can live with Chronic Kidney Disease for years without knowing? I didn't. Apparently it's one of those 'silent killers' - it doesn't show symptoms half the time until you're in a real pickle. That's why it was such a shock to us when she was diagnosed.

(MORE)

JANINE (CONT'D)

When the doctor told her, all the colour drained out of her face, because she realised in that moment that she'd spent the entire pandemic working in a high risk, high-exposure job with a ticking time bomb inside her. It's a miracle she didn't catch it - if she had, she wouldn't be here to tell the tale. Now, two years later, she has to be transported three times a week to the hospital for dialysis. Or at least, she was. Until about a month ago, that is, when she tripped over one of my daughter's toy cars and fell straight down a full flight of stairs. Broke her right leg and arm. She's pretty much immobile now, and she's far too heavy to lift in and out of the car on my own. For a while, I thought we were stuck.

(beat)

Thankfully, the hospital were amazing. As understaffed and underfunded as they are, they still managed to scrape together enough resources to arrange for her to have her dialysis equipment set up at home while she heals. And you know what? It was actually working out great - better, in fact, than traipsing all the way back and forth from the hospital three times a week. She was happier, more energised, less tired, until ... can you guess?

The MP makes a wordless gesture.

JANINE (CONT'D)

Until yesterday at approximately 2.30pm, when our electricity suddenly shut off and denied access to her life-saving medical equipment. She isn't due another round until tomorrow but when she is, rather than completing her treatment in the comfort of her own home, I'm going to have to bundle her into a taxi that I can't afford and pray that the driver takes pity on us and helps her in and out of the car. And do you know the worst thing about it all? Despite all the pain, the humiliation, the inconvenience ...

(MORE)

JANINE (CONT'D)

I know that she won't complain about it once. Tell me - has she 'sacrificed' enough for your liking? Has she shown enough 'Dunkirk Spirit' to be worthy of respect and dignity?

The MP stares at her, dumbfounded.

JANINE (CONT'D)

I'm sure you'll get the result you want next week - men like you always do. But when I see my local library putting on Warm Spaces for winter and everyone I know using food banks; when my electricity is shut off and my family is endangered ... and you stand there, and you squirm, and you wring your hands and tell me that there's nothing you can do, all with a smile on your face ... well. I'm sorry, but I just can't fathom how you can possibly think you're doing a good job.

JANINE picks up her bag and passes him on her way to the door, stopping to pick up her broken umbrella from the floor.

JANINE (CONT'D)

Safe trip back to Westminster.

She leaves. The MP stands motionless in the space, staring after her.

FADE OUT.