

Benefits

By Dante Harker

ACT: 1 SCENE: 1

(OPENS IN THE JOB CENTRE MAIN

(OFFICE. GRACE IS BEING SHOWN)

(AROUND, IT IS VERY BUSY AND THERE)

(IS LOTS OF GENERAL OFFICE NOISE))

CATH:

You must be Grace, you're late.

GRACE:

Sorry, no, I don't think so.

CATH:

Well, we all started at 8am. You have to really, once those Job Centre doors open it's chaos until we close. Plus, we all have to come in the front door now since that incident out back, and by 9am the drunks have already started to gather, so 8am is best.

GRACE:

Oh, right, it's just that HR told me to arrive at 10am on my first day. Something about this giving everyone a chance to get settled before I show up for my induction.

CATH:

Yes, HR, they're not based here any more so why would they care. They used to be

(CATH/CONT'D OVER)CATH (CONT'D): in here but according to them they

"out-grew" their office space. If you ask me, they just got sick of the constant smell of tramp and decided to go elsewhere. I've been to their building, they have a coffee machine that doesn't spit scolding water at you just for getting too close.

GRACE:

That doesn't sound great, I would much rather start the day with a coffee rather than a scold. Also, are we aloud to use the word tramp? I'm sure in my induction pack there was a list of words best avoided, and I think that was on there.

CATH:

They gave you an induction pack? That's very fancy, when I first started they showed me where the biscuits were kept, gave me a layabout, sorry, I'm guessing that's a banned word too, I mean client, to work with and the file full of forms I had to have him fill in.

GRACE:

That must have been a long time ago?

-2-CATH: (CATH GIVES GRACE A DIRTY LOOK.) Are you

saying I look old?

GRACE:

N...

CATH:

Though this job will do that too you, how old are you now, 23, 24?

GRACE:

24

CATH:

Well I wasn't much younger than you when I started and look at me now. Of course that was 30 years ago but still, by the end of this week, you'll be lucky if you can't pass for less than thirty. 30. Of course by that logic you'll be dead in a month. Though we don't talk about death around here, not after the incident the other week with the paint thinners. That was a close one, best

forgotten now though.

JANE:

(JANE WALKS UP BEHIND CATH AND GRACE AND MAKES THE PAIR JUMP.) CATH are you bending this poor girl's ear? She doesn't want to know about the paint thinner incident, wow that stuff goes up

(JANE/CONT'D OVER)JANE (CONT'D): like a bomb when you put a match to it.

Still, that's not important. Perhaps you can go find GRACE a chair so she can join you at your desk.

JANE:

(CATH SLOPES OFF) I have this for you.

JANE:

(JANE HANDS GRACE A 'TRAINEE' BADGE)
You'll need this today, some of our clients are real... characters and they do tend to go easier if they know you're a trainee. Saying that, they might try and take advantage of you too. Saying that, you're with CATH and she doesn't stand for any messing about. I shouldn't say this but we don't normally pair new starters up with CATH, don't

get me wrong, she's okay and all and I have to say she makes wonderful cakes for cake-day-Fridays, but she's been here a long... long time and we'd hate for you to pick up any of her bad habits.

GRACE:

I'm sure I'll be fine, she seems very nice. On the training last week they told me that I had to watch out for

(GRACE/CONT'D OVER)GRACE (CONT'D): the... 'old guard' I think they called

JANE:

Yes, 'old guard' that's a good way of putting it. There are a few like that around here. They all know the job inside out, but they have just lost a little respect for the system. Still, I'm sure you'll do great and it might do CATH some good to see her job through a fresh pair of eyes.

CATH:

(JANE HANDS GRACE OVER TO CATH WHO IS SITTING AT HER DESK. THERE IS VERY LITTLE SPACE AND GRACE HAS TO SQUEEZE IN AT THE SIDE OF HER. JANE CHECKS A CLIPBOARD SHE'S BEEN CARRYING AND RUSHES OFF OFF.) Sorry there isn't much space, but you certainly don't want to sit on that side, that would just get awkward once the clients start to arrive.

GRACE:

This is fine, cozy.

CATH:

Cozy, not so sure about that. It's cost saving bunkum that's what it is; really you should have your own desk but we'll

(CATH/CONT'D OVER)CATH (CONT'D): make the best of it. So what did JANE

have to say about me. Did she warn you about my bad habits?

GRACE:

No, she said you were great, she said you make wonderful cakes.

CATH:

Well that is true; there aren't too many around here who turn down a slice of my chocolate mud cake. But then most of this lot are comfort eaters and who can blame them given what we deal with every day.

GRACE:

I'm sure it can't be that bad.

CATH:

Really, you don't think it can be that bad. Oh you are in for a treat. It's one sponger after another. Look around you. Look at them all. Most of them are lazy wasters and the other half can barely speak English.

GRACE:

Isn't that racist?

CATH:

Is it? I'm not too sure, I think if it's true then it doesn't count as racism.

(CATH/CONT'D OVER)CATH (CONT'D): And actually, it's probably way more

than half who have no grasp of the language. Not their fault of course, we have this lax system that appears to let anyone in. We give people 'job seekers allowance' and expect them to find work. What a joke that is; other than very basic stuff how do you seek work if you don't speak the language. It's madness really, I often wonder if I went to live in another country would I bother to learn the language. I'm sure I would. Certainly, before I expected the state to start giving me money. Of course what other country is stupid enough to randomly dish out state benefit to foreigners?

GRACE:

I'm guessing you're a Sun reader?

CATH:

If the Sun says it like most of us are thinking then I am - I'm not though, mostly because it's full of dross and pictures of surgically enhanced housewives. But still, I hold to my opinions.

-7-GRACE: I guess given how long you've worked

here you're experienced enough to not let your opinions impact on your work.

CATH:

I treat everyone the same way!

ACT: 1 SCENE: 2

BOB:

(OUTSIDE A YOUNG MAN AND WOMAN ARE STOOD FINISHING CIGARETTES BEFORE THEY GO IN.) Who have you got for your interview?

BECKY:

That awful CATH woman - you know who I mean?

BOB:

CATH?

BECKY:

You know, the one who is always snotty and up herself.

BOB:

That's all of um I I think love, you might have to narrow it down.

BECKY:

Oh come on you must know her, she made fat Mary cry and run out screaming.

-8-BOB: Run?

BECKY:

Well shuffle, but either way it wasn't pretty. She's that one that time who threatened to take my benefits away for chewing gum. She said it wasn't befitting of the setting or something. Then she made me leave the building to put the gum in a bin outside as she didn't want to mess up her bin.

BOB:

Did you?

BECKY:

I went outside but I didn't put it in a bin, I just spat it at a passerby like that prozzy in Pretty Woman.

BOB:

Classy.

BECKY:

So you know who I mean?

BOB:

No idea.

BECKY:

You must know CATH, I thought she was the one who made some comment about your arse?

-9-BOB: Perhaps, but they're all pretty hateful to me.

BECKY:

That's because you're too lazy to get a job.

BOB:

I meant that they're all pretty hateful, not so much to me, in general and I don't see you rushing out to work.

BECKY:

In my depressed state, are you insane?

BOB:

Didn't the doctor say you were fit for work.

BECKY:

Pretty much, well, he more said what work I was fit for.

BOB:

And he wrote that down on paper? I thought he'd get in trouble.

BECKY:

What do you mean?

BOB:

Nothing, what do you mean?

BECKY:

Well, they changed the rules and where they used to just say I wasn't fit for

(BECKY/CONT'D OVER)BECKY (CONT'D): work, they've changed it and now say

what work I'm fit for. Which I'm sure would have been nothing if I hadn't screamed at the doctor that time for not coughing up Valium but now he's found a few jobs he says I can do.

BOB:

Bugger, that's not great, so what did he say can manage?

BECKY:

Guess?

BOB:

I have no clue, just tell me.

BECKY:

Oh come on, kill job.

BOB:

I think it's kill joy.

BECKY:

What is?

BOB:

Never mind, I tell you what, I'll guess.

BECKY:

You'll never guess.

BOB:

I'll never guess if you don't let me try.

-11-BECKY: Go on then kill job.

BOB:

Joy

BECKY:

Joy's not a job, who's going to pay you for bringing joy. Though does Santa get paid? He brings joy, well toys, though I guess he's not real.

BOB:

You guess?

BECKY:

No you guess, what do you think the doctor said?

BOB:

Is it time to go in yet?

(BECKY LOOKS AT HER: Another few minutes.

BOB:

Cleaner, toilet attendant, boogiemán, though I guess that would be man's job.

BECKY:

That's not a job, they're not jobs, are any of them jobs?

BOB:

Well the first two are and the last one could be but I doubt you'd get paid for it.

-12-BECKY: Perhaps in a school?

BOB:

What, they'd pay you to be a boogiemán in a school?

BECKY:

No, a cleaner, I could be a cleaner in a school, schools always need cleaners.

BOB:

Was cleaner on the doctors list?

BECKY:

No, the only thing he said I could be was a care assistant.

BOB:

Care assistant?

BECKY:

I know, odd right, not really sure what that is. I know my nan had someone come in for a while. She wore a pink pinny with stains down the front, but then she did spend a lot of her time taking my nan to the loo. She had the bladder of a small child.

BOB:

Or an old woman I guess. Is it time to go in yet?

-13-ACT: 1 SCENE: 3

CATH:

(CATH AND GRACE ARE SAT GOING OVER SOME FORMS) Wonderful, you'll love this one for as a first client. BECKY, I guess she can at least speak English but she's as thick as crusty bread so don't expect too much.

GRACE:

(GRACE IS SAT AT THE SIDE OF THE COMPUTER AND SHE BRINGS UP BECKY'S RECORDS) It says here she hasn't signed on before?

CATH:

Oh you can't trust the computer.

GRACE:

But on the induction it said we should put our faith in the new client management system.

CATH:

Well they say a lot of things on training courses but that's because they don't actually work down here in the trenches. BECKY started claiming money back in her teens, I think she might have actually come in on her 16th birthday with the forms all filled in.

-14-GRACE: Well there is nothing about that here.

CATH:

That's my point, you really can't rely solely on the computers, they're only as good as whoever inputted the data and sadly, round here there's a lot of deadwood. If it were up to me I'd not be cutting down on desks and be hacking my way through some of this lot. Far too many do-gooders in this place, I would have them out for a start.

GRACE:

And who would you replace them with?

CATH:

Perhaps computers who can only say, 'no' and 'get a job'. But failing that I'd employ people with a little backbone, those who can tell it has it is without fear of the PC police. And I'm sure a few people with data entry skills wouldn't go a miss, how hard can it be to put in a clients entire history.

GRACE:

So you're saying there is some of BECKY's history missing?

-15-CATH: Were you not listening to what I was saying? I blame the internet, they have no attention for anything anymore.

Perhaps if I wore brighter colours and spoke in 140 character outbursts people would pay me more attention.

GRACE:

Was that a yes? And I don't have a Twitter or Facebook account just out of interest.

CATH:

It was a yes, and really? Then how do you air your random thoughts. I thought if young people kept these things in side they blew up?

GRACE:

I don't think that's quite true.

CATH:

I think it might be somewhere. But anyway, back to BECKY. She used to sign on, she gave every excuse in the book as to why she couldn't get a job. Well not every I guess, she never once said she was too lazy, or for that matter unskilled and barely literate.

-16-GRACE: I'm sure you tried to point her in the right direction?

CATH:

Oh GRACE, sadly there isn't a right direction for this kind of client. They are going to screw the system no matter what we try. I think her mother was the only one who could point her in the right direction and that was towards the abortion bin.

GRACE:

CATH! You really can't say things like that it's hateful!

CATH:

Hateful but true. Plus, I have plausible deniability.

GRACE:

It's not true, everyone has a place in this world and if they come into this job centre then it's our jobs to help them. And plausible what?

CATH:

Deniability - basically I would only ever say something that harsh about clients when I can deny saying it. And in this case, other than you, no one heard me. I like to get my views off my

(CATH/CONT'D OVER)CATH (CONT'D): chest every now and then but I don't

like to get fired for them. I have four

cats, who would feed them if I were out
of a job.

GRACE:

You have four cats, I'm allergic.

CATH:

Oddly, that doesn't surprise me.

GRACE:

Will you be mean about every client today?

CATH:

I'm not mean, just truthful and I would imagine
so, it's the funest way of getting through the day.
Funest, is that a word, most fun, either way,
believe me, everyone who works here has to find
some way of making it through the day, pies,
smoking, one too many at lunch time - we have
them all here. I prefer out and out aggression
with a hint of nastiness whenever I can get away
with

it. It doesn't come natural though.

GRACE:

Really, No?

-18-CATH: No, it's taken years of practice.
Year's

of putting up with wasters and

layabouts, people who want something for

nothing, people who can't speak the mother tongue and petty bureaucrats in HR trying to tell me what I can and can't say.

GRACE:

Did they try hard enough?

CATH:

Funny. You'll see, I'll give you a week and you will have either gained 5 pounds or taken up some nasty habit. Though I wouldn't recommend smoking.

GRACE:

You mean because it's bad for your health.

CATH:

Well yes, but not in the way you're thinking. When they brought in the smoking ban they closed down the smoking room and now all staff have to go outside with the rest of the layabouts.

GRACE:

And that's not good?

-19-CATH: It has its problems, the constant begging for cigarettes is one, and if that's not bad enough, we've had one

violent attack this year and far too many verbal abuse cases to even bother recording anymore.

GRACE:

That's shocking.

CATH:

It is and it isn't.

GRACE:

What do you mean? When is it not?

CATH:

Well, given that my stress reliever of choice is being mean to clients, it's much better than going and taking that out on another member of staff rather than me and the ones dumb enough to smoke outside give them a perfect target.

GRACE:

That is just horrid.

CATH:

It's a little horrid I'll give you that. Did I mention I've worked here over twenty years and do you know what they gave me to celebrate the twenty year

(CATH/CONT'D OVER)CATH (CONT'D): mark?

GRACE:

As it wasn't your marching orders, I'm really not sure.

CATH:

Nothing, they gave me nothing. Well, the staff all signed a card, reluctantly I'm sure. But no watch, no gift token for a new cardigan, nothing. Budget cuts apparently, HR get a coffee machine but nothing for me! So when BECKY comes bounding over in a minute wanting to carry on claiming money and never wanting to work then perhaps you can see that it really gets my on my tits. Oh

look, speak of layabout and it appears.

JANE:

(JANE BRINGS BECKY OVER) This one is your next client I think CATH. Best crack on we've got a busy day. Take a seat and CATH will soon sort you out.

BECKY:

Why am I seeing two of you?

CATH:

That's none of your concern.

-21-GRACE: I'm new today, I'm a trainee.

BECKY:

So you don't know what you're doing?

CATH:

Don't worry about GRACE, she's just watching. You'll be dealing with me.

BECKY:

But what if I don't want something watching over my business?

CATH:

BECKY this is not important, can we get on please.

BECKY:

It might not be important to you but I don't want someone with no clue what they're doing knowing all my personals. What if she doesn't make it through her training and then what?

GRACE:

You don't have to worry BECKY I've had to sign a none disclosure agreement as part of my contract so I'm not allowed to say anything.

BECKY:

Oh right, that makes sense.

-22-CATH: You know what that is?

BECKY:

Of course I do, I'm not stupid. All the celebs make their entourage sign them so they don't blab to the papers. Though it doesn't work for them. But then I guess no one is going to pay you millions for my life story.

CATH:

And on the subject of money I see that you're signing on again. I thought you'd been signed off with nerves or some such nonsense.

BECKY:

Not nonsense, I suffer right bad.

CATH:

But not badly enough for the doctor to keep you signed off?

BECKY:

He doesn't know what he's talking about; I'm going to contest.

CATH:

I'm sure you are, but until then you're my problem.

BECKY:

I'm only a little problem.

-23-CATH: Well that's arguable. So what did the doctor say you were able to do?

BECKY:

Care assistant.

CATH:

(LAUGHS) Care assistant, really? You?

GRACE:

I'm sure you'll make a great care assistant. It's challenging but rewording work.

BECKY:

(CATH AND BECKY BOTH LOOK AT GRACE AND LAUGH) What would you know anyway?

GRACE:

(LOOKING HARD DONE TO) Well if the doctor thought you were able to work as a care assistant, then it's our job to support you.

BECKY:

I can't be a care assistant, I can barely care for myself. Stupid doctor.

CATH:

Well you're going to have to do something BECKY the rules have become much more strict since you were last here sponging.

-24-GRACE: I don't think CATH actually means sponging, but the rules have tightened

BECKY:

I think she did mean to say that. But I know, which is why I've made a list of what I've done to find work.

CATH:

(BECKY HANDS OVER A SCRUFFY PIECE OF PAPER TO CATH) Excellent, lets see what you've been up to. Right, so the first line just has

a giant M drawn on it and you've put dots in the... err. what?

BECKY:

(CATH DRAWS THE MOUNT OF THE M AND POKES THE DOT IN THERE) Well they're the golden knockers aren't they. I thought it was easier to draw a picture rather than waste lots of room on the page.

CATH:

Okay, golden knockers?

BECKY:

You know, McDonald's.

CATH:

Right, McDonald's, and?

-25-BECKY: So, I went in all the McDonald in the town centre to see if they had anything.

CATH:

So one then?

BECKY:

One what?

CATH:

One McDonald's in the town centre. Not sure that one, actually counts as an all. Did they have anything?

BECKY:

No. And actually, I got my mum to call into the other one near town too.

CATH:

And?

BECKY:

They didn't have anything either.

CATH:

So perhaps the easiest place to get a job in the area and they don't have anything. Interesting. What else do we have here. What does this say?

BECKY:

(POINTS AT THE PAPER) Call centre electric.

-26-CATH: You tried the call centres?

BECKY:

I did, and I had a telephone interview.

GRACE:

And did anything good come of that.

BECKY:

I really couldn't say good; certainly not given the man hung up on me.

GRACE:

He hung up on you, what for?

BECKY:

Well, the guy asked me what I would say to some old woman who was complaining about not having enough money to keep herself warm in winter.

CATH:

And?

BECKY:

He didn't like my answer. Which is odd because I just stated the obvious.

GRACE:

The obvious being?

BECKY:

That the old cow should leave her heating off for a few days and die already. That way her and her old duffer friends would stop hogging all the

(BECKY/CONT'D OVER)BECKY (CONT'D): council houses.

CATH:

You know if you sabotage your interviews we can stop your money.

BECKY:

I didn't sabotage it; the man ask me for my opinion and I gave it too him.

CATH:

Well that's excellent, and are all these scribbles and pointless doodles going to lead us down the same path?

BECKY:

(POINTS AT THE PAPER) None of them lead to a job sadly if that's what you're getting at. But I'm clearly looking, I've filled my sheet in. Can I sign now.

JANE:

(CATH HANDS BECKY THE SIGNING FORM, BECKY SIGNS AND CATH WAVES HER AWAY WITH A HUGE SIGN.SEEING HER LEAVE JANE WALKS OVER.) Okay then GRACE, you've observed CATH with a client, what learning have you taken away from this first encounter?

GRACE:

Err... well... it seems that the computers are not as up-to-date as they

(GRACE/CONT'D OVER)GRACE (CONT'D): led us to believe at the induction.

JANE:

Well no, you do have to keep your wits about you there. Remember you can always ask one of the long standing staff if you get stuck. And what have you gleamed about how to deal with clients.

GRACE:

Err... well... CATH is certainly giving me lots of about what to say and what not to say.

CATH:

I think my next client is already waiting JANE, we best get on.

CATH:

(JANE NODS, FLUSTERS WITH HER CLIP BOARD AND THEN BOUNDS AWAY) You know you could have just told her if you think I'm rude to clients.

GRACE:

I think that would have been awkward all round, plus I think that might just send her flustering out of control.

CATH:

That's very true

(-29-(THE LIGHTS GO DOWN AND COME UP ON)

(ALICE AND MARTIN - ALICE IS)

(STAFFING THE COUNTER NEAR THE)

(ENTRANCE AND MARTIN IS THE SECURITY)

(GUARD WATCHING OVER HER.))

(ACT:1 SCENE: 4)

MARTIN:

(THEY BOTH LAUGH) Have you seen that new girl yet?

ALICE:

Yes, very pretty from what I can tell from a far. They've put her with CATH though, poor soul, be lucky if she makes it through the day. Why, do you fancy her?

ALICE:

(A CLIENT WALKS UP TO THE COUNTER AND HANDS THEIR BOOK OVER TO ALICE. ALICE CHECKS IT.) Over to the waiting area in the far corner.

MARTIN:

No I don't fancy her. I only asked you if you'd seen her, we don't get that many new starters here.

-30-ALICE: (A CLIENT WALKS UP AND HANDS OVER HIS

BOOK) Over in the corner please.

MARTIN:

I wonder if she is single?

ALICE:

This is not going to be a repeat of what happened with that other poor girl. She was here for six months, clearly liked you and you didn't say a word. Poor love. I'm sure it was your rejection that led her to date a client.

MARTIN:

It wasn't and she was crazy doing that. Never mind the fact it got her fired most of them are...

ALICE:

(A CLIENT WALKS UP AND GLARES AT MARTIN THEN HANDS HIS BOOK TO ALICE)
Just over in the corner please.

MARTIN:

You know what I mean. And I was right not to ask her out, if her standards weren't any higher than this lot.

ALICE:

The clients are not all bad and you want to be careful you'll end up sounding like CATH. I'm sure I over heard her the

(ALICE/CONT'D OVER)ALICE (CONT'D): other day telling someone they'd have

more chance of getting a job if they
painted eyes on their arse and started
talking through that. But I can't be
sure, the man did leave crying though so
she had definitely said something.

MARTIN:

She is a bit of a menace I'm sure one day she'll get her cumupence. You'd think after that incident last week with the paint thinners she'd be more careful. I know the guy didn't throw it on her but still.

ALICE:

And lucky is his lighter didn't work I guess or else it could have gotten very nasty.

MARTIN:

Look out.

ALICE:

(A DRUNK MAN WALKS UP TO THE COUNTER.) JERRY, so nice to see you.

JERRY:

(ALL OF JERRY'S SPEECH IS SLURRED) I'm here to sign on. I've got my book.

-32-ALICE: (HE TRIES TO HAND OVER A BATTERED

(SIGNING ON BOOK. HE WOBBLER WHILE HE)

WAITS FOR A REPLY) Do you want to take this or shall I?

MARTIN:

Could you? I still feel a touch hungover from the weekend.

ALICE:

JERRY we can't take your book today you don't sign on anymore. remember.

JERRY:

But I need my money.

ALICE:

You're signed off, remember, we have this every Monday, you haven't signed on for months.

JERRY:

Why not? I need my money.

ALICE:

The doctor said you were too ill to work, or something.

MARTIN:

Or something being more like it.

JERRY:

What's that supposed to mean.

-33-MARTIN: Nothing JERRY, can you move it along now

please, we have people to deal with.

JERRY:

Yeah, well, I have people to deal with, and those people they'll give me money. I need my money.

ALICE:

It's Monday morning why do you need money so bad?

JERRY:

Well I need my smokes and the doctor said that I'm not allowed to sober up. Said I'd die.

ALICE:

Your doctor said you had to stay drunk. Well that'll keep the real world from seeping in I guess.

MARTIN:

Sadly you we can't help you with that particular mission so I'm going to have to ask you to leave. Alice here, has people to see.

KERTAN:

(A MAN WITH A FOREIGN ACCENT) Move along now, I have appointment.

-34-ALICE: Oh dear, this is not going to end well.

JERRY:

What's that?

MARTIN:

Come on now JERRY, time for you to leave.

JERRY:

What did he just say to me? I'm allowed to be here, I was born here. I have a passport.

ALICE:

Do you?

JERRY:

Well, I could get one if I wanted.

KERTAN:

I have appointment now, can I go through?

JERRY:

Where you from? You come here, wanting money off of my country and you don't want to work. Just here to sponge.

KERTAN:

I want to work. I would rather not be here.

JERRY:

Well go home then.

-35-KERTAN: I'm here on political asylum. Not that

it's any of your business, rude man.

JERRY:

I'm not rude, you just want to take our money.

MARTIN:

It's time for you to leave now JERRY. You're being offensive.

KERTAN:

(HOLDS OUT A LETTER) Can I please go through.

ALICE:

(ALICE LOOKS AT THE HELD OUT LETTER)
Yes of course, sorry about hold up.

JERRY:

So he gets to go through. That's discrimination that. Just because my skin is white I don't get

anything. They come here wanting everything for free.

ALICE:

Can you please be quiet now JERRY you don't know what you're talking about and you're up setting people.

JERRY:

I'm just saying, and anyway, it's freedom of speech.

-36-ALICE: Can you help JERRY take his freedom of

speech somewhere else.

MARTIN:

(MARTIN STARTS TO SHOO JERRY OUT OF THE BUILDING) Come on now, you can't be in here.

JERRY:

(RAISING HIS VOICE) This is just typical. I come here, a British man, no an English man and look how I get treated. Look at this lot in here. Sponging off the state. When I was a kid we had none of this.

MARTIN:

Outside, come on, take it outside.

(THE LIGHTS GO DOWN AND COME BACK

(UP ON GRACE AND CATH.))

ACT: 1 SCENE: 4

CATH:

That guy at the door has a point you know.

GRACE:

Do you get drunks in here often?

-37-CATH: I mean look around, half the people
in

here weren't born in the UK. Most of

those don't speak English.

GRACE:

So lots of drunks then? Are the drunks usually
English?

CATH:

I just don't get why you'd move to another
country, not bother learning the language and
expect that country to pay.

GRACE:

And these English drunks, do they work?
Because it seems that they have all the
opportunities that this country has to offer and
they waste it. Which is somehow worse in my
mind.

CATH:

(FINALLY PAYS ATTENTION TO GRACE) You think the drunks are worse than the foreign layabouts?

GRACE:

Well I don't see the foreigners as layabouts. And for that matter I don't see them as foreigners. If they are in the job centre then someone higher up than me has decided that they have a right to be here and those people are

(GRACE/CONT'D OVER)GRACE (CONT'D): paying me to help them.

CATH:

That's a noble attitude.

GRACE:

(CATH TAKES OUT HER DAIRY AND STARTS WRITING) What are you doing?

CATH:

Well I'm just making a note of this moment and then I think I'll have a bet with a few of the other old guard and see how long you last.

GRACE:

Last at what?

CATH:

Perhaps last is the wrong word. Basically, you have this view now, so I'm recording the date and time and I'm going to take bets on how long

it takes you to start slagging this lot off just like the rest of us do.

GRACE:

That's awful.

CATH:

It happens to us all in the end.

GRACE:

I'm sure it won't happen to me.

-39-CATH: Believe me, there is no way you can sit

here, week after week, month after month

listening to the same excuses and not

start to wonder what the point is to it

all.

GRACE:

Surely when you get to that stage it's time to move on? I can't imagine staying in a job for more than a couple of years.

CATH:

You say that now but this job is a doddle really. We just sit here and lord it over the clients. We get paid a pretty decent wage for doing very little. Of course if anyone asks I'd always say it's a shockingly hard and woefully underpaid job, but the reality keeps us all here.

GRACE:

Not me, I have plans.

CATH:

Look around you. Most of these guys have been here for years. I'm sure some were born here. You think you can escape now, but wait till you get your own chair and the buzz of power takes you. Talking of

(CATH/CONT'D OVER)CATH (CONT'D): born here...

JANE:

(JANE WALKS OVER) All going well? You both seem deep in discussion, do you have lots of questions, perhaps I can help?

GRACE:

We were just talking about motivation, the many things that keep people in this job.

CATH:

That's right, so what keeps you in this job JANE?

JANE:

Oh it's getting to work with so many wonderful people. Friendly face, staff, the money of course.

GRACE:

Really?

JANE:

Of course not, it's mostly because I've been here for years and I wouldn't know how to do anything

else. This place is my home. As dirty as it is. But don't let old timers like us put you off. I'm living proof that you can do this job for years and still enjoy it.

-41-CATH: Is it living though?

JANE:

It's a type of living. Anyway... on a different note. Can you do a new sign up for me CATH, they are busy downstairs and this will be a great way for GRACE to see a range of things.

CATH:

But this isn't the sign up department.

JANE:

Still, they are overloaded down there and like I said, GRACE.

CATH:

But I wouldn't want GRACE to get the wrong idea, and confuse who does what.

JANE:

I'm sure GRACE can manage.

CATH:

But...

JANE:

Oh CATH please!

CATH:

Fine, and you only had to ask, I'm always willing to help.

CATH:

(JANE WALKS OFF MUTTERING) She does get herself in a state that lady. Not sure

(CATH/CONT'D OVER)CATH (CONT'D): why she can't be more to the point.

GRACE:

She seemed pretty clear to me.

CATH:

You see what you need to understand is that once you start saying yes to things you'll never hear the end of it. First they want you to do extra work and the next thing you know there's no microwave in the kitchen because they need the space for a new printer.

GRACE:

I'm not sure in that example one thing leads logically on from the other.

CATH:

My point is...

KERTAN:

I have appointment, I've been waiting long time.

GRACE:

(GLARES) I'm sorry about that sir, I'm sure we can help you if you'd like to take a seat.

KERTAN:

I was told to go downstairs and then come back upstairs.

-43-GRACE: If you'd just like to take a seat sir.

KERTAN:

First one way...

GRACE:

Please sit down sir.

KERTAN:

But..

CATH:

(SNAPS) If you don't sit down we can't help you. Do you want to make a calm or not?

KERTAN:

(SITS) There is no need to be rude, the drunk man in the door was rude, everyone is rude today.

CATH:

Are you saying I'm like the drunk man in the doorway?

GRACE:

I think the gentleman here is just having a bad day. We should get on.

KERTAN:

Bad day, yes.

CATH:

Okay, lets get on with this, have you filled in your forms?

-44-CATH: (READS THE NAME FROM THE FRONT

PAGE) Curtain?

KERTAN:

It's Ker...tan

CATH:

Isn't that what I said?

GRACE:

So just to explain why there are two people here; this is my first day and I will just be observing CATH during this signing on process.

KERTAN:

Yes, signing on. I have no money, so I need to sign on.

CATH:

(FLICKS THROUGH THE FORMS) You have barely written anything. There just seems to be your name and address here.

KERTAN:

The English is too difficult for me.

CATH:

How long have you been in the UK?

KERTAN:

Ten years. I have son, he born here.

CATH:

Only ten years, I can see why this basic English is too difficult for you.

(-45-(THE LIGHTS FADE DOWN AND COME BACK)

(UP ON MARTIN AND ALICE))

ACT: 1 SCENE: 5

MARTIN:

Look over there, CATH is signing up another guy who can barely speak English. You know they are her favourite.

ALICE:

That woman is just a racist.

MARTIN:

You say that like she's the only one.

ALICE:

Well you expect it from a lot of the clients but the staff should know better.

MARTIN:

Think of it from her point of view. She's been around forever and seen it all. She's from a

different time, a time where the people who claimed, if nothing else, could speak the language.

ALICE:

I don't think it's about whether someone speaks English or not, I think even way back when she will still have hated

(ALICE/CONT'D OVER)ALICE (CONT'D): people. There will have still been the

lazy and work shy, I don't think that's changed. I just think the English thing gives her some place to vent her bile. You know she lives alone with only a house full of cats for company.

MARTIN:

I thought she had a husband?

ALICE:

No, well yes, but then he retired and was dead within a week.

MARTIN:

Perhaps the cats killed him? How many's a house full by the way?

ALICE:

I'm not sure, she just keeps adopting them.

MARTIN:

How do you know all this?

ALICE:

I hear things, plus my sister-in-law works for the cat sanctuary and she said she's in there all the time. I doubt the cats killed the husband. I'm sure cats would rather have someone around the house to annoy.

-47-MARTIN: Do cats think about these things?

ALICE:

I'm not sure, they might, they are cunning animals.

MARTIN:

Imagine having a house full, it must stink.

ALICE:

Perhaps that's why he died, the smell was too much for him?

MARTIN:

I think it was spending too much time with her. All that bitterness, can you imagine living with her? Did you ever meet her husband?

ALICE:

Once, he came to a Christmas do.

MARTIN:

Was he covered in cat hairs? In fact thinking about it, she never seems covered, you'd think

with that many cats she'd be one giant hair ball.

ALICE:

Perhaps they don't go near her, they just sit on the other side of the room, scared to get too close.

-48-MARTIN: Perhaps that's why she keeps getting

more, desperate to find the one cat that loves her?

ALICE:

All a little sad really.

MARTIN:

Perhaps that's why she's so mean, no husband, and one cat after another who doesn't give her attention.

ALICE:

Tragic.

(THE LIGHTS GO DOWN AND COME BACK

(UP ON CATH, GRACE AND KERTAN.))

ACT: 1 SCENE: 6

CATH:

Okay so you can see here that we've filled details, address, family, countless children etc And we've done your work history for the last ten years. Right, so it seems that you've done building work during the summer and nothing much through the winter months. Does that sound about right.

-49-KERTAN: Yes, no work in winter, we're always

laid off in the winter.

CATH:

Okay, just to check something.

KERTAN:

Go on.

CATH:

Were these legitimate jobs?

KERTAN:

Legitimate?

CATH:

You know, legitimate.

GRACE:

I think what CATH is asking is did you pay tax for any of these positions?

CATH:

Yes, thank-you GRACE, I think CURTAIN here knows perfectly well what I mean.

KERTAN:

Tax, I see, no I don't think so, it was money in envelope at end of the week. Perhaps it was taxed before they gave it to me?

GRACE:

Yes, perhaps.

-50-CATH: Perhaps? Perhaps! There is no perhaps

about it. Of course you weren't taxed

and you know full well. So now I have to

delete all these positions because we

can't include anything that wasn't a

legal position. Do you understand that

CURTAIN? You've wasted our time, and now

you're claiming once again without

actually paying any tax into the system!

GRACE:

It's okay CATH, take a breath.

CATH:

Oh balls to you I've had enough. I'm sick of people who know enough to screw the system

but can't be arsed to learn any English. It makes me sick.

CATH:

(TURNS ON KERTAN) You just sit there like a smug shit, basking in your own ignorance and wanting money for doing nothing. I'm sick of it.

JANE:

(JANE COMES RUSHING OVER. CATH STANDS UP AS SHE APPROACHES) Is there a problem here?

-51-CATH: A problem, a problem, well...

GRACE:

...CATH was just saying how sick she felt... it must have been something she ate. There are lots of bugs going around.

JANE:

Is that right CATH

GRACE:

It is right isn't it CATH, weren't you just saying you were under-the-weather.

JANE:

CATH is that right?

CATH:

Yes, something like that, I do have to say I don't feel at all well now.

JANE:

(LOOKING AT KERTAN) Sorry I don't know your name?

KERTAN:

It's KERTAN.

JANE:

Sorry KERTAN, is that what you heard this member of staff say? I do feel there was more going on over here than just a very loud proclamation of illness.

-52-KERTAN: I'm sorry, I don't really understand what the loud lady say.

GRACE:

Perhaps you could finish up here with KERTAN and I could take CATH off to get a class of water and have a small break.

JANE:

Oh, well, right, it's been a while since I've actually signed someone on but that does make sense, CATH does look rather unwell. Off you go, I'm sure I'll be fine.

CATH:

Yes, a short break would be good, though JANE, you should start by going over CURTAIN'S work history.

ACT: 2 SCENE: 1

(OPENS IN THE STAFF ROOM ON GRACE

(AND CATH SAT AT A TABLE HOLDING

DRINKS)

CATH:

I don't know why you stood up for me like that.
You could have just let me burn?

-53-GRACE: Burn, interesting choice of words.

CATH:

You mean like a witch?

GRACE:

I would never say that.

CATH:

I guess you don't have to. I'm not sure what
came over me. I am just so sick of dealing with
the same kinds of people.

GRACE:

They can't all be the same surely.

CATH:

Oh they are; take him out there. He's been
working in the country for ten years and never
paid any tax and yet somehow he's entitled to
benefits. That can't be right. I would understand

it more if he would have at least learned decent English. Integrated a little.

GRACE:

So this is all about the foreign clients?

CATH:

Oh no, my bitterness and bile aren't reserved for them alone. I have honestly been doing this job for too long. I seem to hate them all now. There are just too

(CATH/CONT'D OVER)CATH (CONT'D): many people screwing the system. By the

end of this week you'll have seen at least 50 percent who are like CURTAIN. Another 20 percent doing their best to get signed off with one illness or another, more often than not it's a mental illness as that's much harder to prove you haven't got. What does that make?

GRACE:

70 percent.

CATH:

Well add to that 30 percent for the drunks who will no doubt stink of fags, cheap booze and urine. Which leaves about 5 percent, I think, for the dumb young ones. Those who didn't bother taking advantage of cotton wool country that we live in that gives them so much free stuff. They really get on my nerves.

GRACE:

Any particular reason?

CATH:

They're just so dumb. All this NEET crap.

-55-GRACE: Not in education, employment or training?

CATH:

Yes that. But ask yourself, who's fault is it. It seems to be that the kids want to blame everyone but themselves, pro activity has gone, not just gone, died a painful death and it makes me sick.

GRACE:

Well that's 105 percent so far, any more while you're letting it all out?

CATH:

105 percent?

GRACE:

50 percent like Kertan, 20 percent perfect faking illness, 30 percent are drunken layabouts and 5 percent dumb kids.

CATH:

Fair enough 105 percent it is, though that means I'll finish on on 106 percent, but it is what it is.

GRACE:

You have one more percent to allocate, who's that for?

CATH:

That would be for the genuine people who come in here. Those who want to work.

(CATH/CONT'D OVER)CATH (CONT'D): And do you know what you usually find

with them?

GRACE:

What?

CATH:

That they don't need our help. They are here for what is usually no fault of their own, redundancy or we had a guy the other day who had been volunteering aboard for a few years. They are keen and motivated and get jobs in no time at all. And that's the thing you see.

CATH:

What is?

GRACE:

Well, people whine that there are no jobs, but jobs come and go all the time. What they should include in their whine is that there are no jobs for the lazy.

GRACE:

I'm not sure it's that simple.

CATH:

That's what people always say and for some I'm sure it's not. But for the majority, if they wanted to work and they've put some effort into training and getting a few skills then the jobs

(CATH/CONT'D OVER)CATH (CONT'D): are out there. But people are snobs, TV

tells them that they should all be

famous or that a certain job is beneath

them. It's just messed up and I've had

enough.

GRACE:

I can see that, how long have you felt like this?

CATH:

You know you sound like a therapist?

GRACE:

Oh don't say that, my mum's a therapist and I hate it when I sound like her.

CATH:

Oh right, that makes sense, you do seem to have a certain way about you. Anyway, to answer your question, I've felt this way for years. I worked right out of school, I didn't get to go to University, there was no money back then and I've been working every since. And I've been here for what seems like forever. I've seen so many changes, new plans, initiatives, and the lazy and the

work-shy, stay lazy and stay out of

work.

-58-GRACE: So what would you do instead of this?

CATH:

(GRACE WAVES HER ARMS AROUND, INDICATING THE JOB CENTRE.) I'd have everyone work. I would have people work for a minimum of 30 hours a week. They could have an extra day off a week to look for a job that they really wanted to do, but if they were not working off their own back, and not in education then they should have to work. It would teach them routine and give them focus and if they

didn't like it they could get a job they

did want. Easy.

GRACE:

And yet they've never done anything like that.

CATH:

Well no, and they never will. If nothing else now, it would be far too expensive to enforce. The outlay to get it up and running would mean it'd never get off the ground. Plus, all the cotton wool liberals would say it's unfair, that it's forced labour and there would be riots. So we're stuck with this mess instead.

-59-GRACE: Wonderful.

CATH:

I know, and on your first day and all. Sorry for the meltdown but I really can't go on like this.

GRACE:

No?

CATH:

No, if nothing else I could end up getting fired and that would ruin my retirement plans.

GRACE:

How far away from retirement are you?

CATH:

(SIGHS) Another ten years.

GRACE:

Oh.

CATH:

Oh is right, do you think I'll make it? Don't answer that, look over there, who is that with JANE, they look very official.

GRACE:

(BOTH CATH AND GRACE LOOK OUT TOWARDS WHERE JANE IS STOOD WITH TWO MEN.) They do.

-60-CATH: That's never good. The moment suited and

booted men are in the building you have to watch out.

GRACE:

Why's that?

CATH:

Well they always want something, usually they are working on the likes of, "productivity" which means somethings in for the chop. Perhaps it's me, perhaps JANE heard my outburst after all and got them in for some advice.

GRACE:

I don't think so, she seemed to buy my explanation.

CATH:

Yes, but you don't know what CURTAIN said to her once we'd gone.

GRACE:

I suppose not.

CATH:

I think I'm going to go in for a closer look. Pass me those files.

CATH:

(GRACE HANDS OVER A PILE OF FILES) I think I'll go and put these back on the selves over there and see what I can

(CATH/CONT'D OVER)CATH (CONT'D): find out.

MARTIN:

(CATH RUSHES OFF. MARTIN WALKS INTO THE KITCHEN) Hey I'm Martin,

GRACE:

Hello, I'm GRACE,

MARTIN:

(THEY SHAKE HANDS) How you getting on with CATH, I noticed she had another one of her meltdowns?

GRACE:

It's happened before?

MARTIN:

Oh yeah, several times, at least I think there have.

GRACE:

What do you mean?

MARTIN:

Well she only seems to have these meltdowns when she's perfectly able to deny them. There's been investigations but there's never any proof.

GRACE:

That's odd, that's what she said to me.

-62-MARTIN: What?

GRACE:

That she can say what she likes as long as she has plausible deniability. Though today she blow up in front of a client and me, which is a bit more risky I would have thought.

MARTIN:

Yeah, but look at the client.

GRACE:

What do you mean?

MARTIN:

Well he could barely speak English and he was the typical character we get in here who wouldn't say anything to rock the boat.

GRACE:

Surely that can't be the case?

MARTIN:

Well would you if you thought it would mess up your chances of getting any money.

GRACE:

No, sorry, I mean surely CATH can't be cunning enough to only have a rant when she knows she won't get caught?

-63-MARTIN: Well it's hard to know for sure, perhaps

it's cunning, or perhaps it's a freakish

survival instinct.

GRACE:

Like some kind of switch in her brain that clicks on to let her know she's fine to be nasty for a few minutes.

MARTIN:

Yeah, or perhaps even a series of switches that let her know just how nasty she can be. So one for casual racist remarks that she can litter the conversation with here and there when perhaps no one will notice.

GRACE:

Right up to a huge red switch that lets her know it's the right time for a meltdown.

MARTIN:

Yeah, something like that. Or she could just be a nasty piece of work who's been in the same job too long.

GRACE:

I vote for the latter. She has been here too long and I've been here for... well an hour is it now.

-64-MARTIN: Are you regretting it yet?

GRACE:

Gosh no, I think it's all pretty funny. I'm so glad I got paired up with the racist mental, it's made the morning far more interesting than I expected.

MARTIN:

You're not shocked by it all? Appalled that the staff aren't more caring and considerate?

GRACE:

Oh no, unlike our mental friend out there I have signed on before. I know what job centres are like. I did an English degree and as I don't want to be a teacher that booked me a slot signing on right after graduation.

MARTIN:

So how did you end up on the other side of the counter?

GRACE:

Government grad program. I'm supposed to fast track my way up the ranks and become a manager in two years. Something like that. I'll get moved from department to department or something. I wasn't really paying attention, I mostly

(GRACE/CONT'D OVER)GRACE (CONT'D): switched off once they told me I'd get

paid.

MARTIN:

Switched off?

GRACE:

Well, planning what to spend the money on is much more interesting than boring HR stuff.

MARTIN:

Fair enough, so you won't be here very long then.

GRACE:

A few months I think, but then I'll still be in the area.

MARTIN:

That's not too bad then.

GRACE:

Not too bad for what?

MARTIN:

Well, it's nice to have someone more my age to talk to, you've seen this lot, it's like an old people's home in the staff room sometimes. Minus the smell of urine of course, we tend to leave that stench out in the main waiting area.

-66-MARTIN: (NOTICING CATH MARTIN
ADDS) I think CATH

wants you, she's pulling strange faces,
so she either wants you or she's having
a stroke.

GRACE:

Let's hope it's not the latter.

MARTIN:

No, that would be terrible. Not good to wish ill on
anyone.

GRACE:

Oh it's not that, it's just that if she has as a stoke
who's going to entertain me with her special
brand of mental racism? Anyway, I best go,
she's looking rather insistent.

MARTIN:

(GRACE STARTS TO WALK AWAY.) You know
if you really wanted to see her crazy come out
you could help it a long a bit.

GRACE:

What do you mean?

MARTIN:

Well, you know, the odd word here, the odd
comment there, use your imagination. I would
have thought with an English degree you'd be

wonderful with words.

-67-GRACE: That's a little wicked but I like it.

Best go.

ACT: 2 SCENE: 2

CATH:

You'll never guess what they are talking about?

GRACE:

Is it Harry Potter?

CATH:

Why would it be Harry Potter?

GRACE:

Well I heard they were building a new theme park up the road and I thought they might be in here advertising positions.

CATH:

Positions, what kind of positions.

GRACE:

You know, trainee wizards, goblins, though I'm not sure they have goblins in Harry Potter, either way, magical things.

CATH:

No, no it's not that at all. It's far worse than that.

-68-GRACE: Worse than goblins?

CATH:

Well perhaps not worse than goblins, but worse than wizards that's for sure.

GRACE:

What is it then, what are they here for?

CATH:

They're shutting us down!

GRACE:

They're shutting us down? Really, how can they do that?

CATH:

Well, what they actually said was we're merging with another office.

GRACE:

So not shutting down then?

CATH:

Yes, shutting us down, aren't you listening or is your mind still off with the fairies?

GRACE:

Goblins, and no, you said we were being shut down, but then you said that it's a merger, does that not mean that everything is okay?

-69-CATH: That depends on how you want to look at

it I guess.

GRACE:

What do yo mean?

CATH:

Well I heard them say that both current offices were to close and we'd be moving in the community centre down the road.

GRACE:

The community centre? Really, that makes no sense, isn't there a nursery there.

CATH:

I know what you're thinking, how can this scum hang around nursery children. It doesn't make sense.

GRACE:

I wasn't using the word scum in my thoughts but yes, it does seem a odd mix.

CATH:

You won't be able to stay that though?

GRACE:

Say what?

CATH:

Scum.

-70-GRACE: I wasn't going to, I didn't think it

either, just to be clear.

CATH:

Because the first time you did say it, or anything that even implied it, the do gooders would be on you. All the 'what's wrong with these people, they have the same rights as you and I' all that rubbish.

GRACE:

So just to be clear, they are shutting down the two current employment offices in this area and merging them into room at the community centre.

CATH:

I heard them babbling on about it being a huge building and only part of it's being used. Some rubbish about community cohesion.

GRACE:

Well it's not a disaster, everyone moves up the road, that's not that big a deal is it?

CATH:

I'm guessing you don't understand the concept of a merger then?

-71-GRACE: Well I think I do, everyone moves into

the same building and...

CATH:

So that's a no then.

GRACE:

Fine, you could tell me, or just let me finish?

CATH:

Safer to tell you. Well, think about it, if they are moving two offices into the same place that's going to give you a lot of repeated posts. Lots of advisers like us all fighting for the same desks.

GRACE:

But surely if you're merging two offices you are going to be merging the clients too, so you'll need all those advisers. I can understand that you wouldn't need two of some staff, like, err, office managers, but...

CATH:

I've seen this before, they'll be redundancies for sure. They'll just up our caseloads and rid the place of half the staff. It's the gold watch thing all over again.

-72-GRACE: What do you mean?

CATH:

Well, it's just not enough money spent on the important things.

GRACE:

Still, I'm sure you're job will be safe, you've been here so long I'd guess they'd keep you for your... experience.

CATH:

And that's the worry. They'd never make me redundant, it would cost them far too much money. They'll drag every last ounce of life out of my broken body before they'll let me go.

GRACE:

A little melodramatic, plus, perhaps you can request redundancy.

CATH:

And let them know I want to go? That'd be madness.

GRACE:

I'm sure the managers have a pretty good idea that you're not keen on being here.

CATH:

And why would they think that?

-73-GRACE: Well I've barely seen your face crack a

smile since I arrived this morning.

CATH:

You really think they pay attention to things like that? They want people signed on and signed off and believe me, when I'm in the right frame of mind I can get pretty much anyone to sign off.

GRACE:

I'm sure you can. You're going to have to help me, I really don't understand what the problem is? You have to move buildings, that's not great I guess, but other than that it's other people it's going to affect more than you.

CATH:

I don't care about other people. You have to fight your own battles in this world. I learned that a long time ago.

GRACE:

So the problem?

CATH:

Well if we move buildings that'll mean new people to have to humour, staff meetings, ice breaking sessions. In the past we had weekends away doing team building exercises. The facilitator had

(CATH/CONT'D OVER)CATH (CONT'D): us doing trust exercises where one

person fall backwards and the rest were meant to catch them. Well some of this lot or so fat that we had two concussions and we had to call the whole thing off. Thank goodness there's no money for that kind of pap any more.

GRACE:

So you're upset that you'll have to mix and mingle.

CATH:

Oh it's okay for you, you're young, at your age mixing and mingling is all part of life. But give it twenty years when you've had the same kinds of conversations over and over. Are you married, how long have you worked here, do you have any children and on it goes. Soon enough and you'll be desperate to avoid these kinds of things too.

GRACE:

Two things though, I'm sure it'll take months, if not years to get these things underway, and also, there doesn't seem to be much you can do about it so best just taking a breath and letting it go.

-75-CATH: I'll take that breath, but only so I can have more time to think about the best way to tell you that you're wrong on both counts. Oh, it seems I didn't need the breath.

GRACE:

You needed some breath.

CATH:

Like I said, wrong on both counts. I heard the one in the dark tie, over there say that it was all going to be done on the rush rush. They want us moved before the next council election. Apparently, the current council support the move but it looks like they'll be ousted after the next vote.

GRACE:

And the other count?

CATH:

What?

GRACE:

Well you said I was wrong on two counts.

CATH:

Yes, the second count, don't you ever let anyone finish.

-76-GRACE: Sorry, you just seemed to have lost your

point there for a second.

CATH:

Well my second point, which I hadn't lost, I was just trying to get to it over your interruptions, is that there is something I can do about it.

GRACE:

You're going to scupper the merger?

CATH:

Oh no, I'm looking forward to seeing the pictures in the local paper when the little tikes from the nursery find some half empty cans of beer or worse a syringe.

GRACE:

That's nasty.

CATH:

That's just a matter of time, but still, that'll take care of itself and I'm going to have to do the same.

GRACE:

What can you do?

CATH:

Well, I really don't think they make me redundant as it stands, but perhaps they'll consider it if I'm too stressed

(CATH/CONT'D OVER)CATH (CONT'D): to work.

GRACE:

But you don't really seem stressed at all, angry, and a touch bitter but not really stressed.

CATH:

I think it would have to be stress with some kind of break down element. I've already been working towards it. I just need to have the breakdown without upsetting anyone's sensibilities. I don't

want them thinking that I'm a racist.

GRACE:

Well no, that would just be madness.

JANE:

(JANE FINISHES TALKING TO THE TWO MEN AND WALKS OVER TO CATH AND GRACE)
Are you feeling better now CATH? We have a lot of clients waiting and this is GRACE'S first day after all.

CATH:

What was all that about?

JANE:

All what?

-78-CATH: All that with those two formal looking men.

JANE:

Formal looking men?

CATH:

The two men you've just been speaking two.

JANE:

Oh those two, it wasn't about anything, or at least it wasn't about anything that concerns you at this point.

CATH:

It doesn't concern me?

JANE:

No, and if you could go back to things that do concern you that would be great. Come on, chop, chop, clients waiting.

CATH:

(JANE WAVES IN THE DIRECTION OF CATH'S DESK AND THEN WANDERS OFF. CATH AND GRACE WALK BACK OVER TO CATH'S DESK.) Did you hear that, chop, chop. That's no way to speak to a woman in my state.

GRACE:

Your state?

-79-CATH: You know, delicate.

GRACE:

I'm not sure you strike me as the delicate type, though I have only known you for the morning.

CATH:

Well, you must have seen how stressed I am, you said it yourself that I was sick and that is bound to be stress related.

GRACE:

I'm pretty definite that you're sick, but I think we're using the word with different meanings.

CATH:

Well if anyone asks, use my meaning, as in the right meaning. I'm clearly very stressed and the work is making me sick.

GRACE:

Well before you give in to this sickness could I do a little more shadowing. I'm supposed to be learning the ropes today and watching you connive isn't really what I had in mind.

CATH:

Fine call the next scrot over, I mean client.

-80-GRACE: That's the spirit.

ACT: 2 SCENE: 3

BOB:

(BOB WALKS OVER AND TAKES A SEAT. CATH LOOKS AT THE DETAILS ON HIS FORMS AND THEN BRINGS UP HIS INFORMATION ON THE COMPUTER) I had an appointment this morning; the adviser said that I wasn't doing enough and then he started going through my details but then some woman come over and said I'd be the perfect person for shadowing.

CATH:

JANE?

BOB:

I'm not sure, she seemed to appear out of nowhere, flitted in like an interfering bee. I'm not sure what shadowing is, but she carried on about how useful it would be and that I should come here, so here I am.

GRACE:

I'm new here so today I'm watching CATH work. It's to help me understand the job better. That's shadowing. And I would imagine that because you need a little

(GRACE/CONT'D OVER)GRACE (CONT'D): more support, JANE, our manager, thought

that it would be a good idea for me to see how CATH works with you, so I can learn.

BOB:

I did tell the woman that I was busy and that I would rather not see anyone else. But she just hovered there until I gave in. I wish I'd at least said that I wanted a male adviser.

GRACE:

Why's that?

BOB:

Well some of the female advisers don't have the best reputations for being helpful.

CATH:

Are you talking about me?

BOB:

I'm not talking about anyone in particular.

CATH:

So me then.

BOB:

All I'm saying is that some of the staff here have a bit of a reputation for being mean.

-82-CATH: Well that can't be me then because I'm

nothing but fair.

GRACE:

(COUGHS AND HOLDS BACK A LAUGH)

...okay then. Shall we have a look at your file.

CATH:

You're shadowing me remember. So, it says here that you haven't been able to find a job in over a year. A year?

BOB:

These are very difficult times, we're in the middle of a recession.

CATH:

A year though, that's a long time. I think we need to go over what you've been doing to find work.

BOB:

I do a lot of stuff.

CATH:

Can I stop you there, I have a checklist that we need to go through. There are rules and I always do my best to stick to them.

BOB:

(CATH STARTS PRESSING BUTTONS ON THE COMPUTER LOOKING FOR THE CHECKLIST) Well, I'm just saying that I

(BOB/CONT'D OVER)BOB (CONT'D): do lots of stuff.

CATH:

If yo could just hold off a a minute until I've had time to bring up the checklist on the computer.

BOB:

But...

CATH:

BOB. One second!

GRACE:

Sorry Bob, these computers are a little temperamental. You do need to have a little patience.

BOB:

Well somebody does but I'm not sure it's me.

CATH:

Right, here we are, the checklist. So...

BOB:

Will this take long because...

CATH:

It takes as long as it takes.

BOB:

I know but I have to...

CATH:

Like I said, it takes as long as it takes.

-84-BOB: And...

CATH:

And I'm sure I don't have to remind you that if I'm not happy with the answers that you give today it could mean we stop your benefits.

BOB:

This is what I was saying before.

CATH:

What?

BOB:

That it doesn't take long before the threats come out.

CATH:

I imagine it doesn't take long with you, no. You do seem to be something of an irritant.

BOB:

I'm sure you can't speak to me like that, can she?

GRACE:

I think it's best if we get on with the checklist, that would be easier for all of us.

BOB:

Fine!

-85-CATH: Okay, lets get on with it. Which of the following do you do each week to look for work.

BOB:

Well I...

CATH:

You have to wait for the list. It's not rocket science. You just have to say yes or no when I read out each sentence. Which is generally how checklists work.

BOB:

Right, okay, I understand, read on.

CATH:

Okay, like I said, it says, which of the following do you do to look for work. Do you check the papers?

BOB:

Check.

CATH:

A simple yes or no will do. Do you send out speculative letters?

BOB:

Check.

CATH:

Please just say yes or no.

-86-BOB: Check.

CATH:

See this is why you don't have a job. You can't follow the simplest of instructions. Lets try another one, just yes or no please.

GRACE:

It might be safer if you were to just say yes or no.

BOB:

But it's a checklist not a yes or no list.

GRACE:

We're only here to help, if you could work with us I'm sure this will go much more smoothly.

CATH:

Can we get on please. So do you check on the internet.

BOB:

Yes.

CATH:

Yes?... Really?

BOB:

See when I say yes you're still not happy.

-87-CATH: So you check on the internet?

BOB:

Yes, why wouldn't I? Do you think because I'm not working I don't know how to use all the online stuff.

CATH:

Oh no, I'm sure a man like you has worked out how to find stuff online, I just find it hard to believe you use it for job hunting.

BOB:

Well I do.

CATH:

So what sites?

BOB:

What?

CATH:

What sites do you look at to find work.

BOB:

That's not on your checklist, I can see it you know.

CATH:

I know you can see it, it's not a secret, but you haven't seen the guidance that goes with it now have you.

-88-BOB: What guidance?

CATH:

In fact not just guidance, training, you haven't have the training that goes along with these questions have you?

BOB:

Of course not.

CATH:

Well then, answer my question, what sites? Because if you'd had the training you'd know that I can ask any supplementary questions as I see fit and this is a perfectly fitting question.

BOB:

Well... Err... Well...

CATH:

So you don't look on any sites.

BOB:

I do, I'm just trying to remember the name.

CATH:

Admit it, you don't look online and you lied.

BOB:

No and if you'd stop whittering for a second I'm sure I'd remember the site.

-89-CATH: I beg your pardon.

BOB:

I doubt that.

CATH:

What?

BOB:

I doubt you'd beg.

CATH:

Well...

BOB:

Well, as you asked, I look on the job centres own website, so there.

CATH:

Really, that's the best you can come up with?

BOB:

Prove I don't.

CATH:

What?

BOB:

I'm just saying that you can't prove I don't look online and now I've named a website you just have to check your little box with a yes. Though they seem to be ticks, so really I should have been saying tick.

-90-CATH: Oh shut up!

BOB:

Well that's no way to talk to a customer.

GRACE:

You're clients to us and I think it's best if we all take a deep breath.

BOB:

Customer, client, it doesn't matter to me, she shouldn't be able to talk to me like that.

CATH:

She? SHE?

CATH:

(DROPS INTO A LOW VOICE) Really, you are a rude and obnoxious man and if I have anything to do with it you'll have all your benefits stopped.

BOB:

You can't do that, I'm going to complain.

CATH:

Oh I think it's too late for that.

BOB:

What?

-91-CATH: You have to go with me on this one
GRACE

BOB:

What? What are you talking about, what did you say to her?

CATH:

(HER VOICE GETTING LOUDER AS SHE SPEAKS) What did you say to me? I'm a what? You can't use that kind of language in here. What? How dare you!

JANE:

(JANE COMES RUNNING FROM OFF STATE)
What's the problem now? What's happening?

BOB:

Nothing, she's mad.

CATH:

Oh I'm mad now too. Security!

JANE:

(MARTIN COMES RUSHING OVER) What do we need security for?

CATH:

I can't repeat what this man has just said but it was truly offensive.

BOB:

I haven't said anything and you're told me to shut up. Don't listen to her she's crazy.

-92-CATH: See, he's being very rude, still, worse than that he used the... C word.

JANE:

The C word?

MARTIN:

You know Cu..

GRACE:

No, no! No need to spell it out I'm sure JANE will get there in a minute.

JANE:

Thank-you GRACE, I know perfect well what C word he's talking about.

CATH:

Then way ask?

JANE:

I was just in shock, this is a very serious matter.

BOB:

Can I say something?

JANE:

I think you've said rather enough.

BOB:

But I haven't said anything, I certainly didn't say
Cu..

MARTIN:

No, I think that'll be enough from you. Come on,
lets get you out of here.

-93-BOB: But my appointment.

MARTIN:

You can make an appointment for another day
when you've calmed down a little.

BOB:

I am calm, she's insane.

MARTIN:

You won't win this one, best just leave it before
matters get any worse.

CATH:

(MARTIN LEADS BOB OFF STAGE) You see
what I have to deal with, all this stress, it's only a
matter of time before it gets too much for me.
You really have to do something.

JANE:

It's a very stressful job I know, is there anything I
can do right now.

CATH:

Well, I'm in shock after what he just said, I really
think I should take the rest of the day off.

JANE:

Oh, I'm sorry, I know it must be hard on you having clients behave like that but I can't let you go home. We are so understaffed and I really need you to

(JANE/CONT'D OVER)JANE (CONT'D): finish showing GRACE the ropes as soon

as possible.

CATH:

But if I don't go home I can't promise this won't come back to haunt us all at some point.

JANE:

I'm really sorry, I can't send you home. I tell you what, GRACE, why don't you go and make CATH a cup of sweet tea, that's good for the nerves. I won't send anyone over till GRACE gets back to give you time to catch your breath.

CATH:

Sweet tea?

GRACE:

JANE is right, it's very good for stressful situations. You settle here and I'll be back in a mo.

JANE:

Okay, good.

CATH:

(JANE WALKS AWAY MUTTERING) What are you doing, I could have milked that a little more.

-95-GRACE: Two things, no, actually several things.

First, you should be thanking me.

CATH:

Thanking you?

GRACE:

Yes, that man never called you anything like the C word. He might have been annoying but having him evicted for your own gain is a little harsh.

CATH:

He was annoying though?

GRACE:

Oh yes, so very annoying. But still, not great to drag me in it it and then have a go at me for not letting your madness go even further.

CATH:

It's not madness, it was the perfect opportunity to lay some ground work for my stress induced sickness. If I'm going to have months off and then get offered redundancy I have to have something to back up my claims.

GRACE:

This was perfect then and actually better that JANE didn't send you home.

-96-CATH: I don't understand.

GRACE:

Think about it, if she'd have sent you home, she would have been acknowledging the stress, which doesn't help your stress case, and as she would have been acting on the problem, that certainly doesn't bode well for you. This way, you told her that you were stressed, you told her what had gone off and asked to go home because he had shaken you up, and she offers you sweet tea. Imagine

how that'll sound if it gets to a tribunal.

CATH:

Oh I see, and you're right. Can you picture standing up and saying, well a client was aggressive towards me and called me a C..., the C word, though you could say it in court for shock value. I'd have everyone on my side.

GRACE:

If you can find another couple of ways to show that you're not being supported then I think you're well away with your crazy plan.

-97-CATH: It's not crazy.

GRACE:

Well it's not overly sane either though I doubt you're the first person to fake stress to get off work.

CATH:

JANE'S looking this way, you best go before she pops over again.

ACT: 3 SCENE: 4

MARTIN:

What was all that about, that guy's insistent that he never swore at CATH; though I bet he wished he had now.

GRACE:

Oh it's CATH, she's bonkers.

MARTIN:

Well that's nothing new; did you push her over the edge like you planned.

GRACE:

I didn't have to she's barking all by herself. And now with the merger thing.

MARTIN:

What merger thing?

GRACE:

Oh you don't know, well how could you.

-98-MARTIN: Know what?

GRACE:

So remember those two guys in suits JANE was talking to?

MARTIN:

Yeah, they looked very serious.

GRACE:

Well CATH overheard them say that they are merging this place with the one up the road, and moving what's left into that new community centre.

MARTIN:

The one with the shiny nursery that's just opened? That's ridiculous, you wouldn't want this lot hanging around children. In fact I'd bet some of them aren't legally allowed to.

GRACE:

Well that's what CATH said, but then she got locked on to the idea that a merger surely means redundancies and they'd never get rid of her.

MARTIN:

Really, I thought she'd be the first to go. In fact I thought they would jump at the chance to get rid of such a barking racist.

-99-GRACE: Me too and certainly from what I've seen

today I would have thought she'd go first for sure. But she's convinced that she's been here too long and if they got rid of her they'd have to pay her too much money.

MARTIN:

Actually, I can see that being true. They'll do anything to save money the higher-ups around here. I don't get it then.

GRACE:

Don't get what?

MARTIN:

What's with all the fuss and what did she do to that guy to have him swear at her like that.

GRACE:

Oh he didn't swear at her.

MARTIN:

He didn't?

GRACE:

No, did I not say.

MARTIN:

No.

-100-GRACE: No, well, she just made it up. He was

being a total arse but nothing she shouldn't have been able to handle. But she's convinced that the only way she can get redundancy is to go off with stress, she thinks that'll leave them with no choice.

MARTIN:

I guess she's been here since the dawn of time, so if anyone would know how the system works she would. So it was all made up?

GRACE:

Yeah, she tried to get JANE to send her home because she was so stressed, but instead JANE just sent me in here to make some sugary tea.

MARTIN:

Good old JANE. I like her but she does seem to be in a world of her own.

GRACE:

So are you not worried about a merger?

MARTIN:

Oh no, I go back to Uni in the autumn, so I'd give this job up anyway.

-101-GRACE: Back to Uni, how come you'll be going

back? How come you're not there now? How old are you?

MARTIN:

So many questions. I'm 24, same as you'd I'd guess.

GRACE:

Yeah, I turned 24 last week.

MARTIN:

Oh, happy birthday. Did you go and celebrate?

GRACE:

No, not really, I was on the training for this job so it kind of got missed.

MARTIN:

That's a shame, perhaps you and I could go out and celebrate sometime, for a drink or something.

GRACE:

That sounds great, let me make it through this week and then perhaps we can go out at the weekend.

MARTIN:

That's great.

GRACE:

So Uni?

-102-MARTIN: Oh yeah, it's nothing exciting, I just

decided to work at 18 rather than go.

Then when I did decide to go I did a

year and then decided to take a year out

to go travelling.

GRACE:

So should you be travelling now?

MARTIN:

I should, the slight flaw was that I forgot to save the money to go with, so I'm stuck here instead.

GRACE:

Oops.

MARTIN:

Oh it's not too bad and it seems to be improving of late.

GRACE:

You know you can stop flirting with me now, I've said I'll go out with you.

MARTIN:

Fair enough, so on other matters, do you want to know something odd.

GRACE:

Of course, who wouldn't?

MARTIN:

Exactly, well you know that man I just kicked out.
I'm sure that's the guy I

*(MARTIN/CONT'D OVER) MARTIN (CONT'D): heard CATH insult
a few months ago.*

GRACE:

Really? Though it doesn't surprise me. Can you
remember what she said?

MARTIN:

It was something about him having more chance
of getting a job if he painted eyes on his... oh
look, speak of the devil.

GRACE:

Who CATH?

MARTIN:

No the guy she had me throw out of the place.

GRACE:

Oh yeah BOB, what's he doing back? Should we
go over there?

MARTIN:

Let's see what he's got planned first.

ACT: 2 SCENE: 5

CATH:

What are you doing back I thought they'd thrown you out?

BOB:

I've got something to tell you.

-104-CATH: I'm really not interested so if you could...

BOB:

I don't care if you're interested, I've got a surprise.

CATH:

(BOB TURNS AROUND AND PULLS DOWN HIS TRACKSUIT BOTTOMS. DRAWN ON HIS BUM ARE TWO EYES AND A SMILE.) What the hell are you doing?

BOB:

(MOVING HIS BOTTOM BACKWARDS AND FORWARDS) You said I'd have more chance of getting a job if I talked through my arse. Well here I am - can I have a job?

CATH:

Pull your pants back up, you're being disgusting.

BOB:

Can I have a job please, oh go on, please give me a job.

JANE:

(JANE COMES RUNNING OVER) What is all this commotion. Young man please pull your pants up and leave.

-105-BOB: But I want a job, and she said I'd get a job if I talked through my arse.

CATH:

I said no such thing.

BOB:

Go on, admin it, you told me I'd have more chance of getting a job talking through this!

JANE:

Is this true?

CATH:

I'm not sure that's the point right now. Where's the security guard?

JANE:

So you're not denying it?

CATH:

JANE there is a man waving his arse at me can you please do something.

JANE:

Well it sounds like you brought this on your self.
Though young man could you please pull your
pants up this is not the kind of thing anyone
wants to see before lunch.

BOB:

No, not until she apologises for being so nasty.
And admits that I never called

*(BOB/CONT'D OVER)BOB (CONT'D): her that C word no one
seems to like and*

that I deserve to be treated like a
proper human being!

CATH:

Proper human beings don't wave their bottoms
around in public. Now where is that stupid
security guard.

GRACE:

(ATTENTION MOVES TO GRACE AND
MARTIN) Don't you think you should go over
there?

MARTIN:

Really? Don't you think she has this coming?

GRACE:

But surely you'll get fired.

MARTIN:

Give it another minute and I'll go over, I'll say I was in the loo or something.

BOB:

(ATTENTION MOVES BACK TO BOB, CATH AND JANE) Come on, admit it, you're a nasty witch who's evil to everyone.

JANE:

Come now, I've already had you thrown out once today, don't make me have to call the police.

-107-CATH: Don't just threaten him, do something.

JANE:

Well if you hadn't provoked him in the first place he wouldn't be here right now.

CATH:

(STANDING UP AND RAISING HER VOICE)
Will you pull your pants up, you're not impressing anyone and these childish antics won't get you anywhere.

BOB:

Well they're clearly upsetting you so they're getting me somewhere.

MARTIN:

(WALKS OVER TO BOB AND PULLS HIM UPRIGHT) Come on BOB you can't behave like this. Cover yourself up.

BOB:

No need to grab me, I was about to stand up anyway.

JANE:

(BOB PULLS HIS PANTS BACK UP) You can't provoke people like you do CATH because this is what happens. The last time it was a man with paint thinners, in the past we've had our cars covered in graffiti and now this. There is going to

(JANE/CONT'D OVER)JANE (CONT'D): have to be some action taken.

CATH:

You're blaming me for this. First he calls me foul names and now he's bearing his bum at me and you think it's my fault.

JANE:

Well ask yourself CATH who else gets this kind of abuse.

CATH:

Everyone does, it's not just me.

JANE:

Most of us get the odd word here or there, some get shouted at but no one but you elicits this kind of contempt. It can't go on.

CATH:

Well from what I heard it's not going on much longer anyway.

JANE:

What do you mean?

CATH:

I heard you talking to those men. I know this place is closing and we're moving to the community centre.

-109-BOB: The one the other side of town? You can't do that, I can't get a bus all the way over there.

CATH:

At best it's a ten minute journey. How can you be this lazy!

JANE:

See this is what I'm talking about, it's these kind of nasty statements that have people flashing their bums in your face.

CATH:

But listen to him, the mention that he might have to inconvenience himself slightly and he's up in arms, no wonder he hasn't worked in so long.

JANE:

You really do take unprofessional to a new level.

CATH:

I beg your pardon, you can't talk to me like that.

JANE:

I am your manager and you're attitude is so wrong for this job it makes it painful for me to look at you at times.

-110-CATH: That makes no sense.

JANE:

It made sense to me, and you understand my point I'm sure. And for your information this place is not closing.

CATH:

But I heard what those two men had to say.

JANE:

And this is what you get for listening in to other peoples' conversations. What you don't know is that not long after those two men left, I got a phone call from head office. It seems the parents caused so much fuss at the community centre that all plans for the merger have been scrapped.

CATH:

That can't be right, what about my redundancy.

JANE:

What redundancy? They're not making anyone redundant.

CATH:

Well I thought they might if there was going to be a merger.

-111-JANE: So you've been even more unprofessional

because you thought you were getting out of here. No such luck. Right you, BOB is it, out now, before I call the police and have you arrested. You CATH, in my office.

CATH:

But it's nearly lunch time.

JANE:

Honestly CATH, redundancy is not on the cards, and as much as I think you deserve it, it'd take months to get you fired, but if I can do nothing else, I can have you transferred to HR I know how much you love that team. and it would keep you as far away from clients, and me as possible. My office now.

GRACE:

(JANE WALKS OFF AND CATH FOLLOWS. BOB SLOPES OFF AND GRACE WALKS OVER TO MARTIN) Well, that made for an evenful morning. I guess CATH isn't my mentor anymore. Do you think I should just get on with seeing the next client?

MARTIN:

Well it's not rocket science, a few forms, the odd signature. I know I would

(MARTIN/CONT'D OVER) MARTIN (CONT'D): just get on with it if I were you.

GRACE:

(PICKS UP A LIST OF NAMES FROM CATH'S DESK) JODY SMITH.

MARTIN:

Okay then, I better leave you to it.

GRACE:

(MARTIN STARTS TO WALK AWAY) Martin, about that date, fancy going out tonight?

(THE END)