

Negligence

By

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FADE IN ON:

A BLACK VOID

The zap of static. Something SIZZLES. An unseen man GROANS. Blue eyes blink and see...

INT. DARK CHAMBER - TIME UNKNOWN

The air warp. Dim light bathes curved walls.

Dressed in a three piece suit which screams "Down payment", MARK CUOMO (40s) huddles on the floor.

MARK

Unnnnnngggh. I'm gonna be si-

Another ZAP. This one electrifies Mark - figuratively. Leaping to his feet, he lunges forward.

MARK

What the hell? Where am I?

An invisible barrier SPARKS. Mark flails backward.

MARK

Ow!

As the ELECTRICAL CYLINDER he's imprisoned in reveals its boundaries. Mark looks up. Then back down. The damned thing extends seamlessly - ceiling to floor.

Mark pokes a test-finger toward the barrier. A second before the flesh circuit closes...

A female VOICE causes Mark to jump.

FEMALE VOICE

DON'T do that. It hurts. I know.

Sparks ZAP Mark's finger. He flinches. Sucks it. Swings to his right, towards the voice.

And sees SHARON (30s). Unkempt hair spills across a faded dress. Based on her body language and facial lines, a lifetime of disappointment's aged her 80 years.

A dimly lit force-field cylinder encases Sharon, too. Ten feet away, Mark stares.

MARK

You look familiar.

SHARON

You too. You're Mayor Mark Cuomo, right?
I didn't vote for you.... No offense. But
I see you all the time on the news.

Mark 180's his surroundings, cautious not to graze the
electrified walls.

MARK

I was just at a fucking press conference.
How it ended here, I've no clue.

SHARON

(giggles)
I never heard you swear before. I thought
politicians only used nice words.

MARK

Screw that. What is this place?

Sharon shrugs.

SHARON

You're the smart lawyer. I should ask
you.

MARK

But you knew about...
(waves at the barrier)
Whatever *this* is!

SHARON

Just because it zapped me, too. Five
minutes ago, when I woke up.

MARK

Woke up: you were sleeping?

SHARON

I - uh - took some pills. All legal
stuff, of course. I took them at home,
but woke up... here.

The curved wall past the force fields BUZZES. On it, a
huge MONITOR springs to life. Displaying:

An ICON on a black background - a stylized old-style
SCALE. Two plates dangle from chains, spaced far apart.

MARK

What's that supposed to mean?

SHARON

Dunno. That's new, too.

Onscreen - a MIDDLE plate appears in the logo.

Between Sharon and Mark, a third CYLINDER appears, too.

A man's trapped inside: EDGAR MUSK. 50s and chubby, he's stuffed into a suit - a cheap one, compared to Mark's.

As soon as he materializes, Musk staggers backwards. Into the back of his electric fence. ZAP.

Edgar doubles over... vomits on his shoes.

SHARON

Yuck!

MARK

(winces)

I almost did that, too.

Edgar gags. Wiping his mouth, he stares as PLASMA sweeps the floor of his tiny, circular prison. Everywhere it touches VAPORIZES his mess on the ground.

SHARON

Wow. Self-cleaning? For kids that'd be -

Her voice trails off.

SHARON

It'd be nice to have something like that at home.

Panicked, Edgar tests every angle of his "prison". Left, Right. Front. Back. Sparks fly. Air warps.

EDGAR

This is unconstitutional. Double jeopardy. Let me the fuck outta here!

Sparks ZAP Edgar's face. He sputters.

MARK

Woah. Buddy, that's not helping anyone. Take a deep, deep breath and calm down.

Edgar whirls towards Mark, points a shaking finger.

EDGAR

You! You're Mayor -

MARK

Cuomo.

(shrugs)

We established that already. Let's move on.

EDGAR

I bet you're responsible for this!

Mark reaches a reassuring hand towards his electric fence. Plasma sizzles ominously. Mark gulps, backs off.

MARK

I most definitely am *not*. I'm a victim of whatever this is, too.

The three turn towards the "scale" on the wall. Animated, the plates bob, balanced at the same level... now.

SHARON

That's three plates. There's three of us!

MARK

I'm willing to bet that's a clue.

(yells to the ceiling)

Guys: whatever joke this is, shut it down. Enough with the reality TV stunt!

SHARON

We were *teleported*. Is reality TV THAT advanced?

EDGAR

This is *persecution*! I had my trial, justice was served. You've no right to use me like some monkey in a game-show!

SHARON

You were in a trial? I was, too.

MARK

(to Edgar)

Hmmm. Tell us more. Your name, for starters.

EDGAR

(blusters)

I'm Edgar Musk. Your *constituent*. Unless you're deaf, dumb and too busy with your lobbyists, you gotta know at least that much. My court case was on the fucking front page - all week!

SHARON

Is swearing really needed - Wait, you're that construction guy?!?

Edgar straightens up, smooths his bargain bin suit.

EDGAR

That's "real estate" developer to you.

SHARON

The one who built the condo that collapsed. You cut corners, and thirty people died!

EDGAR

Bullshit! The court cleared me of all charges.

SHARON

The jury's in? I missed it. When?

EDGAR

Just a few minutes ag-

The monitor wall BUZZES. A pile of THIRTY DIGITAL COINS appear on the middle plate. It dips low, flickers RED.

EDGAR

That's not fucking fair.

Edgar turns pale as more plasma flows across his feet - vaporizes the last traces of vomit there.

EDGAR

I followed state regulations, what more do you want?

MARK

Some minimum concern for safety.

EDGAR

Gimme a break, I'm a business man. It's not like I *murdered* anyone!

At those words, Sharon hides her face. Edgar notices.

EDGAR

Hey. What are YOU here for? You said you had a "trial" too.

SHARON

(whispers)

Because of Nina. Please. Don't.

Sharon glances up; horror and guilt in her eyes.

SHARON

We're being punished, aren't we? When I woke up here, I just knew.

EDGAR

Who the hell's Nina?

SHARON

My daughter.

EDGAR

And where's she now?

SHARON

...gone.

Edgar laughs - an ugly sound.

EDGAR

Given your face right now, I'm betting that's a euphemism for "dead".

Sharon nods.

EDGAR

How old was your daughter?

SHARON

(shrinking)

Three and ten months. Almost four.

EDGAR

And how'd your precious Nina "pass away"? Did you drown her in the bathtub, Mommy Dearest?

Sharon stares at him, wild-eyed.

SHARON

I would never -

EDGAR

If it was really "never", you wouldn't be cooped in here, with us!

Mark inches as close as his electric barrier will allow.

MARK

Hey, whatever she did, we're in this together. Leave her alone!

SHARON

She. I... All I did was take some pills and fall asleep. The next thing I knew -

EDGAR

Aw shit. Brace yourself for the confession. Here it comes!

SHARON

Somehow, Nina opened the door. She got outside, into the road...

EDGAR

Nice use of "passive words", Mom.

Sharon buries her face in her hands, sobs.

SHARON

The car - they couldn't even identify her 'til they woke me up. I loved Nina. I would never, ever hurt her!

BZZZZT. A COIN appears on Sharon's digital plate. It flickers red, dips from the "weight" - though nowhere near as much as Edgar's.

Sharon sees the movement, wails.

SHARON

It's not my fault!

Awkward silence. Edgar's eyes flick to Sharon's arms. Faint lines betray injection marks.

EDGAR

You had a *responsibility* to watch over her. Your scale should be WAY lower than mine!

SHARON

What happened to Nina was an *accident*. You did yours on purpose. And what you did killed way more!

Mark eyes Edgar, disgusted.

MARK

The lady's got a point.

Wounded, Edgar swings towards Mark.

EDGAR

And what did you do to grace us with your presence?

MARK

I... I have no idea. Maybe I'm meant to be the judge of who's more culpable?

(glares at Mark)
And right now, my decision's clear.

Edgar points at the scale icon, representing Mark.

EDGAR
That's not shaped like any gavel I've seen. Don't try to wiggle outta this. What were YOU a few minutes ago?

SHARON
He said he was at a press conference.

EDGAR
Was he, now? Interesting. I bet that's got tons to do with why he's here.

MARK
Give it a rest, spin doctor. When you're in my position, press conferences are boring routine.

EDGAR
Routine "what", Hizzoner? Spit it out!

MARK
(beat)
...coverage of the pandemic mortality rate. You know, nothing-burger stuff.

Edgar hones in on Mark's cagey look.

EDGAR
If it was so *innocent*, you wouldn't be staring at those handsome shoes. What SPECIFICALLY were you discussing, before you got sent out on this little "trip"?

MARK
The public vaccination rate's improved ten percent! That's news to cheer and boost, right?

Mark's digital plate flickers BLACK - bobs up and down ominously. Mark mutters under his breath.

MARK
A lie detector, too? We're fucked.

Metaphoric judge and jury, Sharon and Edgar stare at Mark.

MARK

Fine. If you must know, it was about nursing home morbidity. Which was a human tragedy – one to be expected from any vulnerable population like that! But some indie reporter who fancies himself the next Hunter Thompson was pushing me on details. I gave him all the stats and regs, but the fucker just wouldn't let it go.

Sharon covers her mouth in a gasp. Edgar sneers.

EDGAR

Damn. You killed old people. That's got my "crimes" beat by a mile.

MARK

"I" didn't do anything! That's what I was explaining to that third rate asshole –

EDGAR

How many, Mr. Big Shot?

MARK

How many what?

EDGAR

How many "human tragedies" on that list of yours?

MARK

Uh, fifteen thousand. More or less. But you can't hold me responsible for acts of nature! Sure, I'd love to pretend politicians are gods. But we aren't, for Christ sake!

Sharon stares at the monitor. Something new's bugging her. Mark's scale flashes red.

SHARON

My mom died from the virus, in a nursing home. She was sick, and needed to stay in the hospital. But they sent her back! They wouldn't even do tests to make sure she wasn't still infectious. I begged them, but they said it wasn't *legally* possible. As if it's somehow legal to send people away to die!

Her eyes flick to Mark's guilty face.

SHARON

You did that. Didn't you?

Edgar soaks that in. Frowns.

EDGAR

Hey - weren't you *also* the guy who blocked free health insurance in our state three years ago? The papers said the city council was all good to go. But suddenly, you blocked the vote!

MARK

Because it wasn't a good time. Your point?

EDGAR

My fucking *brother* died from cancer last year. Because he couldn't afford to go to a doctor, he took too long to get diagnosed!

MARK

(glares)

And you - the "real estate developer" couldn't help him out? How is any of that my fault?

Edgar rushes his barrier towards Mark, gets ZAPPED back.

EDGAR

Ow!

(to Mark)

Where's *your* minimum concern for safety? And what good is government, if you don't even bother to keep the people you "serve" alive!

COINS accumulate on Mark's scale. On the monitor, it dips below Sharon's.

Approaches Edgar's icon, fast...

Nervous, Mark waves at the screen.

MARK

Listen, you have my deepest sympathies about your mom. For what happened to Nina.

(swivels to Edgar)

Your brother, too. But my decision was strictly budgetary. We can't spend on everything.

And the nursing home residents had to go somewhere. What the hell else could I do?!?

SHARON

Your job, "for starters".

Edgar snarls, flips Mark the bird.

EDGAR

I ain't no mathematician.

MARK

No engineer either, based on your results.

EDGAR

But when it comes to gross negligent homicide, fifteen thousand lost souls beats thirty any day of the week!

(beat)

And don't forget my brother. Make that fifteen thousand and ONE.

SHARON

Gross? It's disgusting!

EDGAR

Which is why Mr. Politician's screwed.

Mark's scale dips below Edgar's. And...

Plasma flows UP from the floor of Mark's cylinder. Sizzles over electric walls.

Mark throws himself forward - tries to breach the barrier to escape.

MARK

Noooooo!

A flash. Mark VAPORIZES.

Edgar and Sharon watch a scrap of Mark's designer tie flutter to the floor. Flowing plasma burns it up.

EDGAR

(chuckles)

Huh. Maybe he was right. This IS a reality show, after all.

SHARON

Survivor?

EDGAR

Looks like the Mayor lost *this* vote.

SHARON

Does that mean they'll let us go?

Onscreen, Mark's scale vanishes.

Sharon's and Edgar's icons level - but flash red. Edgar gulps in fear.

EDGAR

I'll take that for "no".

A BLACK VOID

The zap of static. Something SIZZLES. A man SCREAMS.

FINAL FADEOUT: