HIS PRESENCE ADDS NOTHING TO THE PARTY HIS ABSENCE TAKES NOTHING AWAY

gene washington, Utah State University
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STUDY OF A NEGATIVE CHARACTER

Gene Washington
gene.washington@usu.edu
435 752 4141

FIVE CHARACTERS: TOM, JIM, BOB, GENE and SAM. Since they appear in different scenes, never together, JIM, BOB and GENE may be played by the same actor wearing different clothes, hat, facial hair, etc. for each role. If this is the case, there should be enough time between scenes for the actor to prepare for the next role.

TOM wears pajamas and a dressing gown; SAM may be allowed to wear the costume of a hotel, or apartment, employee—perhaps a cap or uniform. SAM's halting movements suggests someone reaching old age; the other characters can be played as early middle aged.

PROPS: Bed, letter; clipboard, wallet & scarf; and slippers (for TOM); fly-swatter and broom (or vacuum cleaner) for SAM. There should be a chair next to TOM's bed for visitors to sit in.

To portray a negative character one emphasizes the "lack," rather than the possession, of certain expected qualities. Instead of mobility, one finds immobility, instead of agreement with others, one finds disagreement, refusals, not acceptances. The negative character, in short, endeavors to preserve its present state.

SETTING/ACTION: The audience is informed of the setting chiefly through the dialogue; but an additional clue as to "where it happens" might be a desk, perhaps behind a partition, for SAM to sit at. A telephone might rest on the desk.

All the action takes place with TOM lying in bed, or a chair, or occasionally sitting on the edge of it.

This first performance of the play was by FirstStage (Los Angeles, 21-3 July 2012). The actors were Dennis Sarfin (Tom); Claude Bridges (Sam); Bill Martin (Jim); Glenn Wild (Gene) and Frank Spring (Bob). The play is now being managed in England by Lazy Bee Publications (London).

SCENE ONE
AT RISE: We find TOM dozing in his bed. (or chair) The bed he is lying in seems about to collapse from overuse and age. He is dressed in a dressing gown and slippers. Reading glasses hand around his neck. A clipboard and various sheets of paper lie next to him.

SAM, flourishing a fly swatter shuffles in beside TOM and wakes him.

TOM

(Looking up)
What is it?

SAM

You called me.

TOM

Called you? What could I have called you for… I don’t remember. Leave me alone and I’ll try to remember. I’m working.

SAM moves slowly around the room swatting at flies.

TOM picks up his clipboard and starts to write. 

TOM shivers. He’s cold

TOM (cont)

(To SAM)
Stop that swatting. It’s distracting.
(Pause)
Come here.

SAM keeps on swatting.

TOM

Come here!

TOM stretches out and goes to sleep. His clipboard falls to the floor.

SAM moves haltingly around Swatting flies. Bumps into TOM and wakes him up. TOM slouches forward in his bed/chair.

TOM (cont)
(Looking at SAM)
What do you want?

SAM
You called me, remember?

TOM
Called, did I? What could I have called you for…I don't remember.

TOM sinks into thought and the bed/Chair. .SAM stands looking disapprovingly at TOM for a few seconds then shuffles away.

TOM
Where are you going?

SAM
(Turning back, throwing up his arms as if in despair)
You don't remember that you called me… I can't stand here forever. I have other guests to help.

TOM
Have you lost the use of your legs? You can't stand long enough to hear my instructions?
(Pulling his dressing gown around him)
It’s freezing in here. There’s a draft coming from somewhere.
(Long pause)
Is there a window or a door open?

SAM
(Wets a finger and holds it up)
Hard to know. May be, somewhere in the kitchen…or
(Gestures vaguely)
…or in back…maybe…not for sure.

TOM
Well, just don’t stand there. Go and find out. The cold air causes a breakdown in my osteoclasts.

SAM
(Blank look)
Your what?
Washington

TOM
I have osteopenia, a pre-osteoporosis condition.

SAM
(Shrugs his shoulders)
Why should that surprise anyone…you never move your bones.

TOM
Now go and find out where the cold air coming from.

SAM shuffles around the room as if looking for an open window or door. then exits to his desk.

TOM (cont)
(After a few seconds pass: Yells at SAM)
Is any thing open…have you found the draft?

SAM enters

TOM (cont)
Is a window open?

SAM
Yeah, one over the stove…in the kitchen.

TOM
Did you close it?

SAM
No, the cook wants to let the smoke out.

TOM
What happened?

SAM

TOM
Well, go find my scarf, I’m cold. It's hard on my liver…the cold elevates the bad enzymes in it.

SAM
How should I to know where your scarf is?
(He circles around the room, looking in corners under TOM’s bed, etc.)
You lose everything.
(Exits to look around his desk)

TOM
What are you doing? It wouldn’t be in the hall. Use your head. Hurry up, find it.

SAM
Why don’t you get up and help me look?

TOM
(Writes on his clipboard)
I’m busy…I don’t want to break my line of thought…I’m working on the design for my retirement home.
(Straightens up in bed; shows design of his house to SAM)
See this. It’s a design for my house. It’s out in the country, where the air is clean…on a lake. I’m going to have a boat for me and my old dog to go fishing in. On one side of the house there’ll be a balcony… on the south side to catch the sun…a balcony overlooking a garden.

SAM
(Fumbles for eyeglasses; painstakingly put them on his head; looks at TOM's design)
Where the burial crypt? If I were in your condition a crypt would be the first thing I'd build.

TOM
(Ignoring SAM's remark about a crypt. Taking flight)
Waiting for my friend to wake up, I’d put on my dressing gown and slippers. Then I’d stroll around the garden to breathe in the morning freshness…then I’d go to the bathroom, shave and have a shower and when I came back she’d be there, waiting for me in her flimsy robe…breakfast is ready, she would say and kiss me. We’d sit down at the breakfast table…there would be the pancakes, bacon, eggs, coffee…
(Leans back)

SAM
Eggs are bad for anyone in your condition…so is coffee.
(Pause; gestures at TOM's design)
You call drawing lines on a piece of paper working? You lie around here all day…in your pajamas and robe…you never go out. You call that working.

TOM
I don’t have to explain myself to you…now go away and leave me alone. I need to get back to my work.
(Writes on his clipboard; shuffles through papers; looks up at SAM)
Well, what are you waiting for? I’m cold. Go find my scarf.
SAM
(Moves around TOM’s bed. Stop, looks down; points)
Why there it is. I see it has an end sticking out. You’re lying on your scarf.
Without waiting for an answer he starts to walk away.

TOM
Looks down; locates the scarf; pulls it from under him with difficulty; puts it around his shoulders; sheepish look. Starts a new criticism of SAM.

(Gestures around the room)
Look how dusty this place is.
(Points at ceiling)
What are those stains up there. What squalor I’m forced to endure. It's a disgrace.

SAM
I do my utmost; I wear myself out; I sweep and dust nearly every other week.

TOM
(Pointing around the room)
And what's this? And this…and that…what about the cobwebs over there, in the corner!

SAM
I swept up the cobwebs right after Easter.

TOM
And when did you dust the pictures and furniture?

SAM
I did them before Christmas. But how can I clean everything …with you in the way…you sleep here all day.

TOM
I sometimes go out to see friends…or go to a movie.

SAM
Why, what can I do at night…I have to sleep.
Looks indifferently out a window.
SAM (cont)
I know you! You don't give a hang about the dust and cobwebs. You just want to upset me.

TOM
Don't you understand! The dust is a breeding-ground for moths. (Holds up a fold of his dressing gown)
See there are holes here and here. They didn't get there by themselves. (Gesturing toward the back)
I see bugs on the wall back there.

SAM
(Answers indifferently)
So…you don't seem to mind the bedbugs. By now they must have sucked gallons of your blood. (Pointing at places on the bed) There they are, there and others there.

TOM
(Looking at places on the bed) I don't see anything.

SAM
I suppose you haven't noticed the fleas either?

TOM
Fleas? That's disgusting!

SAM
(Blank stare)

TOM
What time is it?

SAM
(Looks at watch; indifferent) 12:30…ballpark

TOM

SAM
(Indifferent)
Wash? Why would you want to wash? The lack of hygiene seems to suit you.

TOM
I didn't ask for your opinion. Is there any hot water?

SAM
Hard to say…there might be…might not be.
(Walks away; then turns back to TOM)

TOM
It might help if the manager paid the gas bill on time.

SAM
(Shrugs his shoulders)
Whatever.
(Shuffles a few feet away then turns back to TOM)
Oh, by the way. The manager wants you to move. He’s re-doing your part of the building for his son….who’s getting married and needs more room.

TOM
(Yawning)
Getting married! What fools men are.

SAM
The manager wants you out of here by next week.

TOM
What! I’ve endured living here for years. It’s my home…it’s where I do my business. My friends come to see me here…I take my meals here, even though the food’s ruining my health.

SAM
That's nothing to do with me….you might try talking to the manager.
(Pointing vaguely to the right)
You might persuade him to knock another room down before he gets to your room. That would buy you some time.
(Walks away and then turns back)
Oh, I forgot. This letter came for you.
(Pulls letter from coat pocket)

TOM
When did it come?

SAM
(Indifferent)
Oh, a couple of weeks ago or something.
(Squints at letter, from various angles, for its postmark)
The postmark’s hard to read…looks like, October 11, no, it could be October 17.

TOM

(Snatching the letter)
October 11 or 17, why that’s more than a month ago. Why wasn’t it delivered to me earlier?

SAM

(Shrugs shoulders)
Search me. Things get lost…postmen sometimes take interesting items home with them.
(Turns to leaves; pauses, returns to TOM’S chair.)
Oh, by the way…the manager says to tell you he’s going to evict your nephew.

TOM

Evict Jasper? What for? He’s a good boy, just a bit slow.

SAM

The manager says that he owes room service 350 dollars. He sleeps all day. He won’t let the staff in to clean his room. The Don’t Disturb Sign has mold growing on it.

TOM

He spends a lot of time in his room studying.

SAM

That may be…but the manager going to evict him if he doesn’t pay his bill.

TOM

He’ll pay up soon.

SAM

When?

TOM

Soon…I hear that he has money coming from a rich aunt. She made a fortune selling stuff that no-one needs.

SAM

I can’t tell the manager that. He wants your nephew’s to pay up now. I have to tell the manager something definite…my life is hard. I’ll lose my pension. My wife and I will be out in the street…we have years left on our house mortgage. It all worries me to death.

TOM

Oh, alright. Ask the manager to come and see me. I’ll explain Jasper’s situation to him.
(Pause)
Now go away and leave me alone. I have work to do.

SAM exits. TOM drops his clipboard; yawns. Pulls covers over his head. Dozes off.

Lights dim for few seconds

SCENE TWO

JIM, an acquaintance of TOM, enters. JIM walks around the room, stopping before a picture he has seen a hundred times; he glances out a window; picks up a magazine from a side table; pages through it;

Turns around TOM’s bed and wakes him up.

JIM
You’re not dressed yet? You lazy bum!
(Looks at TOM’s robe)
What sort of robe is that? That style went out of fashion years ago.

TOM
It’s not a robe…it’s a dressing gown.

TOM nearly gets out of bed; he glances down where his slippers are; he even lowers one foot from the bed, but immediately draws it back. Slides back into bed and sits up.

JIM
You need a wife to make you take a bath…get dressed…comb your hair…you’re a mess.

TOM
Wife? I can’t be bothered with a wife. I have too much work to do.

JIM takes off his hat. Sits in chair next to TOM's bed/chair.
JIM

(Reaching out a hand)
Are you sick? Let me feel your forehead.

TOM

(Shrinks back from JIM’s hand)
Keep that hand away from me…you just came in from the cold. The cold elevates bad enzymes in my liver.

JIM

Cold? It must be 75 or 80 degrees outside.
(Pause)
But, of course…how long has it been since you were outside? Ten or eleven years?

TOM

Who’s counting.
(Pause)
You’ve come early today.

JIM

(Looking at his watch)
Early? It's after noon. Are you tired of me, or what?

TOM

No, I merely mention it. You usually come just in time for me to buy you supper.

JIM

I came in order to find out if you remember our invitation to Peter’s birthday party. Janet and Peter have invited us to dinner. 5:30 this evening. You don’t have to bring anything special…just a birthday card.

TOM

I wouldn’t think of going out…it’s cold and damp…if you don’t believe me, look out that window.
(Points at a window)
Look at that dark sky…it looks like it’s going to rain or snow some more.

JIM

There’s not a cloud in the sky. And you think it’s going to storm!
(Pause; gestures toward the window)
It seems dark outside because the windows haven't been washed in months…or years. They’re covered with dirt…you can’t see the light of day. And the curtains are always drawn.

TOM

(Yawning; making a vague gesture)
I never noticed.

JIM

(Looking around the room)
Is there anything to drink here? Some wine or beer?

TOM

(Gestures dismissingly)
I don’t know. I suspect there’s some wine somewhere….there’s a bar here.

JIM

(Looking around)
Is it open?

TOM

Search me. I never go there. It's too hard a climb.

(Gesturing upwards)
It's upstairs somewhere.

JIM

Well, give me some money…’I’ll go out and buy some wine.

JIM rises from his chair, puts on his hat. Holds out a hand.

JIM (cont)

Give me money…for the wine.

TOM

(Sitting up)
Just a minute. Wait! I want to ask your advice.

JIM

(Turns back to TOM)
Be quick…I’m in a hurry.

TOM

Two bad things have happened to me. I’m being driven out of here. And my nephew, who helps me with my investments, is being evicted.

JIM

Jasper?

TOM

Yes, Jasper.
JIM
I’m not surprised. He obviously didn’t pay his rent. Serves him right.

TOM
Jasper’s a good boy. He’s just forgetful.
(Pause)
Well, will you help me? Think of what I’m to do. You’re a practical person.

JIM
Will I get something in return…for my advice?
(Takes off his hat and sits down)
Now let me see, how about a case of champagne for your Jasper problem…a box of Havana cigars for yours.

TOM
Okay…so what your advice?

JIM
You must move tomorrow…both of you.

TOM
Is that all you can say. I know that much myself.

JIM
(In a loud voice)
Don’t interrupt me…I’m not finished. You must move tomorrow into an apartment owned by a friend. It’s big enough for two.

TOM
Where is it…remember, I can’t stand noise. It sets up a rapid demineralization of my bones.
(Pause)
And Jasper has to have it quiet for his studies.

JIM
It’s on the other side of the river, in the Clarkston area.

TOM
What! The Clarkston area! They say wolves come there in the winter.

JIM
Well, they do come in from the woods sometimes. But what does have to do with you?

TOM
(Slumps back in the bed)
It’s dull and dreary there. No one lives there.

JIM

Who told you that? My friend lives there. She has a house of her own with a big garden. She’s a widow with two children. Her unmarried brother lives with her. He keeps everything running, he’s very good with his hands.

(Pause; lower voice)

Not like some of your useless friends here.

TOM

So what? All that has nothing to do with me. I am not going to move there.

JIM

(Angry)

We’ll see if you’ll not move. No, if you ask for advice you must abide by it.

TOM

I won’t move there.

JIM

(Exasperated; Rises from his chair; pulls his hat lower; walks fast toward an exit; then turns back to TOM)

What’s the attraction to stay here? Just look at this place. The furniture is falling apart. The food is poisonous. The windows are dirty…even the rats have left.

(Looking up)

There’s a big crack in the ceiling. The place is about to fall down.

(Pause; looking up again)

And where are the fire extinguishers? I suspect that this place violates every safety code in the books…I have a friend, a safety inspector, at city hall, I think I’ll tell her about this place.

TOM

I like it here. It’s near to the shops, the theatre and my friends…I like being central.

JIM

What? Central? And just how long has it been since you went out? How long has it been since you were at the theatre? What friends do you visit? What good does being central do for you?

TOM

(Yawns; pulls his scarf around his neck tighter)

Oh, a lot of things.

JIM

(Looking at watch)
All right…I’ve given you my advice…which you won’t take, out of your stubbornness. You owe me champagne and a box of cigars.

(Holding out a hand to TOM)
So give me the money to go buy them…I know you're not going out.

TOM

(Fumbles for his wallet)
It's here somewhere.

SAM enters with a broom.
Sweeps under TOM's bed and around the room

TOM
(Still fumbling for wallet; motions to SAM)
Put that broom down. Come here! Find my wallet.

SAM
(Retrieves the wallet from the mattress of TOM’s bed)
You lose everything…here it is…under the mattress.
(Resumes sweeping)

JIM
(Watching SAM)
What a burden that man must be to you …always losing your things.
(Pause)
By way, would you loan me your tuxedo? I have niece getting married next week.

TOM
(To SAM)
You with the broom. Bring my tuxedo coat for my friend.

SAM
(Turns back toward TOM)
I can’t do that.

TOM
You can’t? Why not?

SAM
Don’t you remember? One of your acquaintances borrowed your tuxedo last month, along with a pair of shoes, a shirt, a hat and gloves.
(Long pause)
Though it's a mystery to me why he wanted that stuff. It's all falling apart.
WASHINGTON

(Exits sweeping)

JIM
I don’t see how you put up with that man
(Pause)
I’m leaving.. I’ll tell Janet you’re too lazy to come to Peter’s birthday party.

TOM
(After JIM who exiting)
Tell her what you want.
(Pause; Yawning)
Birthday parties! What a waste of time and energy!

TOM stretches out
in his bed, Yawns, goes to sleep

FADEOUT

SCENE THREE

BOB, another acquaintance
enters and shakes TOM'S bed.

BOB
Wake up! Still sleeping?
(Pause)
How are you?

TOM
The bad enzymes in my liver are running my life.

BOB reaches out to shake hands.

TOM (cont)
(Putting up his hands, shrinking back)
Don't come near me, don't come near me, you're straight in from the cold air.

BOB
(Sitting down)
Are you sick?

TOM
(Yawning)
I keeping getting dizzy. It's my bones, a breakdown of my osteoclasts….and you, are you well?

BOB
Me? I am very well….I'm having a great time.

TOM
Tell me, why are you here so early?

BOB
Early? It's afternoon. I have a question for you. Are you going to Senator Thompson's party tonight?

TOM
No, I don't think I will.

BOB
Oh, what parties he has. Last month there were over fifty people there…I hear he's expecting over a hundred tonight.

TOM
Over a hundred? That sounds boring.

BOB
How could it be? Boring? I say more the merrier. Gaga, the famous dancer, will be there.

TOM
Who?

BOB
You haven't heard of her? The whole town raving about her. The way she dances…wonderful!

(Adjusting his clothes, tie; walks around, dusts his clothes)
Are you sure you don't want to come to the senator's party. They'll be talking about everything, politics, art, you'll hear a lot about the Venetian school…music, you should hear what they say about Bach and Beethoven…

TOM
They talk about everything. That must be dull…they must be snobs.

BOB
Ah, nothing pleases you. There are lots of parties you can go to. Everybody has a fixed day of the week now. The Carlyle's have theirs on Monday, the Smiths on Tuesday, the Moore's on Wednesday. I can go to a party every night.

TOM
That sounds tiring.

BOB

I love it. In the morning I read The New York Times, The Economist and Wall Street Journal. I like to stay up with the news. I have a job that I can go to anytime. In the afternoon I drop in on a friend I haven't seen in a while. Then I go to work for a few hours. Before going to that night's party, I go home, visit with my neighbors then I clean up and put on different clothes and take a taxi to the party.

TOM

Isn't it boring to be going all the time?

BOB

Boring? Of course not. But I must be going.

(Walks over in front of a mirror)

Your mirror needs cleaning. I can barely see myself.

TOM

I never noticed

BOB

(Walks toward an exit and then comes back; holds up his hands for TOM to see)

Have you seen these gloves? Everyone's wearing them. Eighty five dollars at Hardy's department store.

TOM

(Looking at the gloves)

What's so special about them?

BOB

Why it's how easy they are to put on. And they adjust instantly to the size and shape of your hand. Should I buy you a pair?

TOM

I never wear gloves. They cause rapid demineralization of the bones.

(Thrusts his hands under the covers)

BOB

That's a silly notion.

(Looks at watch)

I'm late. Well, I'm off. What a wonderful life I have!

BOB (cont)

(Starts to exit)

TOM
Wait! Don't go yet. I need your advice…two bad things are happening to me. I'm being driven out of here and my nephew is being evicted.

BOB

I can't help you with that.

(Gestures)

Goodbye.

TOM

(Watching BOB leave; then, sitting on the edge of the bed, addresses the audience)

What a sad case he is. Jumping around all day, making calls, going to parties. He's a fragmented man…he just doesn't know it.

(Yawns, stretches out in bed and goes to sleep)

SCENE FOUR

GENE, another acquaintance, enters.

GENE

(Shakes TOM awake)

How are you?

TOM

(Opens his eyes; looks up at GENE)

Oh, it's you…how are you? How's your work at the International Dead Ideas Society?

GENE

 Couldn't be better…we have 17 new members.

(Moving toward TOM; holding out a hand)

TOM

Don't near me. You just came in from the cold. It's my bones…I'm suffering from rapid osteopenia. My doctor tells me it's dangerous to get cold.

GENE

Would that be Dr. Henry?

TOM

Of course. He's always been my doctor.

GENE
He's a quack. Everybody knows that.

TOM

Really? Why wasn't I informed?

GENE

You could've asked. What you need is to move around more, get some exercise...breathe some fresh air. Do you want to take a walk with me...it's warm outside.

TOM

Exercise would interfere with my work. I am already behind on it. I have bills to pay, from the laundry, insurance...calls to make, accountants to consult...I have no time to rest. It goes on and on.

(FLOURISHES SOME PAPERS AT GENE)

GENE

Have you seen my play?

TOM

No.

GENE

I could send you the script to read.

TOM

No. I don't have time to read. Just tell me what it's about.

GENE

It's about trade with China, the emancipation of women there, about the lovely weather we've been having and about a new kind of fire extinguisher.

TOM

Fire extinguisher? Isn't that out of place in a play about China and the weather?

GENE

Of course not. I am a champion of realism in drama. Realistic persons always have a fire extinguisher handy.

(LOOKING AROUND)

Especially people who live in a firetrap like this.

TOM

(YAWNS)

I suppose your play's being produced at the Lyric Theater...where they do all the bad playwrights...the ones rejected by everyone else.

GENE
Don't you remember? The lyric burned down 11 years ago.

TOM

Nobody told me.

GENE

It was in all the newspapers.

TOM

So? Who has time to read newspapers?

GENE

You don't deserve it. But I've come to tell you I'm getting married.

TOM

Anyone I know?

GENE

Don't you remember? I brought her to see you last month? Susan? Susan Jones?

TOM

Susan Jones? I don't remember. Is she nice?

GENE

Very, very nice.

(Pause)

Well, I am off. I don't want to be late…I'm meeting Susan to go shopping.

(Walks over in front of the mirror)

Your mirror needs cleaning. I can barely see myself.

TOM

Wait, don't go yet! I want to ask your advice….I've had two bad things happen to me.

GENE

No, no, my friend. Some other time.

(Walks toward the door; turn back to stand in front of the mirror; adjust his clothing. Straightens his back)

I must appear at my best. Susan doesn't like men who slouch and look untidy.

(Exits)

TOM

(To us; addressing the audience)

I feel sorry for him…he's blinded by love…dragged around by a pretty…stupid, no doubt, woman…does she value him for his intelligence? Of course not. He's deaf and dumb to everything but Susan. He could stay here and enjoy himself, his freedom. We
would talk about important things. He could help me with my two problems. But no, he
has to rush off.

(Pause)
Getting married! What a waste!

Yawns; stretches out and goes asleep. Wakes up to see SAM standing over his bed.

TOM (cont)

Well, what is it this time?

SAM
(Handing TOM a letter)
It's from your nephew…he asked me to give it to you.

TOM
(Yawning)
Letter? Why a letter? Ask him to come and talk with me.

SAM
I can't. He left…last night…without paying his bill…he said you'd take care of it.

TOM
I don't have time now to listen to this. Go away. I have work to do.

(Yawns and falls asleep; as SAM continues to talk TOM slowly slips lower and lower. Disappears under the covers)

SAM
(Ignoring the fact that TOM is asleep)
Oh, your nephew wanted me to tell you you've been wiped out…in a mini flash crash. your Wall Street stock lost 99.7 percent of its value. Just took a few seconds.

(Talking more to the audience than to TOM)
Funny thing about a mini flash crash, it acts like a small-time version of the stock market on its wildest day. I suspect it's a sign that another big crash on Wall Street is coming. I know others say that this sort of thing is simply the way lightning quick markets work and people had better get used to it…Oh I know they tell us that there are circuit breakers in place to halt trading and to reset prices. But what they don't tell us is that such mechanisms can be overwhelmed.

(Gestures wildly)
Completely overwhelmed! You hear me! They're keeping the facts from investors. They're afraid the facts will undermine investor confidence.

(Pause; shuffles to center stage; gestures emphatically)
Well I am here to tell you that there's no such thing as circuit breakers and investor confidence. What we have here is providence…it's providence at work.
FADEOUT