

SAINT MONICA OF THE UNEMPLOYMENT HELP-LINE

by James Still

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1(E) 6/4/2020

Written for American Blues Theater / Ripped from the Headlines

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IN DARKNESS WE HEAR A PHONE
RECORDING:

PHONE RECORDING

...Welcome to the Employment Development Department's unemployment insurance online assistance center...to better serve you our new expanded contact center hours are 8AM to 8PM seven days a week for unemployment insurance questions. To hear this recording in English press 1... Thank you for calling the Employment Development Department unemployment insurance online assistance center. We are currently receiving more calls than we can answer and are unable to assist you at this time. Please try again later...

And then we see
A GUY NAMED JAMES.
He has an iPhone.
And maybe a notebook (because he
always has a notebook).

He talks to us like he knows us (because
he wants to know you).

JAMES

There was this headline I saw the other day that read:
"More than 40 million Americans have Sought Jobless Aid Amid Pandemic"
That's a lot of people. And I'm one of them.

PHONE RECORDING

We are currently receiving more calls than we can answer and are unable to assist you at this time. Please try again later...

JAMES

Yeah, I'm one of the 40 million Americans who have filed for unemployment thanks to Covid-19 and the inept response from the White House. I won't go into the nitty-gritty about being a freelance artist in the Spring of 2020. And I won't say much about the fact that I'm a writer for the theater and every single theater is closed and every single production of mine that was scheduled for the next 15 months has been cancelled, postponed, or is hanging out in limbo. And why even mention that I travel a lot for my work and for the first time in 25 years I do not
(MORE)

JAMES (CONT'D)

have a plane ticket in hand. I am unemployed. It's so weird to say that -- but there it is: I am unemployed. I'm sheltering in place in Los Angeles where I live. I'm on a walk now -- that's what I'm doing while I'm talking to you. We're on a walk. Follow me. It's Sunday morning. I figure I might have a better chance of getting through to the unemployment help-line on a Sunday morning. I keep calling the same number over and over and over.

PHONE RECORDING

We are currently receiving more calls than we can answer and are unable to assist you at this time. Please try again later...

JAMES

So far this morning I've called
seven times

29 times –

44 times

61 times...

VOICE ON PHONE

Please try again later

Please try again later

Please try again later

Please try again later

JAMES

This part of the story takes awhile so here's the thing I want to tell you about being on unemployment. All of the horror stories you may have heard about what it's like to file for unemployment right now, all the jammed phone lines, the crashing websites, the overwhelmed State governments -- all true. But surely SOMEBODY is calling and getting through to an actual human being and yet for all the blame and anger and frustration, I haven't heard anyone talk about the voice on the other end of the phone. I want to talk about that voice on the other end of the phone. That is, if I ever get THROUGH to a voice on the other end of the phone.

(to phone)

Hello???

VOICE ON PHONE

Thank you for calling the Employment Development Department's unemployment insurance online assistance center. Due to the high volume of calls you may experience longer wait times than usual. Please stay on the line and the next available associate will be with you shortly.

JAMES

At least I'm now on hold -- that's progress. I mean it only took me 78 attempts to get through -- and I really do mean 78 attempts: my phone's "call history" shows how many times I called the unemployment help-line on this Sunday morning... couldn't get through, now I'm on hold -- wait! Hello?

VOICE ON PHONE

Thank you for your patience. Please stay on the line and the next available associate will be with you shortly.

JAMES

Still on hold. Imagine if everyone who's on hold right now is standing in an actual line, six feet apart... If you lined us all up, all of us 40 million unemployed types who are on hold this very moment with unemployment offices across the country -- I bet that line would stretch all the way to the Moon. And back.

(...)

Still on hold. While I'm waiting I look up the history of unemployment on my phone: "Public unemployment insurance first appeared in Wisconsin in 1932 as part of an effort to provide relief to workers who were unemployed as a result of the 1929 financial collapse. Six other states followed suit before the first federal unemployment insurance program was created as part of the Social Security Act of 1935. By 1937, every state in the Union had enacted their own unemployment insurance programs –

(to phone)

Hello? A human being comes on the line and I swear it's like I have reached an angel.

MONICA ON THE PHONE

Hello, my name is Monica... how may I help you?

JAMES

Her name is Monica. And right now I'm struck by the sheer beauty of her name. Monica. And from the very first moment, she is simply amazing: patient, kind, knowledgeable. And most of all: empathetic. I have a bunch of questions about my not knowing how to answer some of the stuff for my online claim, questions that don't seem to have anything to do with this suddenly unemployed freelance writer. I mean, how did I get here?

(to US)

It's a real question. How did I get here?

MONICA ON THE PHONE

Are you still there?

JAMES

Yes. I am still here.

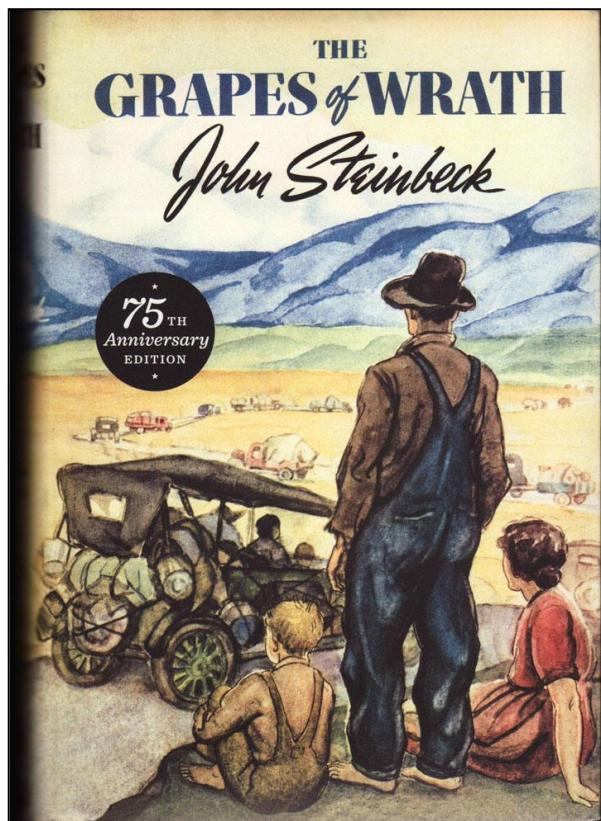
(...)

Because she has my unemployment claim in front of her (I am in the new Pandemic Unemployment Assistance program for freelancers) -- Monica can see that I'm a writer and director. She asks me how I'm doing. She asks me what kind of things I write. I tell her I write for the theater and she asks if she's seen anything I wrote. I tell her that every theater in the country is closed, all productions of all my plays are cancelled. There's a silence between us. Finally I say, "Monica? Are you still there?" I hear Monica let out a long, sorrowful breath. And Monica tells me how sorry she is about my situation. Then she tells me that when she gets off of the phone with these calls (I decide she must be an over-hire who's working from home), she often cries because she can hear how much people are hurting, how scared they are... And then she starts talking to me about art and empathy and tells me how much the world needs artists. "What will you write when all of this is over?" Monica asks. And I admit I don't want to write about the pandemic. That's funny when I think about it now because of course that's exactly what I'm doing as I write this monologue for American Blues: I'M WRITING ABOUT THE PANDEMIC. And then... and then --

MONICA ON THE PHONE
Have you ever read "The Grapes of Wrath"?

JAMES
Monica has just asked me if I've ever read "The Grapes of Wrath" and tells me how John Steinbeck found a way to write about another terrible time in American history when people fell on hard times because of no fault of their own... and we talk about the greatness of that story. And I tell Monica that I love that book. It's a great story beautifully told. And Monica says --

MONICA ON THE PHONE
Remember in the movie when Henry Fonda looks out at that valley?



JAMES

OK: I just need to pause this for a minute -- because do you hear what's going on? Seriously. I'm on the phone with a woman who works for the unemployment office and she's talking to me about "The Grapes of Wrath" and the moment in the movie when Henry Fonda looks out at a valley in California -- his family had to leave everything they knew back in Oklahoma where the Dust Bowl has buried their farm and made it impossible for them to scratch out a living. They've traveled across country and finally made it to California! And Henry Fonda and the family climb out of their beat-up jalopy and -- oh and one more thing: did you know the book was banned in the Soviet Union by Joseph Stalin, because the Communist Party was troubled by the thought that the story showed that even the most destitute Americans could afford a car...?

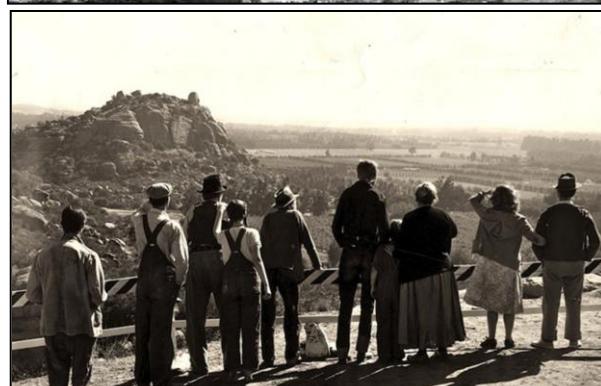
(...)

Back to Henry Fonda and that valley.

This is from the screenplay of "The Grapes of Wrath: by Nunnally Johnson.

"The scene dissolves to the TEHACHAPI VALLEY, by day. Taking it from the book, there is a breathtaking view of the valley from where Highway 66 comes out of the

mountains. This is the California the Joads have dreamed of, rich and beautiful, the land of milk and honey. It is just daybreak, with the sun at the Joad's back. They have pulled off the side of the road and stopped, just to drink in the sight. They are looking almost reverently at the sight before them as they climb stiffly out of the truck."



MONICA ON THE PHONE

So in the movie they get out of the truck and the Joad family looks out at this beautiful valley -- it's so green, so beautiful.

JAMES

Just to pause again for a minute. If you've ever seen the movie of "The Grapes of Wrath" then you'll remember it's shot in black & white. So when they're looking out at that valley -- we see what the characters see. It's like we see it in color. And for a moment it's like Monica and I are both standing at the side of the road looking out at that valley together. Then Monica says:

MONICA ON THE PHONE

See it? See it? We need that valley now, Mr. James. We need that Valley of Hope. You're going to write that valley. Please? Will you do that for us?

JAMES

And then she tells me she's going to be on the look-out for my name on something great in the future.

MONICA ON THE PHONE

Well Mr. James. Mr. James Still -- I'm going to remember your name. I'm going to be looking for you.

JAMES

Thank you, Monica.

MONICA ON THE PHONE

We need you. I'm counting on you to write OUR "Grapes of Wrath"...

JAMES

O, dear Monica. I don't know what I say to that... I need to get off the phone before I start to cry. When we finally hang up (did I mention that she answered all of my unemployment questions which also helped calm me down???) – as soon as I hang up I literally double over and weep right here on a street corner in my neighborhood. It's a Sunday morning and I'm on a walk in Los Angeles where I live. I can't stop crying. I weep for the tenderness of our phone call. I weep for what feels like a messy mix of loss and gratitude. I weep out of grief. I look at the street and it's lined with Jacaranda trees and they are in breathtaking bloom. The trees are filled with their purple blooms, and the street beneath them are a river of purple blooms too. I'm thinking about Monica. From here on out I know I'll forever be writing for Monica. And all the Monicas out there. I see you.



END