

The Resurrectionist— (!)

A Farce in

Two (2)

Acts

By

Michael Fowler

WHY I LIKE IT: *Drama Editor JOHN SULLIVAN writes...* The Resurrectionist proposes – but not overtly – some fundamental questions but from its own essentially (maybe existentially) absurd perspective. So what’s the purpose of Medicine, as a science, a practice and a business? What’s the nature of our biology and how tight can we stretch it before it warps? And legal casuistry follows the play’s insane but irresistible logic until ultimately the whole shebang comes totally unsprung. Though the way this plot develops is unique to The Resurrectionist, this play reminds me of much of what I still like about Mel Brooks’ Young Frankenstein – minus the incessant stream of often corny zingers. And you’ve got to feel for Grandpa Sander – a sane man of medicine trapped in his grandson’s crazy-making premise. (Spacing is playwright’s own.)

The Resurrectionist
A Farce in Two Acts
by Michael Fowler

Characters:

Carl: a medical student

Sander: a retired physician, Carl's grandfather

Samantha, called Sam: a law student, Carl's neighbor

Leon: a resurrection intern, young, cruel and uneducated, perhaps with a hump

Infant dolls, adult dummies, disembodied ghosts

Setting

Except for the graveyard scene, the entire action of the play takes place in Carl's living room, a spacious room in a third-floor apartment that he shares with Sander. A table and chairs. A large open window in the rear wall that overlooks a parking lot sixty feet below.

Act One, Scene One

Carl

I'm sorry, grandfather, that I ran you over with my car, not once but twice. Entirely unforgivable of me.

SANDER

Not at all, my boy. I'm none the worse for wear, it would appear. My fault entirely trying to locate the morning edition while you were heading off to clinic.

CARL

The odd thing is, grandfather, that I could have sworn you were dead at the first impact. I hit you that first time face-on and accelerating, recklessly trying to beat Mrs. Rogers out of the lot. I saw you in the twilight too late to apply the brakes, but saw you lifted in the air from the force of my bumper. When I got out to investigate, you were under the wheels. You had stopped breathing and your heart had stopped beating.

SANDER

Yes, I vaguely remember that. Though it's hard to recall things experienced during a loss of consciousness.

Carl

As a third-year medical student, I know what I'm talking about. You were dead. Then, thinking I was putting the car in reverse, I sought to pull away from you, but ran over you again. I felt the wheels go over your body, crushing any life out of your frail form if any remained. When I again got out to look you over, you were alive and kicking. You had started breathing again and your heart was pounding. You even begged me to stop running over you. Naturally you were in rather a bad mood.

SANDER

Yes, I was a little upset with you at that point. Running me over twice, really!

CARL

But now you're fine.

SANDER

Yes, well, a little under the weather, perhaps. Not really top-hole after that.

CARL

But think about this, grandfather. You died from being run over by me, of that I'm certain. And then you were evidently revived by being run over by me. What can that mean?

SANDER

Haven't the foggiest. Do you think you could get me some tea? I'm still a bit atremble from being killed and coming back to life all in one morning. And it's not even nine o'clock. I haven't had my BM yet.

CARL

Of course. (As he moves to the kitchen, enter SAMANTHA holding a lifelike infant that turns out to be made of nylon or other artificial material.)

SAM

Hello, may we come in?

CARL

(Handing his father a cup of tea) Well, whose is this? Not yours, Sam?

SAM

Not likely. I've never been pregnant in my life, more's the pity. I told Mrs. Rodriguez on two that you might look at little Emanuel here before we took off for work this morning. She says the baby seems irritable. I've looked the thing over, but don't detect any problem with it. But then my specialty is patient rights up to and not excluding malpractice.

CARL

Irritable, eh? Well, pediatrics isn't my specialty, either. Maybe you'd care to have a look, grandfather? Even though your specialty was kidneys?

(SANDER chokes gently on his tea and dies)

CARL

Grandfather seems to have fallen asleep. I'll have a look, though I'm due at the ER in twenty minutes. (Takes infant from SAM)

SAM

Is Dr. Volner all right? He doesn't seem to be breathing, and he's gone all blue.

CARL

Let me see (Hands infant back to SAM) You're right, he's stopped breathing. This really isn't his morning. It may be his second passing on.

SAM

Take the baby (Hands infant back to CARL) I'll give him some tea. It may revive him if we're not too late.

CARL

No! He must have choked on the tea. Giving him more will only make matters worse. (Pause) Wait, no, you're right. Take the baby. (Hands infant back to SAM) It can't hurt, and I want to test a hunch I have about grandfather. (He pours a lot more tea into SANDER's mouth, who sputters and regains consciousness.)

CARL

Grandfather, grandfather, are you all right?

SAM

Are you okay, Doctor Volner?

SANDER

So it would seem. Don't tell me I died again. You know, it's not such a bad idea. I'm eighty-six, after all, and I'm just waiting around. Food tastes like nothing to me and I haven't had sex in over twenty years. There's nothing I want to see on television. I know what happens to the stock market. You don't need to keep reviving me, Carl. You either, Sam. I'm ready. I've got my living will papers around somewhere, what did I do with them? (Begins looking around him aimlessly)

CARL

That's just it, grandfather. I'm not reviving you. At least I'm not doing anything that ought to revive you. I ran over you twice, killing you once and applying the same trauma a second time, and you recovered. You choked to death once on tea, then when I filled your throat and lungs with tea a second time, you recovered. As a medical researcher, what does that suggest to you?

SANDER

You secretly hate me?

CARL

Nonsense. This is very odd. Hmm.

SAM

Would one of you medicos please look at Emanuel? I told Mrs. Rodriguez I'd have him back and diagnosed before we left for work.

CARL

Grandfather? I'm trying to think. (Walks to the window)

SANDER

Sure, sure. (SAM hands him the infant)

CARL

(Pointing): Right out this window I can look down sixty feet to the spot on the lot where I twice ran over grandfather. I can't stop thinking about that. How could he ever have survived?

SAM

You leave your window open at night, without even a screen? What about bugs?

CARL

Grandfather and I are old campers. We like fresh air. (He slaps fly on wall, and watches it fall to a table top.) Fly dead. (He slaps the dead fly, and watches it fly away.) Fly alive. Hmm.

SANDER

Probably the child just needs a good burp. (He stands and walks across the room holding and patting the infant and falls out the window)

SAM

(in shock): Did you see that? Doctor Volner and Emanuel just went sailing out the window!

(SAM and CARL rush to look out the window, down at the parking lot below)

CARL

Grandfather's landed on the Rodriguez's wooden balcony thirty feet below. He's not moving. He's a goner.

SAM

The baby went down all sixty feet to the paved lot! Oh my heavens!

CARL

Look, the Rodriguez kids are pushing grandfather over the edge. They think it's some sort of game.

SAM

Oh goodness! (Begins to shout down to the Rodriguez kids.) You kids! Stop that! Leave Doctor Volner alone!

CARL

(To SAM) No, no, let them push him over!

SAM

Are you serious?

CARL

Trust me and don't interfere. It's a hunch I have. (Looking down) There he goes the rest of the way. Ouch, right on the neck.

SAM

Whatever. I'm going after the baby. Come with me, we'll drive him to the ER. Oh, I hope it's all right. They're flexible at that age, aren't they?

CARL

Just get the baby back up here, ASAP, since I don't know how long we've got. (Softly) No way it could have survived that fall. Sixty feet onto pavement, landing right on its little head. Not a chance.

(SAM exits on the run.)

CARL

(At the window again) Grandfather! You okay? Great! Listen, pick up the baby beside you and bring it inside to Sam. She's on her way for it. Sam! Meet me on the stairwell with the baby and toss it up to me as fast as you can. We may only have a few seconds! He goes to the door, looks out, and catches the infant tossed up to him from the steps below. He at once turns, steps toward the window, and tosses the infant out.) Good luck, Little one! (Leaning out the window and looking down) Mrs. Rodriguez, don't catch the baby! No, no, let him hit the pavement, it's for his own good! (Softly) Oh good, she missed. (Louder) Sam, how's the baby? Grandfather, examine little Emanuel before you give him to Mrs. Rodriguez. Grandfather! Do you hear me? Sam, get the baby away from Mrs. Rodriguez and bring him up here!

(SANDER enters. CARL reacts to see him return so quickly)

CARL

That was a fast climb, grandfather. Did you get a chance to examine the infant?

SANDER

(Between loud, deep breaths) Seems fine. (He sits wearily in an easy chair, expels his breath noisily.) Lord, what a morning.

SAM

(Entering) Mrs. Rodriguez won't surrender her baby to me, but Emanuel was crying lustily and appears no worse for harm. She's calling 9-11 just to be safe. Oh my, she's a wreck. And how is Doctor Volner?

SANDER

(Weakly, beginning to catch his breath) Can't complain, I haven't the strength. (During the following, he picks up a blank sheet of paper from a nearby table, writes a brief message on it,

folds it double, and sticks it in a breast pocket so that it sticks out. Then he helps himself to more tea, quietly sputters and dies.)

CARL

I have to get to work, and I know you have to get to class, but there's a lot here to think about.

SAM

You'll run me by the law school as usual? I can't miss any classes with finals coming up next week. I'll be late as it is.

CARL

Sure, are you ready? I'll sure have a story for my coworkers in the ER this morning. Maybe they can help me think this through. What's happened here is outside medical science, as far as I know. Tonight we all three can meet and give opinions. That all right with you, grandfather? (Pause) Grandfather?

SAM

It looks like the tea again. He's lost his ability to swallow properly. If I may anticipate you, I'll pour some more down his throat. (She prepares to do so.)

CARL

What's this? (He extracts the note from SANDER's pocket, unfolds it, and reads aloud.) "DNR," Do not resuscitate, signed Doctor S. Volner. Hmm. Well then, I guess that's it. I haven't the heart to bring the old boy back again. Maybe it wouldn't work a second time anyway.

SAM

The 9-11 people are coming, Carl. We can wait and tell them about your grandfather. (A siren is heard.) There they are now.

CARL

No, let's go. I'm not going to trouble them. This was his last wish. Let them focus on little Emanuel. I'll notify the police from work. (They exit, leaving SANDER at rest)

SAM

(Reenters quickly, pours more tea down SANDER's throat, and watches him sputter back to life. Attaboy, couldn't just count you out, could I? But don't tell Carl it was me. (She exits hurriedly)

SANDER

(Pulls the note from his pocket) Can't anyone around here read? DNR means do not resuscitate!
What a household!

CARL

(calling, off) Be right with you, I forgot something! (Enters and rushes to SANDER) So you're
alive.

SANDER

What do you expect, with all you do-gooders around here? (Tries to hand CARL the DNR note)
Here, this is your copy.

CARL

Later, granddad. Got to hurry. Tell Sam I'm onto her. (He exits)

Act One, Scene Two

(It is several months later. CARL now wears a white suit like Mark Twain. SANDER and SAM are unchanged. An uncouth intern, LEON, young, hulky and possibly with a hump, is on hand. A section of the living room has been screened off into a "resurrection" area, which the audience does not clearly see. The area contains guns, knives, bats, tire irons, brass knuckles, poisons, a flamethrower, a large freezer, an oven, a wading pool full of water, a gallows, an electric shock device, sticks of dynamite, an explosive-proof locker, all more hinted at than seen. Down in the parking lot sits the Resurrection Mobile, a remodeled ambulance with "The Resurrectionist" logo painted on the side. It is LEON's task to maintain this equipment and the Resurrection Mobile, and also to usher in new clients, especially ungainly ones, from the stairwell and dining room that together now serve as a client waiting area.)

CARL

Leon! Show in the next client!

LEON

(Off): Eh. (LEON enters bearing a dead nude infant in one hand as if it were an apple) Eh.

CARL

Thank you, Leon. But where's the mother or guardian at the time of death? I need to know the precise circumstances of the infant's demise, or I can't hope to resurrect it.

(LEON stands holding the dead baby and looks vacant)

SAM

(Entering, dressed in exercise leotard) Excuse me, it's me again. And how's the Resurrectionist this morning? Goodness what a crowd out there. Bodies stacked on the stairs and sagging on the dining room chairs. I'd say someone needs an assistant.

CARL

Business is booming, Sam, no question about it. Word of my unique powers is spreading. Have you met Leon, my intern? Actually he's only a job applicant at this time, though a promising one. (He motions to LEON to hand him the dead baby, and LEON complies) And in case you're wondering, since he refuses to say hello, Grandfather is asleep over there, alive but not lively.

SAM

Glad to hear you're all well. Hello Sander. Hello again, Leon.

LEON

Eh. (SANDER does not react)

SAM

It was Leon I handed over the dead baby to, on my way in. So we've met, briefly. He's a most efficient intern. Had the little corpse out of my possession as soon as he saw me.

CARL

Ah, and is the child yours. Sam? Is this at last the clandestine child you've been hiding from your friends and neighbors?

SAM

Not likely. It's little Emanuel again. I was babysitting for Mrs. Rodriguez this morning, and put the little chap through a recommended exercise program for infants. You see the result.

CARL

Aha. Now then, so as not to waste precious moments, for I have not yet determined how long after death resurrection may be performed, you must explain to me as exactly as you can the steps you took to exercise the infant.

SAM

As a legal student, I've very concerned about my liability. Perhaps this exercise program isn't as safe as advertised. I'm counting on you, Carl, to get me out of any potential trouble spot.

CARL

Well, you're the legal beagle. I was hoping that you would advise me in these matters. But my guess is that no blame for the infant's fate attaches to you, provided I succeed. Unless, of course, you were mistreating the child in some manner.

SAM

Oh I hardly think so. I was only exercising it the same way I exercise all the infants I babysit. I can't imagine what went wrong. I think of myself as a kind of child fitness expert.

CARL

(Handing her the tiny corpse) Pray demonstrate. Do the routine exactly as you did when little...you say this is little Emanuel again? The child whom Grandfather dropped out the window?

SAM

The same.

CARL

What an unfortunate, and at the same time, what a fortunate young man. Now then. Do the routine exactly as you did it prior to little Emanuel's demise. Down to the least flex and twitch. (He sits back and touches his fingertips together like Sherlock Holmes, but does not smoke a pipe)

SAM

(Expertly tosses the dead infant about by each of its tiny limbs, catching and twirling it as if it were the plastic dummy that it is. She performs a complicated and practiced routine for some seconds)

CARL

And it died somewhere in here, you think?

SAM

(Continuing to stretch, twist and toss the infant) Yes, after about a minute, I should say.

CARL

It's been about a minute now. Keep going, repeating the routine exactly.

SAM

(As infant crying sounds are heard) Oh, he's alive! You've done it!

CARL

All right, you may stop the exercise now. (She does so, holding the infant to her breast, and cooing and gurgling sounds are heard)

LEON

Eh! Eh! Eh!

SAM

What's his problem?

CARL

Children make him nervous. Can you slap a diaper on it? That lessens the terror somehow. Leon, why don't you dash out to the dining room and bring in that fellow who was clubbed to death, and his friend who was battered with a tire iron? Set them up in chairs in the Resurrection Area and begin administering treatment the way I taught you while I finish with Sam and Emmanuel. Keep beating them until you feel a strong pulse and see the roses in their cheeks.

LEON

(Exiting) Eh.

SAM

I knew I could count on you. You are truly the Resurrectionist. What seemed only minutes ago like an unalterable tragedy has been transformed into an uplifting but at the same time mundane business.

CARL

Thank you for the kind words. And now you know what to do should Emanuel or any other infant succumb to over-exercise in the future. Just repeat and he'll come right around.

SAM

Astonishing. But I expected nothing less from my wonderful neighbor who makes the miraculous the prosaic.

CARL

You're too kind. Have you looked into our Resurrection area lately, Sam? Leon and I have guns and knives of all calibers and sharpness to revitalize the victims of gunshot and stabbings, a freezer to restore the frozen, a wading pool to revive the drowned, potions of all sorts to awake the poisoned, a flamethrower to bring back the burned, an explosion-proof locker and sticks of dynamite to restore the blasted, a shocking device to rekindle the electrocuted, and outside on the lot rests the Resurrection Mobile, useful not only in transporting the deceased here, but in revivifying the run over. I have a cheap clunker down there too to reenact car crashes. We're fully equipped. (Pause) I can't think why no one ever noticed it before.

SAM

Noticed what before?

CARL

How easy it is to reverse death. All you need to do is reenact the cause of it. I make no secret of the fact. I've submitted articles to the *Journal of American Medicine* and *The Lancet*, outlining my theory and practice. *The Lancet* published Watson and Crick's theory of DNA structure, you know.

SAM

I didn't know. But wouldn't it be better to keep mum about the whole project, if you plan to make resurrection your livelihood? You'll have no trade at all if any rank amateur feels qualified to raise the dead.

CARL

I should have thought of that. I let my desire for fame undercut my innovator's advantage. Well, it's too late to worry now.

SAM

Oh, here's your mail. I picked it up on the way in. I think I spotted letters from *The Lancet* and *The Journal of American Medicine*.

CARL

(Eagerly grabs the stack of mail, looks through it, and tears open an envelope. At the same time, LEON drags large battered body across the living room floor toward the Resurrection area) Amazing. I only sent out my article two weeks ago, and both publications have already responded. They must have been impressed. (Over the sound of the concealed LEON pounding the large body with a club or tire iron, he reads) "Dear doctor...hmm...hmm...we tested your

hypothesis on the regeneration of healthy tissue by reapplying the cause of injury, with most disappointing results. I slammed my knee, already painfully bruised by a collision with a doorway lintel, into the lintel once again. Instead of seeing a loss of pain and the promotion of healthy tissue, I beheld more pain, along with additional swelling and discoloration. This we believe falsifies your hypothesis, and we must therefore reject your article. Sincerely, The Lancet.” The fools. Don’t they understand it is the return from death I’m talking about, not sore knees? (Tears open another envelope and, as LEON redoubles his efforts on the seated corpse and the corpse gradually begins uttering soft groans and cries, he reads) “Dear Doctor...hmm...hmm...or should we call you Dr. Frankenstein...we find ourselves amazed that such an outdated myth as the reanimation of a corpse taken seriously in this day and age. Please accept our speedy and sincere rejection, The Journal...” Hmmm. That’s that, then. I remain unsung and anonymous.

SAM

But now your procedure is secret, at least for the time being. If you really want to give up medical school and be The Resurrectionist, the field is open. (Looks concerned) What do I owe you for the infant?

CARL

Yes, I can rake it in as the sole Resurrectionist, until word or mouth spreads, as it inevitably must. Hmm. I frankly don’t recall our scale for infants. But for you Sam, my services are free. In fact I’ll pay you to become my legal expert and payroll clerk. That way you can give up babysitting with its high infant mortality rate, and concentrate on bringing back the dead. I’ve no objection if you want to read law while you’re here. I know your heart is set on becoming a lawyer, and if you were to become mine, that would suit me very well.

SAM

I may take you up on that. Law school is expensive. I do have one small complaint. (Over the sounds of LEON pounding the body of the man he just dragged into the Resurrection Area) That Leon person you call your intern or job applicant there. When I arrived he was standing on the stairs having a cold beverage, sort of smirking at the dead child in my hands and all the other bodies out there. It was quite off-putting, and not the service-with-a smile I felt I had the right to expect.

CARL

(As LEON, finished pummeling the man back to life, sets a charred corpse in the now vacant chair and turns a flamethrower on it) Thank you for your input. Client satisfaction is our number one priority. Be assured the young man will be thoroughly investigated and interviewed

intensively before I offer him full time employment at The Resurrectionist. In fact if you want to assist me in interviewing him, I would welcome that.

SAM

Let me think it over, but I'm sure I'll say yes. I can foresee some tricky legal questions pertaining to your business that will make it very interesting for a lawyer like me. Well, time to feed Emanuel. (She exits)

CARL

(Calling to her) Bring him back if he chokes.

SANDER

(Awakes after several starts) So you brought the babe around, eh?

CARL

Grandfather, I thought you were asleep.

SANDER

I wish I could have remained so for eternity. That kid will regret his life too someday. Fortunately I have a way out. (Takes up a pistol from the seat of his chair and shoots fatally himself in the heart)

CARL

Grandfather! Not on my watch! Leon, a .38, cocked and loaded! (He takes the pistol handed to him from behind the screen marking off the Resurrection area and shoots SANDER lethally in the heart)

SANDER

(Gradually pointing his gun at his temple as he returns to life) This is my last round. I encourage you to read this. (Offers CARL another folded note with his free hand) You're an observant fellow. You'll notice the DNR above my signature. Now respect my dying wish. (Shoots himself horribly in the temple)

CARL

(Aims the .38 at SANDER's head and pulls the trigger once more. There is a click but no shot) Damn. (He hands the pistol into the Resurrection area) Leon, a .45, primed for action. (He

withdraws his hand now with a different pistol in it. He aims this at SANDER and shoots him violently in the head)

SANDER

(Revived) What is it you want now?

To let you know, Grandfather, that Samantha is to start work with us, if all goes well.

SANDER

Oh lucky day. (He points his gun at his head once more, but lowers it on seeing CARL point the .45 at him.)

CARL

It really will be Grandfather. I need a sharp mind to organize the business and keep us from running afoul of the law. Some folks may be better off dead, in other words, and we may need to weed out those customers. And with business the way it is, I can easily afford to pay Sam and my intern Leon top wages. I plan to pay you too, as my general scientific advisor and kidney expert. Also as my ethics consultant.

SANDER

I advise you to heed my living will.

CARL

Grandfather, you're a caution. Now why don't you get busy and think of a mission statement for the Resurrectionist? Something that states our metaphysical purpose at the same time it dazzles our customers.

SANDER begins to snore loudly, his gun falling to the floor.

Act One, Scene Three

LEON

(Carrying over his shoulder SANDER, who has been fatally wounded in a hunting accident. The shooter has driven off in his car after dropping off the body, unable to wait around.) Where do you want this?

CARL

Good heavens. Is that Grandfather? It looks like he wandered onto a skeet range.

LEON

Yep, it's him. Hunting accident, the man outside said. He left in a hurry. I'll set the old bird up in the Resurrection Area and apply our 20-gauge.

CARL

Set him here, no need to stand on formality at a time like this. (LEON unloads SANDER into an easy chair. SANDER groans)

CARL

I detect signs of life, feeble though they may be.

SANDER

(Weakly) Perhaps I should have worn my orange cap. Then I would have stood out. Couldn't have missed me in my orange cap. I said, "There's a grouse, it's mine." Next thing I know, it's like I stepped on the Normandy beach on D-Day. Shot came at me from all sides. My grouse vanished in a vapor of feathers as I fell wounded.

CARL

Grandfather, this is Carl. I think I can save you. Your wounds appear to be superficial, if extensive, though there's a lot of bleeding and most of the left side of your face is missing.

SANDER

And that's my good side, too. The side with the scenic mole.

CARL

Keep quiet and sit still while I get my bag. (As he gets his black doctor's bag and opens it) You wouldn't have wandered into another hunter's line of fire on purpose, now would you, Grandfather, just to get yourself shot and killed?

(SANDER sputters and dies)

CARL

He's gone. Leon, you may apply the 20-gauge.

LEON

Whatever you say. But doesn't the old man have a living will?

CARL

Leon, you used to grunt a monosyllable when I gave you a command. Now I get backtalk.

LEON

I was off my meds for a time. Now I'm on them again.

CARL

Lucky me. But you must follow my instructions. I'm still hoping to persuade Grandfather to change his living will.

(LEON obtains a shotgun from the Resurrection Area, aims it at SANDER, and shoots him messily)

SANDER

(Groans and opens his eyes) What day is this?

CARL

While Grandfather recovers his wits, Leon, let me go over triage with you. Since you are brighter now, you possibly may be able to understand it. Put the rifle down and pay attention. (LEON does so) Now then. It would help if you organized the stacks of bodies out there on the stairs. I can hardly squeeze past them these days. All the gunshot victims could perhaps go into the dining room, the car crash fatalities of course stay down on the parking lot, the drug over-dosers between the bathroom and the laundry area.

SANDER

Since you're undoubtedly curious to know, I'm going to tell you what led me to go hunting today, not that one ever needs an excuse to go out in the fresh air and blast away at the lower species. It'll take me a minute to connect all the dots.

CARL

All right. (He sits and prepares to listen) Leon, if you're done beating the stiff back to life up here, go out on the lot and run over some of those accident victims. I'm sure Grandfather's story is not intended for you. Remember, run them over only once, or if you must, three times or at most five. It must be an odd number of times, do you see why, Leon?

LEON

Five times. I like five times. Five times is better than one time or three times.

CARL

All right, Leon. Make it five times, though it seems rather a waste of time and gasoline. Let's count it out, Leon, to be sure you understand. One is resurrection, twice is death again. Three times is resurrection, four times death again. And so five times is resurrection. Right, Leon?

LEON

Right-o. (He exits)

SANDER

There's something about that man I don't trust. Do you see what I mean?

CARL

He's on medications. And now what led you to go hunting, Grandfather?

SANDER

I've been seeing a woman, I don't know if you know that.

CARL

This comes as a complete and total surprise, for the simple reason that you're always here. And not only that, you're always here alone.

SANDER

Well, I've been seeing her for some time. I met her on Biddies.com, and one thing led to another. Long story short, we fell in love and arranged a mutual suicide pact. We both took lethal doses of anthrax last night, but worst luck, only she perished. I got up this morning with the larks, sniffed the air for eggs and bacon, when I remembered her.

CARL

What, all that happened here?

SANDER

No, over at her place. We killed ourselves and I woke up there. It was at her place I sniffed around for eggs and bacon.

CARL

And where is she now?

SANDER

Her body is out on the lot in my car. Naturally I was distraught when I saw that I had betrayed her trust by not dying along with her. To console myself I got dressed, called some friends and went hunting. It was a glorious day for it, the fields teeming with life.

CARL

How long has she been in your car?

SANDER

About two days, I should say.

CARL

I know from experience that it is with my power to bring back someone who has only been deceased for two days. I wouldn't be overly concerned unless she'd been in your Hyundai a month or longer.

SANDER

Still I feel I betrayed her. And it would be worse if we brought her back. She and I had no desire to return to (He spreads his hands to encompass the globe) *this*. Mass shootings. Political correctness. Global warming.

CARL

If you decide to bring her back, Grandfather, you know you need only apply more anthrax.

SANDER

I find myself on the horns of a dilemma.

CARL

Speak of a dilemma. I've got another stiff in the Resurrection Area, awaiting the verdict of Sam, our legal advisor.

SANDER

Oh?

CARL

You remember that man we revived from electrocution last week, the one with the burns on his wrists and the guilty expression?

SANDER

Vaguely. What was his name?

CARL

Pardon.

SANDER

I said, what was his name?

CARL

(Forcefully) Pardon.

SANDER

(Shouting) I said, What's his name?

CARL

(Exasperated) No, I'm telling you his name. His name is Pardon, Joel Pardon.

SANDER

(Calmed) You don't say. How confusing.

CARL

It gets worse. Mr. Joel Pardon, it appears, did not receive the governor's pardon for a capital crime he had committed and been found guilty of, and was legally sentenced to die in the electric chair. This was done. Mr. Pardon, accompanied by several family members who had raided a funeral home, appeared before me several days later and applied for resurrection. Sam found his name on a state roster of the rightfully executed, and promised to let me know the legal repercussions of bringing him back to life. She's very thorough, our Sam. She thinks if we resurrect him, we may have to turn him over to the state to be executed all over again. And his family keeps calling me as the body sits out there in our chamber, awaiting my decision.

(LEON enters)

CARL

Ah, Leon. Did you run over those accident victims back to life?

LEON

I did. I mean, me did.

CARL

And where are they now?

LEON

They left. Why, was there something you wanted me to tell them?

CARL

No, that's fine. I'll just send them a bill. Leon, would you mind running across the hall and getting Sam? We need to discuss a legal matter with her.

LEON

Sure, sure. I guess my opinion doesn't matter, even though I've seen the entire Perry Mason series. (He exits)

CARL

I haven't told you before, Grandfather, but some of the ethical and legal and even metaphysical offshoots of being a resurrectionist are most troubling to my soul. I hope you can give me some advice on a particularly ticklish issue.

SANDER

Fire away, my boy. And feel free to take that literally.

CARL

Basically, it's this. What is it like to come back from the dead? Any number of my clients are asking me that. Not the dead ones, of course, but the living ones who bring in the dead ones. And frankly I've been too busy to ask any of my patients about their experiences. Oh, occasionally one may volunteer his or her experience, but it's usually something compatible with an oxygen-starved brain. One told me he found himself floating above his own body in a beam of bright light listening to Kenny G play the saxophone. That kind of bliss. Does that comport with your experiences, Grandfather?

SANDER

Not exactly. I recall this last time I found myself in a place where I bruised easily and often, but I was able to obtain excellent medical at a senior discount.

LEON

(Enters bearing the dead SAM over his shoulder) I found her slumped over the sofa, the culprit running out the back door. (Lowers her not too gently onto a chair) Do you want I should give chase?

CARL

No, no. I know who it is. She's started seeing her abusive boyfriend again after I warned her that he was trouble. The important thing is to bring Sam around. She can notify the authorities if she wants to. (He moves to examine SAM, who is sitting up lifelessly) Looks like strangulation. Notice the redness around her neck and the bulging eyes. (Feels her neck) Yes, the epiglottis is crushed. Same thing happened a week ago. That's when I first warned her about this guy. Trouble, I tell you. (Pulls on white gloves) Let's see if I can get her breathing again. (Places his hands around her neck)

SANDER

I've been giving some thought to our mission statement too. You recall that you asked me to come up with a mission statement for The Resurrectionist.

CARL

(Begins rather gently to strangle SAM, who although dead squirms a bit) What about it?

SANDER

(From memory, with difficulty) I call it "My Vision."

CARL

(Continuing to strangle SAM more and more vigorously, to which she responds likewise but does not regain consciousness) It's supposed to be our vision, that is, the vision of the Resurrection team, and not your vision. Isn't that right, Grandfather?

SANDER

(Ignoring CARL, who continues to strangle SAM back to life)

As an American with the best interests of his fellow countrymen at heart, my vision is unfortunately impaired. I have cataracts that require laser surgery, and although I am not a Presbyterian, I have presbyopia. That means that I have the vision of an old person, not that I see old church fathers wandering about. In my vision, cloudy as it is, I see death no longer master, but tamed and in retreat. I see perhaps our greatest fear diminished and life prolonged and enhanced, despite all the floating dark specks I see everywhere I look, as if I wandered in a storm of black flies. I know that America can be great again, with legions of the dead brought back to rejuvenate us in our hour of need. Our parents die, our children keel over, our loved ones suffocate on plastic wrap in kinky sex acts, our respected mentors are crushed in acts of road rage, what does it matter now? All are salvaged and reanimate by the Resurrectionist, at modest fees. Yes, I see this clearly, despite ruptured capillaries in both retinas and an outdated optometric prescription.

CARL

(After struggling mightily but to no avail to revive SAM)

I think a stronger hand is required here.

SANDER

Shall I?

CARL

No, Grandfather. You go on reciting your vision, which is quite moving. Leon, you have the arms of a strangler. Care to give it a go?

LEON

(Puts his hands around SAM's neck as CARL stands aside) Eh. (Through SANDER's remaining speech, he strangles SAM vigorously as she twists and writhes her way back to life)

SANDER

My vision for America comes through a bad left eye and an even worse right eye. But I see clearly my need of prescription sunglasses. The Resurrectionist promises the disgorgement of graveyards and funeral homes and a rising tide of ever deceased. (As SAM coughs and shivers to full recovery) That's really all I have. I'm sorry. I wish I were dead.

CARL

I think she's back. All right, Leon, leave off there. (LEON stops strangling SAM, and she looks around) Sam, how do you feel?

SAM

(Gasping) Top notch. Ready to rock and roll. (Looks around and gets her bearings) Thank you, Leon. It was nice of you to choke me back to life.

LEON

Aw, my pleasure, miss.

SAM

Your hands remind me of my boyfriend's. So firm, so strong.

LEON

Lordy, miss. Me feels a blush coming on.

CARL

What's got into you two? Leon, go into the Resurrection Area and begin reviving our backlog of child drownings in the wading pool. Use room temperature water. (LEON obeys) Sam, I really would advise against your seeing your current boyfriend. He's obviously some sort of serial killer, or he would be if we didn't keep bringing you back from death. This is the third time, isn't it? Your neck is as dry and scruffy as crepe paper where it's been squeezed. Why don't you take legal action? I would think a lawyer in training like you would at the very least initiate restraining order against this fiend, before he seriously harms you.

SAM

I do need to give this relationship a good think-through. I don't know why I'm drawn to violent men. (LEON chuckles from behind the Resurrection Area screens. The sounds of running water and splashing and finally children giggling also come from there)

CARL

Now that you're refreshed and composed, Grandfather and I need to pick your legal brain. Foggy legal issues are creeping into the Resurrectionist's work, and must be clearly resolved.

SANDER

Don't forget my lady friend dead in my car outside. (To SAM) I think she's better off that way, but Elijah here thinks otherwise.

CARL

And then there's the thorny issue of a man I brought back from the dead whom the courts say has no legal right to be alive.

(SAM grips her forehead and her head falls onto her chest as she expires. LEON then emerges from behind the screens and runs a long knife into her back. SAM recovers once more)

LEON

Youse didn't notice that her boyfriend also stabbed her. Lucky for her I did.

Act Two, Scene One

(It is about six months later. CARL, SANDER and SAM are sitting in the living room, talking. SAM is vastly pregnant. LEON is not present)

SAM

What is that delightful aroma coming from the kitchen?

CARL

(Leans back in his chair and touches his fingertips together like Sherlock Holmes. But he does not play the violin) It's a little experiment Grandfather and I are performing. Last night after you left us we had a lengthy discussion on whether we could resurrect cremains, or the ashes of cremated bodies. That and the revival of those who have died of natural causes are becoming our most popular service requests, and so far we don't have a reliable answer to either.

SAM

I should think not.

CARL

Each is a thorny problem indeed. The problem with cremains would seem to be twofold. You have the original cause of death, which could be anything at all, from being run over to overdosing. And then you have the destruction of the dead body by funeral home oven. Where to begin? Let's say the subject died by gunshot. Do I shoot the ashes? Or pour water on them if he or she drowned? Neither of those works, as I have verified by experiment. So it seemed clear that I should apply heat first, and see if the cremation process could be reversed. But what oven setting is appropriate? Do I need the extreme temperature of a kiln or pizza oven, or will my kitchen oven do? By Grandfather's fortuitous decision, I decided to bake the ashes of our current client, whose original cause of death is in fact unknown to me, for 15 minutes at 450 degrees, and then 45 minutes at 350. And I think something wonderful is taking place.

SAM

I'd say so. Something, or someone, smells delicious. Congratulations, Sander.

SANDER

(Coming out of a light doze) Nothing to it. It's my first wife's old gingerbread recipe, the baking part. Ruth's gingerbread men were the highlight of every Thanksgiving and Christmas, unless her name was Agnes. (The oven timer sounds) I'll go have a look and see if she's done. It's a woman, by the way. We know that much.

CARL

(Starts to get up) Nonsense, Grandfather. I'll go. You've done enough for one day.

SANDER

Stop treating me as if I'm a helpless old fool. I'll check on her, and if she needs another five or ten minutes, I'll reset the timer. (He gets up laboriously)

CARL

Fine. On your way, would you toss that paper bag on the kitchen table into the explosion-proof locker in the Resurrection Area, and detonate the grenade that's inside? Leon left the bag lying out there, and the man in it, or what's left of him, needs to be reassembled following a dynamite accident along the highway construction.

SANDER

Of course. (He walks back into the Resurrection Area leaving the bag untouched on the table. He is then seen through the screen climbing into the explosion-proof locker. He closes himself inside it)

CARL

Have you given any further thought, Sam to our troublesome legal issues? What if we revive a person sentenced to death by the state and executed? Can we be punished for that?

SAM

To tell you the truth, Carl, my mind has been elsewhere. It's finals time, and I'm overwhelmed by torts and contracts. (A muffled blast is heard from the Resurrection Area. She notices the bag on the kitchen table) You know, I think Dr. Conyer just blew himself up back there. The bag of body parts is still on your table.

CARL

Oh dear. Back to his usual tricks. But it's barely possible he mistook the explosion-proof locker for the bathroom. I've caught him sitting in it before, reading with his pants down.

SAM

I hate to mention it, but I sometimes run across him that way in your bathroom. He seems not to bother to close the door anymore.

CARL

Yes, that's his latest gambit. He's pretending to have senile dementia so that I'll euthanize him. Well, nothing to do but blast him back together again.

SAM

I'll practice my breathing exercises. (She begins to inhale and exhale with concentrated force) I'm due in two weeks, and I'm all aflutter.

CARL

(Picks up the bag of body parts from the kitchen table, goes behind the screen to the explosion-proof locker, opens the locker door, tosses in the bag, then lights a stick of dynamite and tosses that in. He closes the door) Who's your doctor?

SAM

You and Dr. Conyer, actually. I'm not seeing anyone else.

CARL

(Joins her in the living room and sits back down) But Grandfather is, or was, a kidney specialist. And I don't have my medical degree yet. Perhaps I never will. Not to mention that my studies have been restricted to a general practice.

SAM

I'm not the sort who demands a birthing team: a doula, a midwife, and an ob-gyn specialist. I count on nature to take its course without undue incident. Life is a natural process after all. You and Dr. Conyer are all I require.

(There is a muffled explosion in the Resurrection Area as the dynamite goes off inside the locker)

CARL

That was a long fuse. (As SAM continues her breathing exercise, the locker opens behind the screen and CARL emerges indistinctly. He enters the living room, distinctly covered in soot and disheveled) Grandfather, did you happen to notice if our highway blast victim fully recovered?

SANDER

(Sitting in his former place) He did. I showed him to the stairway and he seemed most appreciative. Said he'd come back as often as necessary. I also checked on our gingerbread lady. She popped out of the oven done to a turn, and ran down the stairs as well. It's like a fairytale come true.

CARL

But shame on you, grandfather, for blowing yourself to kingdom come like that. we might have lost you.

SANDER

I didn't realize I had blown myself up. It's my brain damage. I suffer from backward sneezes now. Instead of propelling themselves outward, my sneezes are propelled backward into my brain, destroying vital gray matter. It's not my fault I'm a hazard to myself.

CARL

Backward sneezes, he says. Sam tells me you're giving her obstetrical advice. I hope it's good.

SANDER

It's the best. I advise a late-term abortion before it's too late.

SAM

No, Dr. Conyer. I'm having the child. Its father would wring my neck if I didn't.

CARL

So he's the father.

SAM

You think you know who it is?

LEON

(Enters with a string of naked dead babies on a rope like animal pelts) Eh. (To CARL) Got these crib deaths from the hospital along with the cadaver and disinterred body you wanted.

SAM

Good heavens. How gruesome.

CARL

Put them in the Resurrection Area, Leon. Where's the cadaver and disinterred body?

LEON

(A he moves the dead infants into the Resurrection Area) Down in the Resurrection Mobile.

CARL

Bring them up. Need any help?

LEON

Eh. It's only a 250-pound obese blob. And the disinterred body is in a moisture-proof enameled steel casket that only weighs 150-pounds. You relax. Me got 'em in one trip. (He exits)

CARL

To SAM) Not to misconstrue things, but is Leon the father?

SAM

Oh, I'm not ready to make any announcement yet.

SANDER

That brute the father of Sam's child? (To SAM) Definitely you should abort. It'll grow up saying nothing but "Eh." What happened to the other murderer you were seeing? The one that broke your neck every Saturday night?

SAM

Oh, I still see him around. But let's change the subject, if you don't mind. (Mainly to CARL) Can you resurrect those infants? It would be a comfort to me if you could. (She rubs her abdomen)

CARL

I had you in mind when I asked Leon to bring those infants here from the morgue. We all want your labor and delivery to be as from anxiety about stillbirth and sudden infant death syndrome as possible.

SAM

(Continuing to rub her abdomen) I feel better already.

CARL

But as far as we now know, resurrection doesn't work with infant who die prematurely. Resurrection seems only to work on recent deceased who died unnatural deaths. Death by natural causes, by cancer or heart attack or even stillbirth and crib death, seem immune to my gift. Those who died from uncomplicated old age also seem immune. It's most frustrating.

SANDER

Unless you bake their ashes at 375 for fifteen minutes, and then at 325 for forty-five. Then you have little gingerbread babies or gingerbread nursing home residents, alive as anything.

CARL

(Leans back in his chair and joins his fingertips together like Sherlock Holmes, but does not assume a disguise) Perhaps, Grandfather, perhaps.

SANDER

I'm going to tidy up. (He exits)

LEON

(Enters carrying an obese dummy) Eh. Where do you want him?

CARL

Set him up in the Resurrection Area, Leon, and we'll give him the works. And the coffinized individual.

LEON

Right behind. (He sets the obese dummy in a chair in the Resurrection Area, then moves outside the screen to drag in a coffin. He opens the coffin and he and CARL remove another dummy from inside it, a thinner one. This they place in a chair beside the obese dummy. The two then begin pounding the obese dummy indiscriminately with a tire iron and a baseball bat)

SAM

I suppose I should be used to the sight of you two pummeling a corpse, but it still gives me a pang. (For a short time, through the screen, she observes CARL and LEON beating the fat corpse with great exertion and variety of implements)

CARL

(Panting as he works) This is actually a controlled scientific experiment. One the one hand we have an obese man who died of natural causes, most likely congestive heart failure capped by a myocardial infarct. Can anything bring him around? We will give him the works and see. And then beside him we have a man who was interred by a funeral parlor in 1920, going on a hundred years ago. My researches have linked his name to a stock broker who defenestrated himself at the collapse of the market at that time. We will see if a toss out our window has any salubrious effect on a body dead going on a century. If we succeed with either, it will be a major breakthrough.

SAM

I think I'll go check on the mail. (She exits)

SANDER

(Entering cleaned up and with combed hair in a capacious bathrobe that conceals his wrists and ankles, he makes his way with tiny steps to his chair carrying a thick book, and sits. He watches through the screen as CARL and LEON work on the overweight corpse, and cackles with excitement) Give him the works! Give him the works! (Pause) I forgot to ask, what did he die of? (After there is no response to this, he bellows) What did he die of?

CARL

(Nearly breathless, not pausing in his activity) Natural causes, Grandfather. We're trying to revive a man who died of natural causes, to see if it can be done.

SANDER

And who's the skinny galoot?

CARL

(Not pausing in his work, scarcely able to speak) A man buried a hundred years ago.

SANDER

A hundred years ago, fancy that. I was an intern around then. Never thought I'd live this long. What'd he die of, tuberculosis?

CARL

(A gasp) Defenestration.

SANDER

Oh, defenestration. There's no cure for that. Where's Sam?

CARL

(Very weakly) I think she's turned a bit squeamish, but she'll be right back.

SANDER

What makes you think so?

CARL

(Ignoring SANDER, to LEON, hardly able to speak) OK, Leon, enough, enough. (The two stop tormenting the overweight corpse) You ran over him in the Resurrection Mobile before you carried him up here, didn't you?

LEON

Eh. Yeh. And dragged him half a mile at 90.

CARL

Then I'd say he's a goner. Let's try the other. On my count, defenestrate him. (Together they take the thin corpse by his arms)

LEON

Say what?

CARL

Out the window with him. On the count of three. One...wait, let me make sure there's nobody down below. (He looks out the living room window a moment, these shouts down) You kids, look out down there! Yeah, you! Get away for a minute! (After a very brief pause, to LEON) OK, you ready? (They grip the dummy by the arms again) One, two, three, out the window with him! (They toss the dummy out the window. There is a female scream)

CARL

(As he and LEON look out the window and down onto the parking lot) He landed like a pancake.

LEON

Eh. A sack of potatoes.

CARL

I wonder who screamed? We'd better go investigate. We'll bring him back up for another dive, too. (Gasping) We can't give up. I feel I'm on the brink of discovery. Oh, and grab fatty. We'll stuff him in the Resurrection Mobile until we get a chance to run him back to the morgue. (LEON grabs the obese corpse and the two exit, leaving behind the coffin)

SAM

(Enters carrying a stack of mail) Here's your mail. (She tosses it on the living room table. To SANDER) Can I assume the body I saw descending onto the parking lot through my back window was ejected from here? Gave me quite a fright, though I don't know why. Nothing should frighten me these days. Still, for a moment I thought my water broke. (She feels her belly)

SANDER

So you did come back.

SAM

Yes, why shouldn't I? I only went out to gather my wits for a moment and to get the mail. Where are the others, Dr. Conyer? (She sits in her usual chair)

SANDER

Chasing a corpse, as usual. Things have gotten distinctly peculiar around here lately. (Handles the book in his lap) Know anything about Harry Houdini?

SAM

The illusionist and escape artist? Very little.

SANDER

I've been reading up on him. The man was a fool. On his deathbed, he claimed that if there was a way to escape death, he'd find it and return. What a blockhead.

SAM

But Dr. Conyer, most people want to live forever, or they think they do. You can't blame Houdini for sharing in that feeling.

SANDER

Oh, I don't, I don't. I claim he was a numbskull because he hasn't found a way back yet. It's been 75 years, how long does the man need?

SAM

Perhaps it's a difficult problem, the ultimate test.

SANDER

I could do it easily. And to prove it, I will replicate one of Houdini's greatest escapes, with your assistance. It's the one where he escapes drowning while handcuffed under water. (He stands, dropping the book and shedding his bathrobe. He is revealed in swim trunks, handcuffed and with his ankles shackled. He begins taking tiny steps toward the Resurrection Area) Now I am going to throw myself face down into the paddling pool, Sam. After I do that, if you would be so good as to cover me with a tarp or blanket, and then give me 30 minutes to emerge, I would appreciate it. Please don't peek under the tarp as I achieve my miraculous escape. It would ruin the effect. (He steps behind the screen)

SAM

Dr. Conyer, I think this is very ill-advised. And I don't see what it has to do with coming back from the dead, even if you succeed.

SANDER

(From behind the screens, following a great splash of water) The tarp! The tarp!

SAM

(Standing up) Dr. Conyer! Oh, Dr. Conyer! (She feels her stomach) Oh my gosh, my water is breaking.

CARL

(Enters followed by LEON) Sam, what are you doing, giving birth? Leon, lend a hand. (The two arrange SAM in her chair for emergency childbirth. The birth happens apace, and soon after much groaning and grunting from SAM, Carl holds aloft a dead newborn) I'm sorry, Sam, it's stillborn. Nothing in my training prepared me for an umbilical cord like a python. It wrapped itself around the child's throat and strangled the breath out of it. Still, as a resurrectionist...

SAM

You're not pushing that thing back inside me!

CARL

Not necessary. Leon and I will perform the role of a giant vagina, and that should do the trick. Leon, after I wrap the discharged umbilical cord around the infant's neck once more, pull it tight as you can. At the same time, pour warm water over mother and child. Meanwhile I'll press and squeeze the babe with all my strength to imitate a constricting birth canal. Let's do this.... (With much exertion the babe comes to life and gives forth a squall) Success!

SAM

Oh thank heaven!

CARL

Here, suckle your babe. (He hands over the babe to SAM, and she begins to nurse it) I have an idea. Leon, bring Sam's expelled uterus and umbilical cord back into the Resurrection Area. We'll have a go at that wrack of crib deaths. Nothing to lose for the attempt, after all. (LEON, bearing the bloody organs, follows CARL back into the Resurrection Area) all right, Leon, I want you to strangle each infant with the umbilical cord while I squeeze the child with my hands. (Louder) Sam, if you would, point your vagina in our direction. Surroundings may be important. (SAM does not react, but soon there is the gurgling of a growing crowd of happy infants)

SAM

I feel so untidy. Still, it's a wonderful relief to feel my child at my breast. (Hearing the revived babes) I hope I'm not expected to nurse all those. (She glances down at her child, gives a worried look, and shakes it)

CARL

(Emerging from behind the screen) There's that lot taken care of. We'll need to notify the mothers or start a daycare service.

SAM

I've smothered my baby. He's gone all slack and breathless and turned blue.

CARL

You must have had a bad latch. (He approaches SAM and pushes the babe's head hard against her breast. A healthy gurgling sound is quickly heard

SAM

There he is back and turning pink again. Thank you, Carl. By the way, did you happen to notice Dr. Conyer in the wading pool? He's attempting to perform one of Houdini's old tricks, for some reason. I'm afraid he may have drowned.

CARL

Yes, I found him in there beneath a tarp, dead as a sardine in mustard sauce. Leon and I pulled him out to make room for the resurrected infants. Grandfather's pulled that stunt on me too. The old boy is convinced we're going to let him go, just like that, because of some fool living will he claims to have. All he needed was a bit of water forced down his windpipe. He stalked off to his room to change his clothes, I believe. He was wringing wet and in a foul mood, cursing like a schoolboy. I tell you, I love that old bird and refuse to let him die, even if he hates me for it.

Act Two, Scene Two

(A few days later. CARL is relaxing in his usual chair. He presses his fingertips together in the manner of Sherlock Holmes, only he does not say "Elementary, my dear Watson." He appears to be alone in the living room)

SAM

(Enters carrying a stack of mail and holding her infant at her breast. She tosses the mail on the living room table within Carl's reach and then sits nursing the baby in her usual chair) Here's your mail. You know, Carl, I suffocated this damn child again before I came over here, drowning it in mother's milk or cutting off its air flow with too firmly pressing it against my flowing breast, and it's been dead for a couple of hours now. Everything I do to it kills it. Nursing, exercise, you name it.

CARL

I would hold off on any strenuous exercise regimen. We've seen what that can do.

SAM

I tell you, I don't know that I'm cut out for motherhood. I've got the bar exam coming up in three days, and it's too distracting to have to keep this demanding parasite alive. I've a good mind to let it wither and die like a piece of old fruit on the vine, now that I've gone and killed it again already.

CARL

(Casually opening a letter and beginning to read) Oh now, Sam. What you're experiencing is doubtless a bit of normal postpartum depression. Soon the dark skies will part and you'll be glad to have the little one burbling and mewling all over your life. And think how proud the little boy or girl will be to have you, a successful lawyer, as its mother. Is it your son or daughter, by the way? I keep forgetting to ask.

SAM

I don't know. Whenever I change its nappy, I forget to look.

CARL

And money won't be a problem. Lawyers do quite well, and unless I'm mistaken, there's a fat child support check in the mail to you whenever I beat you to it. I recognize the Bureau of Support's envelope by now.

SAM

Yes, yes. He's a good provider for a violent and physically absent man. Though now and then I miss feeling my neck broken by his powerful, warm hands.

CARL

Didn't I read he was arrested after a murderous liaison with another woman? Or was that some other fellow?

SANDER

(Appearing through or between the screens as he sits up in the coffin. He wears a white undershirt spattered with blood with the DNR tag pinned to the front)

This is just the sort of coffin that I want when I die, tee hee! It's just my size and is quite comfortable to stretch out in. Good of Leon to leave it here for me to test drive. Don't anyone forget now, my instructions are: Do Not Resurrect. I mean resuscitate, tee hee!

SAM

What with the old folks' locution? I haven't heard anyone laugh tee hee since, well I've never heard it in real life. Dr. Conyer sounds like some old forester out of Ibsen.

CARL

Once again Grandfather is trying to convince me of his senility so I'll put him down like a dog. (Louder, to SANDER) Speaking of driving, Grandfather, did you ever revive that lady in your

Hyundai? The last time I looked out the window, a crowd was gathering around your car. You really should do something. Either administer anthrax and bring her back to the land of the living, or drive her to some final resting place. Didn't she have any last wishes that you know of?

SANDER

I don't think so. She and I used mainly to discuss the meaning John Denver had brought to our lives. Ah, Denver! We'd go driving in my Hyundai with his greatest hits playing on my console. Both of us remembered where we were and what we were doing when "Country Roads" topped the charts. And would you believe it, it was having sex. Perhaps with each other, who can be sure?

CARL

John Denver? I thought you were more of a Carpenters fan.

SANDER

They were good too. And we'd go park over by Pineywoods Cemetery and make out. Can you believe it, she and I both have prepaid burial plots there. The only difference is, I have a space in the ground, and she has a reserved niche for her ashes. But her last wishes? No, I don't recall any of those. Let me think. (He lies down out of sight once more in the coffin)

SAM

Have you noticed that Dr. Conyer is covered in blood? It's almost alarming.

CARL

(Holding a opened letter before him) Oh really? Grandfather, are you bleeding?

SANDER

(Sitting up in the coffin as before, in the same bloody T-shirt with the DNR tag on the front) Yes, I recently took a job as a greeter at a shooting range, tee hee! This morning I strolled in front of the targets just as a dozen handguns were blazing. It was like Anzio beach. I suppose I'll have to die now, tee hee!

CARL

(Loudly) Really, Grandfather? You greet at a shooting range now, like some cowboy?

SANDER

(Sings) I got spurs, go jingle, jangle, jingle. (He sits down out of sight in the coffin again)

CARL

(Referring to the letter in his hands) This is most interesting. I don't know if you spotted the return address on this envelope before handing it to me?

SAM

I did. The Hero.

CARL

(Carelessly flinging the letter back onto the table and touching his fingertips together in the manner of Sherlock Holmes, only he does not fall over Rieckenback Falls) Precisely so. His letters have been arriving at the rate of almost one a day now. According to this most recent epistle, the one who calls himself The Hero will appear here today at one p.m. sharp, to discuss with the Resurrectionist what he terms "conditions." In brief, he wishes to be the sole provider of resurrection services in these parts, and claims the town isn't big enough for the two of us to operate freely without interfering with each other's trade. Hmm. He would also expand the service to cover ancient ancestors and household pets, no matter in what condition or how long deceased. (He places his fingertips together in the manner of Sherlock Holmes, but does not grapple with Professor Moriarty) These are deep waters.

LEON

(Enters wearing a tight black body suit with a capital H on the front of the shirt) Eh. I am the Hero.

CARL

Is that Leon? This is amazing. It's nowhere near one o'clock. (He leaps up and stands next to LEON, so that the contrast between his white suit and the Hero's black suit is very apparent)

SAM

Why have you leapt up like that?

CARL

Simply because I am a man of action, and mean to convey as much. But I don't mean to alarm anyone. I must shoot Grandfather back to life, of course, but there's no urgency. (He sits down again)

LEON

(As the HERO) Eh. My demands have already crossed your mind.

CARL

And my answer has no doubt already crossed yours.

LEON

You must cease and desist.

CARL

Leon, your behavior is most odd. It sounds as if you are reciting learned lines. They're not like you at all. Who put you up to this?

LEON

Dr. Conyer. I'm sorry, doctor. I can't continue the deception. My heart isn't in it.

CARL

And why, Grandfather, why? (After a pause) Oh, I'll need to shoot him back to life. Want to handle that, Hero? He's in the coffin you forgot to take back to the cemetery. Make sure he's dead first before you shoot, but I'm thinking he must have bled to death by now.

SAM

(As LEON procures a gun and examines SANDER in the coffin) Maybe you should rethink your resurrecting Dr. Conyer, Carl. Put yourself in his position. You long for death, you die, and hope it's all over. Then you find yourself alive again, now must long for death again, and now die again. And so forth. It has to be aggravating to an intelligent, sensitive man like your grandfather.

LEON

Eh. He's gone all right. (He aims a gun into the coffin)

CARL

I suppose you're right. (LEON fires the gun) Grandfather, please accept my apologies. But would you kindly explain what you had in mind by coaching Leon in the role of The Hero?

SANDER

(Sitting up in the coffin again) Damn, alive once more. (To CARL) I only wanted to put you out of business, so you'd stop reviving me.

CARL

I see. There is no Hero then. And my dispute with him never happened.

SANDER

None of this happened. How could it? Resurrection would demand a suspension of the laws of nature, perhaps more than one. And that doesn't happen, not in the real world, tee-hee!

SAM

Of course this never happened. There would be something repellent about it. But you did come back to life, Dr. Conyer.

SANDER

(Climbing out of the coffin in his blood-soaked clothes and DNR tag) One last time, tee-hee! (He lifts a large ax from the coffin and bears it into the kitchen. There he is only indistinctly seen behind the screens) Don't you have a chopping block in here? (Sings as he looks for the block) Talking about my g-g-generation! (There is a loud chop, and SANDER's head flies out into the living room from behind the screens)

SANDER'S DISEMBODIED HEAD

(Loudly) Don't forget. Do not resuscitate tee-hee!

Act Two, Scene Three

A graveyard. Lights come up slowly on SANDER'S grave. The Tombstone has inscribed on it:
Dr. Sander Conyer

1920-2016

DNR

Surrounding the grave are a number of outdoor leisure chairs. These belong to the ghosts who occupy nearby graves, and are invisible to the living, as are the ghosts themselves. When a ghost speaks, it is always from offstage, to reinforce its invisibility, and a light shines on the chair the speaker presumably occupies while it speaks. Some water seepage is already forming beneath SANDER's tombstone, and much more is visible in the sodden area nearby.

CHAIR #1

What a night. The constant drip drip drip of water into my Eternal Bronze casket. That funeral home should be investigated for ripping off the bereaved. My family paid good money, a small fortune, for what is essentially a sieve.

CHAIR #2

I couldn't sleep either. I actually feel my grave moving as the underground flow dislodges it. Soon we'll all be cascading over that embankment on the north side and down onto the expressway below. Then maybe we'll get some attention.

CHAIR # 3

Hello everyone. Good to find you all lively and disputatious so early in the morning. But who's this coming along? Not one of us, that's for sure.

CARL

(Enters in normal street clothes, having discarded the white suit of the Resurrectionist. He slows his pace on encountering his grandfather's resting place, and halts there. Standing and shaking his head at the water seepage, he presses his fingertips together in the style of Sherlock Holmes, but he does not purchase a Stradivarius violin from a pawnbroker) Hmm. Hmm. These are deep waters indeed.

CHAIR # 1

I recognize him. It's the one they call the Resurrectionist. I went to see him about my uncle who died of food poisoning. He revived him by shoving an infected taco down his throat. Did a damn good job.

CHAIR # 2

Yes, I recognize him from a TV ad I saw once. Only in the ad he wore a white suit. Good Heavens. You don't suppose he's here to revive *us*, do you?

CHAIR # 1

He better not try. I'm dead and I'm glad. He comes near me, and...well, I don't know what I'll do. I'm immaterial.

CHAIR # 3

Don't worry. He's not able to bring back the buried. It was one of the problems the Resurrectionist never did solve.

CHAIR # 1

(As CARL concentrates on SANDER's grave) Looks like he's still trying to solve it. I'm worried. If I had to return to life, I'd drink engine coolant all over again.

CHAIR # 2

(To CHAIR # 1) I'm guessing you were a married man. Me, I died at 89, a terminal bachelor. I never was lonely, but who wants more? Not me. What am I going to do, make new friends at 89?

CHAIR # 1

You met us.

CHAIR # 2

True.

CHAIR # 3

I believe he's just paying his respects to Sander. That's his grandfather.

CHAIR # 1

(To CHAIR # 3) How do you know all this?

CHAIR # 3

I knew Dr. Conyer. I had the honor of consorting with him romantically, and then being poisoned by him with anthrax. We listened to John Denver in his Hyundai, and he told me all sorts of stories about the family.

CHAIR # 2

Wasn't John Denver just amazing?

CHAIR # 3

The voice of a generation. You know he wrote "Leaving on a Jet Plane"?

CHAIR # 1

(Concerning CARL) Look, he's coming around.

CARL

Grandfather, I want first of all to say I'm sorry for making you wait to reside in this most beautiful spot. As the sun comes up over the mud and puddles I've been walking through, I see I deprived you too long of wonderland.

CHAIR #1

Was that irony?

CHAIR #2

He doesn't even know that his grandfather isn't there. He went out for a walk in the moonlight and hasn't returned.

CHAIR # 3

What can you expect? Sander just moved in and hasn't got his sea legs yet. The meadow is particularly sodden along here, and from what I saw of Sander's casket, it won't hold out long. In fact it had a pre-owned look to it, gruesome as that is to say.

CHAIR #1

I saw it too. Hardly better than a pine box. You'd think a physician could do better.

CHAIR # 2

Must be the grandson's idea. Hush. The cheapskate is about to speak again.

CARL

I want you to know, Grandfather, that you were always the most influential person in my life. Now that the Resurrectionist is no longer viable, I have put away for good his white suit. As you predicted the power to bring back the dead is completely gone and an impossible violation of natural law to begin with. I will now follow in your footsteps and return to my study of medicine, where real science reigns. I will specialize in the kidney, as you did, though it strikes me as one of the more tedious organs.

CHAIR # 3

There you have it. We can rest in peace.

CHAIR # 2

Thank heaven.

CHAIR # 1

Imagine being alive and having to do a job search in this economy. I'd rather be dead.

CARL

(Looking about) I think I hear your gentle voice nearby, Grandfather. Or perhaps it is only the sighing of a gentle breeze or more likely the burbling of an underground stream, since clearly I am alone.

(SANDER, wearing a clean new suit, walks up behind CARL and stops to listen bemusedly)

CARL

What more do I have to tell you? Samantha passed the bar on her first go, and has learned not to kill her infant child. We still don't know if the child is male or female, as she refuses to name it and won't let anyone look into its diaper. Leon, you'll be glad to know, is not the father, as was established by blood test. I was appalled to learn that Sam and Leon both thought he might have been, but he isn't. Leon was upset when I let him go as the Resurrectionist's intern, but was glad to escape paying child support. I believe he's with the sanitation department now. I hope so. I gave him an excellent reference. (CARL looks at his watch and then the sky) And so I leave you. I'm due at the clinic in thirty minutes. I suppose I'll come back from time to time if I'm not too busy. Rest in peace, Grandfather. (He exits, brushing imaginary dust from SANDER's headstone)

(SANDER steps forward, brushes imaginary dust off the "DNR" part of the headstone, and then exits in the opposite direction from CARL)

CURTAIN

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS: *I wrote the play "The Resurrectionist" in 2016 as a member of the Cincinnati Playwrights Initiative that held meetings at the University of Cincinnati and gave staged readings of its members' plays at the Cincinnati Taft Theater and the local VA Hospital. This was around my productive peak as a playwright, and I eventually had staged readings done for three of my plays, but not for "The Resurrectionist" which I didn't submit to our selection committee. I thought the play unsuitable for a reading, since it was all routines with props and sight gags, and to read aloud the dialog without the visual accompaniment would have been pointless. Only a production would do, but my group didn't involve itself with costly and time-consuming productions. For that reason and others, "The Resurrectionist" was my swan song as a playwright, and had remained on my computer in fairly unpolished form until now.*

By 2016 I was done with playwriting anyway, having decided the theater was far too collaborative a union for me. I couldn't control my impulse to call my fellow playwrights' works incoherent, and at readings of my own efforts, I sat speechless in a corner, laughing at my own jokes like an idiot. Rather than attend weekly rehearsal readings, and attend to the fluctuating demands of a director, and watching actors fall apart, ultimately for an audience of around nine people, I fell back on my first love as a writer, the humorous essay, a much more restful and secluded project. My wife and I had moved to Columbus to be nearer our daughter, and one reason this delighted me was that Columbus was home to one of my literary loves as I grew up, James Thurber. Beginning around 1960, when I was a lad, Thurber's short works, along with those of humorist Robert Benchley and Mad Magazine, had the most formative influence on me, if not yet as a writer, then as a growing person. I believe that everything I've written since

reading these humorous headliners, a half dozen plays and hundreds of essays and stories, are somehow in imitation of them.

I'm always pleasantly amazed when a magazine publishes something of mine, because I tend to see only the defects in my writing. Still, "The Resurrectionist" allowed me to address comically what has become the predominant theme in my writing as I have aged: death. Death is of course the ultimate joke on us all, as long as it happens to someone else.

AUTHOR BIO: Although he has written a handful of plays, Michael Fowler is primarily a writer of short humor, and has pieces archived at The Big Jewel, The Morning News, Defenestration, and McSweeney's Internet. Recent shorts have appeared at Rejection Letters and Piker Press. In 2021 Mike stopped laughing for a few minutes and turned to speculative fiction. He has science fiction tales (soft, not hard, if you please) up at Savage Planets, Underside Stories, Dark Horses, and Teleport. To date he has published one mystery-crime story, over at Mystery Tribune. His second tale of intrigue is due to appear at The Horror Zine early next year. Mike is currently at work on his first ever outright horror story, and is paying close attention to horrible writing to see how it's done. He lives in Ohio with his wife and a bunch of phantom limbs, mainly arms. He also babysits his grandkids.

