

THE DONATION

A one-act PLAY

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Lights rise on Mr. COOK, who sits behind a large, mahogany desk, doing some work. His office is covered with picture frames of people in group shots. There are two chairs in front of his desk, a doorway behind him, and one in the wall opposite.

The SR door opens and the secretary, MS. DIVERS enters. She stands in the doorway. She is bubbling with energy.

DIVERS: Excuse me, Mr. Cook, your next client is here.

COOK: Very good, thank you, Ms. Divers. Please send him in.

DIVERS: Right away, sir. *(Exits)*

She returns moments later with PETER DONOHUE. He is a man in his mid-thirties, who looks beaten down by time. He is dressed in a plain, slightly rumpled suit, and acts hesitantly.

COOK: Mr. Donohue! Please, come in! *(Extends his hand to welcome him, and ushers him towards a seat.)*

PETER: Thank you. *(Hesitantly shakes hands, and lowers himself into the seat opposite COOK.)*

COOK: My pleasure. Wonderful to meet you. I hope you were able to find the place easily enough.

PETER: Yes, Michael -- the friend who referred me -- told me how to find you. Not a lot of signage, is there?

COOK: We're a word of mouth operation. *(Picking up a file on his desk.)* Now, I understand you're here about your sister?

PETER: No, my wife, actually.

COOK: *(Correcting it on the form.)* Oh dear, I do apologize. Sometimes Ms. Divers gets her wires crossed. She's been here...well, forever, really. So hard to let her go.

PETER: Ah, of course. It's my wife, Sarah, I'm here about.

COOK: Yes, Sarah. Got it. Thanks for that. (*Eyeing file.*) Drunk driver, I see. I'm so sorry.

PETER: Yes, well.

COOK: How long were you married?

PETER: Only eight years when....(*Silent a moment as he thinks.*) She had become distant in recent months. She had recently been promoted to English department head at her school...

COOK: ...Jobs can certainly stress a marriage. Ask any of my ex-wives!

PETER: So, how do we...proceed?

COOK: Getting right to the point. I like that. I'm not much for small talk myself, frankly. We all have busy lives! (*Consolingly.*) Not to put too fine a point on it, but it'd be helpful to know exactly what brought you here today.

PETER: What brought me here? I thought that you folks could...um...Jesus, I can't believe I'm saying this...bring her back.

COOK: (*Confused.*) Bring Sarah back? Back from where?

PETER: (*Blankly.*) From...from where?

COOK: Yes? From where, Peter?

PETER: You see, I thought...a colleague of mine told me about you all....that you can....somehow...

COOK: (*Using PETER's words.*) "Bring her back?"

PETER: Right.

COOK: But Mr. Donohue, wherever would we be bringing her back from?

PETER: *(Feeling like a joke has been played on him.)* I think I've made a mistake coming here. There has been a terrible misunderstanding on my part. I won't waste any more of your time. *(Starts to leave.)*

COOK: *(Quickly rising to his feet and coming around the desk to stop him.)* From the dead, you mean?

PETER: *(Stops in the doorway, his back to COOK.)* Yes. Back from the....dead. *(Practically gags on the last word.)*

COOK: *(Relaxing.)* Mr. Donohue, in our line of work here at Commercium, we must make sure our clients -- that would be you, in this case -- are coming to us fully cognizant of the fact that their loved one is, indeed, deceased. We must also make sure that we're not forcing you to that realization.

PETER: ...right.

COOK: Now that you have quite sufficiently accepted that your wife, Sarah Renee Kilpatrick Donohue, is dead, we can continue to the next part of our "interview." *(Gesturing to seat.)* Shall we?

PETER: Yes. Please. Thank you.

COOK: *(Picking up file again.)* I see you were referred by a Mr. Michael Enderly.

PETER: He was the coworker I mentioned earlier. As well as a good friend. We met in high school, you see. He introduced me to Sarah, as a matter of fact. He recommended you specifically. His daughter--

COOK: Yes, I remember the case well. He was here for his daughter.

PETER: Margaret.

COOK: Yes. Terrible story. She succumbed to a rare genetic disease, if I recall correctly. Last June, this was.

PETER: It was awful to see that beautiful girl deteriorate. Mike had sole custody of Margaret, and Sarah and I were her godparents. I think Sarah loved her more than she loved me.

COOK: Kids have that effect on people. *(Pause.)* At this point, I like to ask potential clients if they have any questions not answered by the reading material found in our waiting room.

PETER: Mike -- Michael -- Mr. Enderly -- doesn't make very much money. He works in accounts payable with me. This all seems like it would be an expensive ...operation.

COOK: Not at all. We cater the "operation," as you call it, to each client's financial abilities.

PETER: *(Thinking.)* Do you issue any guarantees about how they are returned?

COOK: A "lifetime warranty?" Ha! Sorry, a little levity.

PETER: I don't mean to-- If we're supposed to--

COOK: Oh, no! This is a perfectly fine way to go about it. We certainly guarantee that your loved one will be returned to you at peak health, and none the wiser either about where they've been. But we cannot make any promises as to what happens once they leave our office.

PETER: Yes, of course. That seems reasonable.

COOK: It is, I assure you! *(Jokingly.)* Our lawyers would tell you the same!

PETER: *(Laughing politely.)* Yes, of course. But, about the cost...

COOK: Of course! Money is a driving factor in making this decision. But let me ask you this: To have Sarah back, what would you pay for that?

PETER: *(Speechless.)* I...well...as I said, I'm only in accounts payable....

COOK: A money man yourself! Very good. So what do you think would be a fair deal? One dollar?

PETER: *(Appalled.)* Certainly not!

COOK: I apologize if I've offended. How about \$100, then?

PETER: *(Getting angry.)* My wife is worth more than \$100, sir!

COOK: I wholeheartedly agree! What do you think about \$10,000,000?

PETER: She's worth that -- more! I cannot put a price tag on my wife's existence! But I only make \$30,000 a year, you see...

COOK: Mr. Donohue -- may I call you Peter? -- Peter, what if I told you that there was no cost?

PETER: (*Shocked into silence.*) No cost?

COOK: Well, I shouldn't have said that. Don't tell the higher-ups! I meant, no financial cost. To you.

PETER: But how is that possible? How would you run such a business with its...product...being free?

COOK: Nothing in life is free, as you well know, Pete. But don't you worry about that part of it. Now, I know what you're thinking. Here comes the scam. The con. Some Spanish Prisoner, or Nigerian Prince ruse. Let me allay your fears by swearing on my life and those of my children and even my ex-wives, that you, sir, are not being swindled at all. Everything you've heard about is true. (*Beat*) We only ask for a little....exchange.

PETER: Exchange?

COOK: Yes. You want your wife back, and as you so aptly pointed out, how would we benefit from this? For that reason, we ask for a life in return.

PETER: Surely you can't mean--

COOK: A death. A sacrifice. A donation, if you want to write it off on your taxes! Call it what you will, quid pro quo. We must balance the scales.

PETER: This must be some sort of joke? Am I one of those hidden camera shows?

COOK: A joke? There is no joke in what we do. We reunite people! (*Indicates wall of photographs.*)

PETER: But still. The joy of seeing loved ones together again is not enough to keep a business operational. There must be some sort of monetary outcome on your side.

COOK: Here at Commercium, we are founded by a generous -- very generous -- board of financial backers, who have made such an endeavor essentially free to our Clients.

PETER: What's in it for them?

COOK: For whom? The board? The love of science, one would hope. These wouldn't be the first millionaires to throw their money into seemingly implausible and, I'll say it, insane causes. Did you see the story on the news recently about that fellow who decided to give all his money to a group of scientists who are working to genetically engineer bullet-proof apes? By comparison this sounds normal.

PETER: I suppose some people have too much money. Still, though, I feel like I'm speaking to Dr. Frankenstein.

COOK: If I had a nickel for every time I heard that, I'd be on that board! The patented science behind the process, unfortunately, cannot be disclosed, for security reasons. Yet it is the 21st century, after all, is it not? We've cloned human beings, you know, and have drugs that can bring somebody back from a drug overdose, so how is returning people from the dead much different?

PETER: Well, to begin with, clones are made from living cells, and that drug you mentioned—

COOK: -- Is only is good within the first hour of the overdose? True. But do you find it a grand stretch of the imagination that government scientists somewhere have been secretly working in labs to reverse the essential mystery of all time? Death?

PETER: I suppose not.

COOK: Quite right, my good man.

PETER: But if Mike had never mentioned this to me, I never would have known about it. You'd think with such an outcome as returning loved ones, there'd be one of your shops on every corner!

COOK: When push comes to shove, not many can go through with making the appropriate donation.

PETER: Appropriate?

COOK: (*Conspiratorially.*) I will let you in on a secret, as long as you don't tell anyone else?

PETER: (*Hesitantly.*) All right.

COOK: The process of returning, while I do not understand all of it myself, has something to do with transferring the (*uses air quotes*) "life force" of one person to the recently deceased.

PETER: Life force?

COOK: Sounds like a science fiction novel, doesn't it? I thought the same myself when I started out here. But I assure you, it's quite real.

PETER: I'm not going to murder — sorry, *donate* — someone. Who would volunteer to do that anyway?

COOK: Mr. Donohue, you know fully well that there are many people who do not want to be alive. Yet they go on, day to day, trying to summon the courage to end it all by their own hand. Now they can, for a good cause, and without lifting a finger except to sign on the dotted line.

PETER: So all I need to do is find anyone who wants to die, and tell them they can do it for a reason! That's madness!

COOK: Well, not just anyone. Someone appropriate. (*Pulls a contract out of a desk drawer, and reads from it.*) Where is it? Ah, here we are. "Clause 26B: Client agrees to find a Donor of greater value to have their loved one returned."

PETER: "Of greater value"? Now I know this is a hoax!

COOK: Let me explain. Take your colleague Mr. Enderly for example. He wanted his daughter returned. She was 3 years old at the time of her passing. Therefore we'd have accepted another, healthy three year old with perhaps some greater family history or with 20/20 vision. Things of that nature.

PETER: You expect me to believe that Mike Enderly -- a man who admitted he cries like a baby everytime he watches *UP* -- would let another three year old die for his daughter? I'm sorry, but that's just too much to take.

COOK: You're absolutely correct. He didn't. I never said it had to be a three year old. Just someone of greater value.

PETER: How is this value clause assessed anyhow?

COOK: It's a tricky question, that. Fortunately we have a panel of esteemed assessors who have devised a near foolproof algorithm to determine the exact value of a person's life, down to the tenth of a percent. The specifics are above my pay grade, I'm afraid, but I think it has something to do with their age, health, etcetera, etcetera, and so forth. I shouldn't be spreading rumors out of school, but...some of the guys around here think that the little extra value that is siphoned off in the donation is what they're really in it for. I've heard tell it's like a drug. The ultimate high! But you didn't hear that from me.

PETER: Who was Mike's donor then?

COOK: Peter, Peter, Peter...you know I can't tell you that private information.

The door to the waiting room opens, and MS. DIVERS enters, looking upset.

DIVERS: Excuse me, Mr. Cook. I am sorry to interrupt your meeting, but we have a gentleman in the waiting area who is asking to see you.

COOK: Is he scheduled for an appointment?

DIVERS: No, sir.

COOK: *(Patiently, as to an elderly family member.)* Well, Ms. Divers, you know the protocol for that. Find him a time I'm available.

DIVERS: I've told him as much, sir, but he refuses to leave.

PETER: Is everything all right? Should I leave?

COOK: Everything is perfectly fine. Ms. Divers, please tell the gentleman that I will see him shortly.

MS. DIVERS nods and exits, closing the door behind her.

PETER: I think I should leave. I need to give this some thought.

COOK: Perfectly understandable. But please know that your window of opportunity to have Sarah returned is closing with each passing moment.

PETER: A month, is it?

COOK: We try not to do it past three weeks if possible. Helps avoid, well, to be blunt, decay.

The office door bursts open. MIKE ENDERLY enters, holding MS. DIVERS as a hostage.

COOK: What is going on here?

MIKE: I have a donor.

PETER: Mike?

MIKE: *(Off-guard)* Peter?

PETER: What are you doing here?

MIKE: It's Margaret.

PETER: What about her? Is she with you?

MIKE: She's....she's gone. I lost her again.

PETER: What? How?

MIKE: She got sick. Really sick. Same as last time. Worse.

PETER: Why didn't you tell me?

MIKE: It happened so quickly. She was fine, then all of a sudden last week, the symptoms appeared again. I couldn't believe it. *(To COOK.)* You people guaranteed that they would be returned as I remembered them.

COOK: And she was. But as the contract states, and as I made clear at the time, there are no guarantees for quality of life after leaving this building.

MIKE: I know that, but...but...

COOK: At this point I must inform you, Mr. Enderly, that while we are capable of returning someone who has already been returned, the quality of their life may not be, shall we say, equal to how they were before. Think of it as a copy of a copy.

MIKE: You mean to say...Margaret will die again? From this same disease? A disease I've seen her painfully die from twice already?

COOK: *(Matter-of-factly.)* That is exactly what I'm saying. And it may come quicker this time too. Or it may not. The choice is yours.

MIKE: It doesn't matter. I want my daughter returned to me. I want Margaret back. This time will be different.

COOK: I see. But as you know from your first visit, we must first process your application with our assessors, and only then--

MIKE: Assessors? That's a lie. You're a one-man operation. There are no assessors. You're the man behind the curtain.

COOK: Me? Oz, the great and powerful? That would be wonderful, but in this grief, you have sadly mistaken fact with fiction. *Commercium* is more than just me. I'm a low-man on the totem pole. *(Pointing at MS. DIVERS.)* I'm further sorry to inform you that Ms. Divers is not of greater value than your daughter. Even I can see that. Your daughter was three, Ms. Divers is ...considerably older, and worse for wear, shall we say? Margaret's disease notwithstanding, her lifespan is much longer than Ms. Divers's.

MIKE drops his arm around MS. DIVERS, not expecting that. MS. DIVERS is equally surprised.

COOK: And then there's the other part of it.

MIKE: Other part? What's that?

COOK: While she is a wonderful person, returned people cannot be Donors themselves. And the returned are, to put it bluntly, of lesser quality than an unreturned, I'm afraid.

DIVERS: I'm returned?

COOK: Oh dear. It seems Ms. Divers is forgetting again. *(To MIKE.)* All of our employees are returned. Well, except for me, that is. I believe that's part of the reason for our company's low profile. A profile we must maintain, as some people in power would not approve of what we are doing here.

MIKE looks around pleadingly, desperately. Then he pulls a gun on COOK.

COOK: Now hold on a second--

MIKE: You'll be my donor.

COOK: Mr. Enderly, I understand you're upset. I cannot contemplate losing a child. Twice, in fact! I don't know what I would do if that happened to me. Well, I do know, but that's beside the point. The fact is, you cannot force a person to Donate.

MIKE: A gun to your head might persuade you.

COOK: Do you think you're the first Client to pull a gun on me? You won't shoot me. Who would do the exchange then?

MIKE drops his gun on a chair.

MIKE: I'll donate myself then.

COOK: *(Chuckling.)* You've thought of everything, eh? I applaud your efforts, but...Greater value, remember? Whenever a client visits us, the assessors also do an inventory on him or her. This was done with you too, and...well, your daughter was of far greater value than you, sir. As it should be.

MIKE looks helplessly at PETER.

PETER: I'll be your donor.

MIKE: What?

PETER: Without Sarah...I don't have much to live for anyway.

MIKE: But that's why you're here, isn't it? To bring Sarah back?

PETER: It's more important for you to have Margaret than for me to have Sarah. She'd understand.

MIKE: But I'm the reason why you're here.

COOK: Mr. Enderly, I strongly encourage you to stop what you're saying now!

PETER: Of course you're why I'm here. You're the one who told me about this...place.

MIKE: That's not all. You only know about it because I felt guilty.

PETER: Guilty? For what?

MIKE: For Sarah.

PETER: I don't understand. Sarah died when she was in a hit and run.

MIKE: That's only partly true.

PETER: *(Takes a step back.)* Partly?

COOK: *(Urgently.)* I must end this conversation now. I demand you both leave.

MIKE: We've been -- were -- in love for years, Sarah and I. The two of you meeting was an accident. I certainly didn't expect it to last! But she fell in love with you, and that was that. I was glad to see my best friends together and happy. But then she got the promotion, and you've never been a man of many words, so one thing led to another.....The guilt was eating her alive. I love ya', man, but sometimes you're thick as a brick.

PETER: You kidding me? I knew about you two. I just hoped it would pass. You could be there for her when I wasn't. That's what you do for people you love. You make allowances. You forgive.

MIKE: Sometimes I think Margaret getting sick was karma, for me being with Sarah while you two were still married.

PETER: Mike--

MIKE: But then Margaret died, and you know how Sarah adored that kid. She saw how heartbroken I was. She told me about this place. At first I couldn't believe such a thing could exist. And where was I going to find a Donor anyway?

PETER: Sarah was your Donor. Wasn't she?

MIKE nods.

PETER: Jesus Christ...

COOK: Not returned. Yet.

They all look at him.

COOK: Sorry.

PETER: Wait a minute. You said the hit and run was only partially true.

COOK: Well, since we're laying all our cards on the table, I may as well tell you it's one of our many Donor removal techniques. Not very original, but eliminates any suspicious behavior.

PETER: This whole thing is disgusting.

MIKE: It was my fault. I took her from you.

PETER grabs the gun and points it at MIKE.

PETER: You feel so bad? You be my donor.

COOK: I must remind you, a person has to voluntarily--

MIKE: *(Swatting gun away.)* You don't need that. I volunteer. I will be your Donor.

COOK: At this point, I'd normally inform you -- again -- that your life is not of greater value than his wife's. But I'm going to make the exception because, quite frankly, I've already spent too much time on this and I have a round of golf in an hour. *(To MIKE.)* You understand what you are doing?

MIKE: Of course I do. Maybe...I don't know. Maybe now I'll see Margaret again and this time she won't be taken away from me.

COOK: Beautiful. And you, Mr. Donohue, are aware of all this entails?

PETER: Fully aware.

COOK: Well then, if you could both sign the contract on the dotted line, we will get things underway.

They both sign. COOK hands contract to DIVERS, who exits, shaken.

MIKE; *(To COOK.)* Not a one-man operation, eh?

COOK ignores him.

PETER: What happens now?

COOK opens the door behind his desk, and holds it open.

COOK: I could tell you, but then, of course, I'd have to kill you! *(Laughs.)* This way, please.

MIKE walks towards the door, stops, looks back.

MIKE: I'm sorry. I hope it works better for you than it did for me. *(Continues to exit, then stops right before the door.)* Mr. Cook, what will you....do with me?

COOK: Oh, don't you worry. We'll make sure it's something special. Thank you for your donation. *(Turns back to PETER.)* I will return shortly. *(As he exits with MIKE)* This job never fails to surprise me.

PETER is alone in the room. He places the gun on the desk and walks around looking at the pictures on the wall.

PETER: *(Practicing.)* Hi, Sarah. *(Pause)* Good to see you. *(Pause)* You're probably wondering what you're doing here.

His rehearsal is interrupted when the door behind the desk reopens, and Mr. COOK steps through.

COOK: Are you ready?

PETER: I'm--I'm not sure. That was very fast.

COOK: We here at Commercium pride ourselves on our speed of service. Life's too short to waste time! Do you need a moment to collect yourself?

PETER tries to compose himself. Then he nods to COOK.

COOK: After you.

A bright light emanates from behind the door as PETER walks through it. After he's exited, MS. DIVERS re-enters. She is not nearly as energetic as she was at the beginning of the play. She stands in the doorway, not making eye contact with COOK. She looks as though she wants to say something.

COOK: *(Completely himself again.)* Yes, Ms. Divers?

DIVERS: You mentioned something before about....um....? You know, I've forgotten what! Silly me!

COOK: *(Slightly impatient)* Silly you!

DIVERS: Did I ever tell you that you remind me of my son, Charlie?

COOK: Do I?

DIVERS: He died when he was a bit younger than you. He had this crazy business idea about bringing people back from....from....

COOK: The dead?

DIVERS: Stuff of science fiction! He was always a dreamer, that one.

COOK: So it would seem.

MS. DIVERS: Well, I'll show the next client in, shall I?

COOK: Thank you.

MR. COOK sighs, returns to his desk, and pulls out the next file to examine. He smiles. Lights fade to black.

The End