

Our Records Show . . .

by [Armando Simón](#) (October 2023)



The Waiting Room, George Tooker, 1959

It was not until Bruno was stopped by a policeman in order to give him a speeding ticket that he realized that he was dead and had been dead for over two weeks.

The policeman had taken his driver's license back to his car and punched in the number of Bruno's driver's license for a routine check for outstanding warrants. After receiving a reply, the policeman had sent in the car's license plate number, but the records did not show it to be stolen. He returned to the waiting Bruno who was patiently waiting for his speeding ticket. That he was going to get a ticket there was no doubt in Bruno's mind, since he had been speeding way

past the speed limit and he was not an attractive girl. Instead, he was surprised at what the policeman said.

"Mister Lambertazzi, according to our records, we show you to be dead."

"Say what?!"

"I ran your license through twice and each time it showed that you were deceased."

"I am most certainly not!"

"Well, either you're Mister Bruno Lambertazzi or you're impersonating him, though I admit the driver's license picture looks like you. I checked the license plate on your car; your car hasn't been reported stolen."

"Look here, I got plenty of ID," and he took out several credit cards, his voter's registration card and his social security card. He looked up at the policeman with an annoyed look but could not see any reaction to his face. He wondered why the devil are they trained to be so expressionless, it's so irritating, it's like talking to an ambulatory machine. The policeman returned all the identification.

"Please step out of the car, sir."

Groaning with irritation, he did so.

"Please put your hands behind your back, sir."

"Oh, you've got to be kidding."

He was going to be arrested!

"Please put your hands behind your back," the officer repeated.

In seconds he was handcuffed and in the cramped back seat of the squad car, still muttering. "I'm going to have to take you

down to the station in order to sort this out. Chances are, it's just a glitch in a computer somewhere and you'll have to correct the problem, in case you are Bruno Lambertazzi—"

"—I am!"

"—and if you're not, we'll want to know why you're carrying someone else's ID and where is the real Lambertazzi, or at least his body."

Being arrested and booked is a humiliating experience, something that only habitual criminals get used to. Bruno, now at the police station, felt both angry and humiliated. He had been arrested eleven years ago for an absurd fight in a club where there had been too much booze and had been finally let off with a fine. Since his fingerprints and photographs were on file, however, they verified his identity.

"I don't get it. It's him, all right, but the records show him as being dead."

"Can't we charge him for impersonating a corpse?"

"There ain't no such statute in the books. Just give him the speeding ticket and let him off with a warning for Driving While Being Deceased. Oh, and tell him his driver's license had been automatically nullified. Can't have corpses with driver's licenses or have them driving around in cars and trucks. This ain't no *Night of The Living Dead*."

Bruno swallowed his anger and telephoned his wife to pick him up at the station, which she did, and he told Clara what had happened to him on their way to pick up his car.

"Somebody must have punched the wrong numbers somewhere by accident, that's what probably happened," Bruno grumbled. "Scratch off all the things I was going to do today. I should have gone ahead and gone to work."

"Well, it's not a total waste. At least you found out that you

were dead.”

“I’m not dead! Quit joking around.”

“Of course you’re not, dear.”

“Mmmm. It seems that once their computers show me as dead, the driver’s license is automatically canceled so no one else can use it, which kinda makes sense, so I gotta straighten it all out.”

They reached where his car was parked.

“OK. Follow me. I’ll take the car home, then you can drive me to the bank. I’ll pick up my birth certificate and passport from the safety deposit box and from there we’ll go to the Department of Motor Vehicles. Stay close behind me. This time I definitely won’t go over the speed limit.”

“Bruno, are you sure you should be driving while dead?”

“Willya knock it off?!”

An hour later, they walked into the bank. Miss Leigh greeted them.

“Mister Lambertazzi! I thought you were dead.”

“What! How’d you know? Who told you?”

“Well, as soon as anyone passes away, all other systems are notified and that includes banks. For obvious reasons. You don’t want anyone taking advantage of the confusion and grief in the family and make off with that person’s money. Somebody could clean out your account, you know.”

“Well, I’m not dead!” he declared.

Miss Leigh turned to his wife.

“I want to tell you how sorry we all were when we learned that

he passed away.”

“Thank you. It was very sudden, you know.”

“Ah. So, he didn’t suffer. That’s good. He was so young, too! It must be quite painful for you.”

“I’m bearing it as best I can. After all, it’s really all you can do.” She made the face of a martyr.

Bruno, meanwhile, was shooting them dagger looks.

“Excuse me for interrupting you,” he interjected with a sarcastic expression on his face, “but I’d really like to get into my safety deposit box.”

“Oh, I’m afraid you can’t.”

“And why not? Wait! Let me guess: ‘cause I’m dead, right?”

“That’s right.”

“How can I be dead if I’m standing here in front of you?”

“That is a puzzle,” she frowned.

“There’s no puzzle! Miss Leigh, you’ve known me for years. Somebody simply made a mistake somewhere and it’s become a chain reaction. Now, let me get in the box!”

“I’m sorry, but I can’t let you.”

“I suppose that I can’t withdraw any of my money from my checking account, either.”

“Exactly.”

“Well, fortunately, both the checking and savings accounts and the safety deposit box is in our joint name, so Clara can sign in. Or is she dead, too?”

“Of course she’s not dead, Mister Lambertazzi! What kind of a

question is that, with her standing right here, talking to me?"

Bruno rolled his eyes upwards and grabbing Clara by the arm, went to where the safety deposit boxes were housed. Once opened, he took out his other social security card, his passport and his birth certificate. With these, he marched up to Miss Leigh's desk and slammed them down. She looked up, questioningly.

"Yes?"

"Well ... look at these papers!"

"Mister Lambertazzi, it doesn't matter what these papers say. Our computers received the notice that you were deceased. Until that notice gets taken off our records, there is nothing that we can do."

He turned to Clara.

"We gotta go to the Department of Motor Vehicles. I'll bet you that's where the trouble probably started. Let's go!"

Miss Leigh stood up.

"Mrs. Lambertazzi, again our condolences. Where could we send flowers?"

"I'm sure that there'll be a notice in the newspaper, as soon as I can arrange—" but Bruno had yanked her out by the arm.

As she drove along, Bruno was silently fuming.

"We need to get some gas. It's almost on Empty."

She drove into the Exxon gas station. Bruno got out and filled up the tank, then he went in to pay for the gas, handing the service attendant his Exxon credit card. The attendant ran the card through, peered at the message and shook his head.

"Sorry, sir, the machine won't take your card," and in a flash, he cut the card in half.

Bruno was shaken. Meekly, he handed over his VISA.

"Try that one."

He did.

"Sorry."

Snip!

"Try my Master Card."

Snip!

"My American Express?"

Ship!

"How about cash, buddy? Or, do you still got more credit cards to go through? My scissors are getting kinda dull."

Bruno paid up.

With cash.

He did not say another word until they almost got there.

"This is rapidly getting out of hand," he muttered.

After waiting over two hours at the DMV, it was finally their turn. He explained the situation to the lady officer and showed her all his documents. She typed up his name in the computer.

"The computer says you're dead."

"Well, obviously, I'm not dead."

"The computer says you're dead."

"I'm not dead, OK? Can you check with the Social Security office?"

"Sure! Give me a minute." She dialed the number, talked to a clerk and hung up.

"Their computer says you're dead. Mister Lambertazzi, face the facts: you're dead!"

"I'm not dead!! I'm living, breathing and talking to you, so how can I possibly be dead?"

"I don't know, but they can do all sorts of things with science these days."

"Look here. This is my passport. See my picture? And here's my Birth Certificate! You see that there's no Death Certificate anywhere."

She looked up at Clara. "You need to pick one up. You're going to need it for insurance purposes."

"All right," Clara said, "I will."

He tried again, holding up his Birth Certificate. "Oh, come on, now! This is a Birth Certificate. Doesn't it count for anything?"

"Do you have a Life Certificate?"

"A what?" asked Clara.

"There's no such thing!" Bruno asserted.

"Maybe not, but if there isn't, there should be," she retorted. "I mean, if the government issues a Death Certificate, there should also be a Certificate of Living, don't you think? It makes sense to me."

"This is absurd! Look, just change it so that it shows that I'm alive," he was pleading now.

"But, you're not alive, you're dead."

"Change it!"

"Mister Lambertazzi, I'm not going to falsify records—not for you, or anybody else!"

"But you're not falsifying. I'm alive, I tell you!"

"I must ask you to leave now sir."

They drove back home in silence. He could not think of a way out of this bureaucratic impasse. Just before they went to bed, Bruno overheard Clara muttering to herself, "I'm too young to be a widow."

Bruno had nightmares the whole night.

He did not feel much better in the morning. And he felt worse when he got to work.

"Bruno! What are you doing here? You're supposed to be dead!" his boss exclaimed upon first setting eyes on him.

"Oh, no, not you, too," he groaned.

"I'm sorry, Bruno, but when I was notified that you had died, I had no choice, but to fill your vacancy. You have to look at it from my point of view, old man."

"Who'd you put in my office?"

"Jenkins."

"Jenkins! The man's an idiot! I've been replaced by Jenkins?"

"Oh, it's only temporary, just a stopgap measure until I get a permanent replacement."

"Well, I'm here now."

"Oh, I can't put you back to work, old man. Are you kidding?"

If OSHA found out that I had a corpse on my premises, they'd shut me down! You know how they are! You know the problems I've had with those mindless bureaucrats."

"Tell me about it."

"I'm sorry you're dead, Bruno."

"I'm not dead! I'm not dead!! Not! Not!! Not!!! How many times do I have to say it?"

"I understand, old man," his boss nodded. "You're in denial."

Bruno stamped out, hailed a taxi, and went home. He found Clara on the telephone. She was surprised to see him back and he explained.

"Well, never mind that," she interrupted, halfway through. "Guess who was that on the phone? Mister Jaworsky from the insurance company, calling me up to let me know about your life insurance. \$200,000! Oh, you were so thoughtful," she daubed an eye with a Kleenex. "Such a good husband."

"But, Clara, I'm not dead," he whispered.

"Hush, darling, don't go and spoil it now. Let's go, instead, to the insurance agent and take care of the paperwork. And I'm driving. You can't drive now that you're dead."

Both Mister Jaworsky and his secretary commiserated with Clara over her recent loss in spite of Bruno sitting right there next to her. In fact, they made it a point of ignoring him altogether, as Jaworsky went over every detail.

On their way back home, with the \$200,000 check tucked away in her purse, Bruno kept shaking his head in disbelief.

"I don't know, I just don't know. It seems dishonest taking that money."

"Now, Bruno, don't go and spoil it for me."

"Clara, it's \$200,000!"

"I know. Isn't it wonderful?"

"It ain't right."

"Well, now, Bruno Lambertazzi, you stop and think about it. How does a woman ever get to be rich? Answer me that! I'll tell you how: through men. Men either give us money as a gift because we're so cute and nice and sweet, or else, like in your case, we get the life insurance benefits for our years of faithful devotion to our husbands, or else we divorce our husbands, and we bleed them dry. We don't work for it. Have you ever heard of a woman spending years slaving away prospecting in a mine to make a fortune? Or wasted years developing a revolutionary new invention? Of course not. We marry those men that have made those sacrifices and worked so hard, and we take their money. And have you ever heard of a woman making a killing in the stock market? No. Too many risks! In order to make spectacular amounts of money quickly you've got to take spectacular risks and women simply don't take risks! We marry the men who've taken those risks in business, and we then use their money. And do you think we spend years to get a Ph.D. or an MD? Don't be ridiculous, honey. We become nurses or secretaries in order to marry those men. That, or we just simply go to college and while there be on the lookout for a good catch.

"And now, here we are, my ship has finally come in, I've got \$200,000 in my purse, and you want to go and spoil it all for me by trying to stay alive. Honestly, you're so self-centered sometimes."

She was going on, but seeing the expression on his face, she stopped.

"Dear me, I forgot. You must be upset. It can't be much fun for you, being dead and all." She patted his leg in consolation, as she would pat a dog.

As they drove home, Bruno muttered, "This is almost as bad as being forced to listen to Barbara Streisand songs."

That afternoon, an old friend stopped by. Clara answered the doorbell. It was Alfred, bringing flowers.

"Clara! I came as soon as I heard. Why didn't you call me? I'm so sorry."

"Thank you for coming, Alfred. It's good to see you at a time like this."

"Did he suffer? Was it painful?"

"No, thank God. It was very sudden."

They were in the living room and Bruno could plainly see them from his chair in the den, and they him, if they had cared to do so.

"You're bearing it awfully well, I must say."

"What else can I do, Alfred? Hysterics don't solve anything."

"True. True. Oh, these are for you." He gave her the bouquet.

"For me? Alfred, you mean for Bruno's funeral."

"Clara, I think it's time that I should tell you how I felt for you. I've always cared for you all these years," he said, now holding her hand while Clara dissolved into a puddle of giggles, averting her eyes.

"Now, now, Alfred, it's not right."

"I know. It's too soon. But I wanted to tell you right away how I felt. And if there's anything I can do—anything at all—you just have to say it."

"Oh, Alfred, you're so kind." She giggled again like an idiotic schoolgirl.

Bruno calmly got up from his chair, walked up to Alfred and landed a solid punch squarely in Alfred's face, bloodying his nose. He followed through and slammed his face against the door jam. He then pushed him out of the house, throwing the flowers after him and closing the door behind him.

"The nerve of that guy," he said between gritted teeth.

"I know," Clara agreed. "It was too soon after your death. It would have been better after a decent interval, don't you think? He put me in an awkward position. Still, he meant well."

He barely restrained himself from punching her in the nose, too.

Bruno spent the next couple of days making telephone calls trying to straighten out the muddle that he was in, calling every government agency that he could think so, from the dreaded IRS to his State Senator, with no luck. He also made appointments for job interviews which were canceled as soon as he told them that he was dead (they would have found out, anyway). During all this time, there was a steady stream of well-wishers visiting Clara, the women bringing large, covered dishes and bowls with food in them. All of them did their best to ignore Bruno as they consoled a crying, grieving Clara, who easily got into the spirit of things.

She was now with June who was urging her to look to the future and not be so despondent.

"Clara, you can't go on crying forever. How long has it been, four months?"

"Four days."

"All right, four days. The point is, it's not good for you. You need to go out more. Go out and meet people. It's time to think of yourself now. Life goes on."

"Oh, I don't know, June. It's so soon! I can't go out and meet men now."

"Bruno would have wanted you to. Do you think he'd have liked to have seen you like this, depressed all the time, crying your eyes out? Of course not. Life goes on."

Bruno was sitting across from her, watching the spectacle with a grim look. He slowly drummed his fingers.

"You didn't know Bruno like I did, June. He was a very possessive husband. I don't feel right in doing that."

"Well, maybe it's wrong to speak ill of the dead, Clara, but in that area, Bruno was very selfish and behind the times. Not progressive or liberal enough. I don't know ... maybe it's not my place to say so. I know that he had good qualities as well. But I think that it's time for you to be up and around and think of yourself for a change. You've put up with so much from him. And remember that life goes on."

Bruno got up, went over to June and grabbing her firmly by her neck, yanked her up on her feet. At the front door he firmly planted his shoe on her backside, after which he slammed the door shut. That was the fourth woman that he had kicked out thusly and for the same reason.

In the kitchen, a pensive Clara asked him, with an absent-minded air, "What do you think, should I start to go out and meet men, or is it still too early for that? I don't want the neighbors to talk." Bruno, once again, had to restrain himself from committing mayhem.

He received no support at all from his son, nor had he expected any, when he came home from college. Bruno had sent his son to college to get an education and a profession and had instead gotten a blithering idiot, his gray matter replaced with a plethora of slogans and clichés.

"And like I've told everyone, and no one seems to hear, I'm not dead!"

"What you're saying, then, is that you're right and the whole world is wrong. Is that it?"

"Yes, if you must put it that way."

"That's wrong, you know."

"Far be it for my knee jerk liberal of a son to go against the grain and actually think for himself. Oh, no, can't have that."

A knock at the door interrupted their discussion. It was a man from the Health Department. He was accompanied by another man carrying a briefcase.

"Mrs. Lambertazzi? My name is Mister Chang, I'm with the Health Department and it's come to our attention that your husband died over a week ago, yet our records show that he has not been buried, nor cremated."

"Oh, dear, I'm afraid that's true."

"Good Lord, we can't have that! It poses a serious health crisis, you know! No, this won't do at all. He must be buried at once—or cremated. It makes no difference which. It's the law."

"Mom, we've got to do what's right."

"Yes, I suppose I should have taken care of this before. What must you think of me?"

"Excuse me," Bruno said. "I'm Bruno Lambertazzi and, as you can see, I'm very much alive."

"Is this the deceased?" Mister Chang asked her.

"Yes. My husband. He was a good man. A good provider."

"Excuse me?" he interrupted again. "But do I look like a stiff?"

"Well, he's certainly very well preserved. He doesn't smell or anything."

"Thank you very much. I took a shower this morning, that's why. And you can talk to me directly, you know, Mister Chang. I can hear you perfectly well, though you don't seem to hear me."

"Chill out, Dad."

"Shut up, you moron. Who's talking to you?"

"Dad, you can't possibly be opposed to this. You must see what a health risk you pose to the community."

"Exactly," Mister Chang said. "That's why I took the liberty of contacting Mister Agranoff, who is with the funeral services in town."

Mister Agranoff immediately assumed his somber professional demeanor and began his litany. "First of all, Mrs. Lambertazzi, let me offer you my condolences in your Hour of Grief and allow me to assure you of our wide-ranging facilities in choosing your husband's Final Resting Place." He was opening up his briefcase and taking out colorful brochures as he spoke and spread them all over the coffee table. "I am sure that you will choose the type of funeral that will have made the Dearly Department proud."

"Vultures," Bruno muttered.

As he rapidly drummed his fingers while the sales pitch was being given, he noticed the enticing colorful brochures, similar to those of travel agencies. "Visit Sunny Spain." "Tour Blazing Crematoriums." "Vacation in Rustic Greece." "Picnic in Early Tombs."

Agranoff was showing a sniffing Clara laminated pictures of the ground.

"And this is our Eternal Rest Garden," showing a well manicured garden.

"Excuse me!" Bruno yelled out. "But you're not going to plant me in no skull orchard. Get it through your thick heads, will ya?"

"Dad, it's your civic duty. Don't you have a Social Conscience, any Social Responsibility?"

"Shut up, you moron! Who's talking to you?"

Clara ultimately chose the most expensive funeral arrangements, bringing a twinkle to the mortician's eyes.

"Nothing's too good for my Bruno," she said, trying to assuage her conscience, what there was of it, as she thought of the new clothes that she would buy in preparation for going out to clubs in the weeks to come.

There was just one little problem: Bruno Lambertazzi stubbornly refused to cooperate.

It was an awkward situation. He just simply refused to go along with them and be buried.

"Over my dead body!" he declared.

In the end, four burly men had to be called for. It was a knock down, drag out fight. For a stiff, he was in surprisingly good shape. Using a table leg as a weapon and with a week's accumulated worth of frustration, he laid low two men with fractured skulls, another had a broken nose, another four teeth missing and a broken collarbone (Chang had had to lend a helping hand in subduing the corpse). The living room was leveled. He was dragged out, raging, while Clara alternately sobbed and sniffed to one side as her son tried to

comfort her.

The services for Bruno Lambertazzi were well attended by relatives and friends of the family. No one brought up the scandalous delay between Bruno's death and his burial, out of courtesy for the grieving widow.

The funeral home was one of those progressive institutions in the mortuary business which tries constantly to come up with innovations to bring life to a dying business. Years ago, it had been the first in the city to offer drive-in Window Services, just like McDonald's or a Kentucky Fried Chicken franchise. This was for friends and family so busy with work that they just had enough time to drive by the funeral home and, without stepping out of the car, look in, through the window, at the Dearly Departed. There was a register there, very accessible, wherein they could sign their names. If they wanted to linger, they could do so. There was even a vending machine within easy reach, in case the drivers got hungry or thirsty and could munch on a bag of cookies or popcorn or maybe a candy bar and wash it all down with a soda pop while they stared at the body.

In the case of Mister Bruno Lambertazzi, a recent innovation had been applied, with the consent of the family. First, instead of lying down in the coffin, seemingly asleep, Bruno's body was seen sitting up in it. But, more importantly, they had acquired from the family tape recordings of Bruno's voice over the years which could be played briefly for five seconds or so, by pulling a plastic ring at the back of the neck, which pulled out with about a foot of string. As the tape played on, the string contracted until the plastic ring slowly went back and the voice stopped (the tape was cleverly concealed in the Dearly Departed's clothes). It immediately came to be expected for each mourner, after they came in and saluted the family, to go up to Bruno's casket and yank the string. Some took selfies with the corpse, grinning.

With this innovation, mourners could not only say the customary, "My, he looks so natural. Just as if he was asleep." Now, they could also say, "Goodness, it sounds just like him."

Just as everyone was leaving for their car in order to join the procession for the funeral, Alfred was able to corner Clara alone.

"Clara, have you had a chance to think about what I said the other day?" he asked, circling her waist with his arm.

She started giggling again. "Oh, Alfred, this isn't the time."

"But have you thought about it at all? Tell me that."

She nodded shyly, averting his eyes, yet smiling.

"Yes, every day. But we must let some time pass."

"Next week, then?"

"Next week will be fine, Alfred. Call me then. We'll do something together." He kissed her lightly, then joined the others.

As the funeral procession wound its way through the city with the cars' lights on, Clara had time to think. There was just one thing bothering her. It had to do with the funeral services. She was not sure that she had made the right choice for Bruno. One of the options that had been available to her, but that she had passed over without much consideration now appealed to her. It involved having Bruno stuffed and mounted, perched on his favorite chair at home, just like you would with any deer's head or stuffed bird. It came with the same voice box and the ring that you could pull any time that you wanted to hear his voice. A stuffed stiff. She wondered if it would be too late to change her mind and if she did, what would people think and say of her.

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Armando Simón's goal is to be for short stories and plays what José Martí was for poetry—not that it matters since Cubans are only interested in music and sex. Regardless, some of his works are [Very Peculiar Stories](#). A [Cuban](#) from Kansas and *This [That](#) and the Other*.

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