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Aubrey

By

JOE MUSSO

Dramatic Publishing Company

Woodstock, Illinois • Australia • New Zealand • South Africa

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ISBN: 978-1-61959-215-5

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Aubrey received its world premiere at Detroit Repertory Theatre on March 28, 2019.

CAST:

AUBREYJenaya Jones Reynolds

IVANAaron Kottke

PRODUCTION:

DirectorBarbara Busby

Stage Manager Lynch Travis

Set Designer Harry Wetzel

Sound Designer Burr Huntington

Costume Designer..... Judy Dery

Lighting DesignerThomas Schraeder

Aubrey

CHARACTERS

AUBREY GAGNIER: mid-20s, female, heroin addict, calligrapher, heavily tattooed, literary, talkative, uninhibited, homeless.

IVAN STILLMAN: mid-30s, male, tall, muscular, slight limp, coffin builder, gravedigger, workaholic, mysterious, reticent.

SETTING

The play is set in Ivan's workshop, where he builds coffins using old-fashioned hand tools. A hallway leads to the shop's offstage entrance, and a door leads to an offstage bedroom. One large window looks onto a graveyard. Although the play is set in the present, the shop does not have electricity. For heat, a wood-burning stove. For light, kerosene lanterns.

SCENES

ACT I

Scene 1: The present, fall, dusk.

Scene 2: The next evening.

Scene 3: Three months later, winter, evening.

ACT II

Scene 1: Three months later, spring, dusk.

Scene 2: One month later, late evening.

Scene 3: The next day, mid-afternoon.

PLAYWRIGHT'S NOTES

Ivan's shop and his tools are all wood and metal. Nothing modern or plastic should appear. Ivan never smiles, except where specifically noted in the script. Aubrey's addiction should not be exaggerated on stage. Words in brackets [] indicate lines implied but not spoken.

Aubrey

ACT I

Scene 1

(The present. A coffin workshop. It is dusk on a warm fall day, and muted light from a large window keeps darkness from engulfing the room. Neither the wood-burning stove nor the lanterns are lit. An unfinished cedar coffin rests on two sawhorses. IVAN STILLMAN sits on a wooden stool next to a worktable. A tall, muscular man with a slight limp in one leg, he wears rugged work clothes and brown work boots. He sharpens a shovel with a file. An axe and a few other shovels lie next to his feet. Offstage, a shopkeeper bell rings as a door opens and closes. AUBREY GAGNIER enters and stands behind him. She wears a dress, carries a purse and is heavily tattooed.)

IVAN. Who's there?

AUBREY. A ghost.

IVAN. In flesh?

AUBREY. Yes.

IVAN. Then you live.

AUBREY. A dead life. Can I light this lantern?

IVAN. Here for a coffin?

AUBREY. No.

IVAN. Grave dug?

AUBREY. Not today.

IVAN. I build coffins. Dig graves.

AUBREY. I have a lighter. Fire.

IVAN. Does the dark—

AUBREY. Scare me? No. Comforts me. I can't see your eyes.

I'm told if I look in your eyes, I see my soul.

IVAN. You were told wrong.

AUBREY. Please.

IVAN. You want to see your soul?

AUBREY. No, I don't.

(He lights a lantern with a wooden match.)

AUBREY *(cont'd)*. Aubrey Gagnier.

(She offers her hand. He shakes it.)

IVAN. Miss Gagnier.

(She stares into his eyes, then turns away.)

AUBREY. I'm a calligrapher. I'm here to buy lampblack ink.

IVAN. I don't sell lampblack ink.

AUBREY. You make it. Paper too. You make a lot of what you use. So I'm told. Was I told wrong?

IVAN. I don't sell it.

AUBREY. No TV, phone, power tools, no electricity. In the old style. Isn't that your motto? Ivan Stillman. Handcrafted coffins. Hand-dug graves. In the old style.

(He places a bottle of lampblack ink on a table.)

IVAN. Free.

AUBREY (*picks up the ink*). Thank you. Do you have business cards? You know, small cards with your name, occupation. I'll pass them around. Help drum up business. See, I know people, people who die. That was a joke. A funny aside. 'Cause everyone dies. Seriously, though, a wealthy gentleman commissioned me to hand-letter his suicide note. He's hanging himself Saturday. Which is a lie. I hand-letter poetry verses. Sell them on street corners. A half-step from begging.

IVAN. I have work to do.

AUBREY. No joke, I *do* know people who die. You buried my lover Tuesday.

IVAN. Mister Wiloth?

AUBREY. Danny Wiloth.

IVAN. Tall man.

AUBREY. Yes. Do you ever wonder, when you shovel dirt back in a grave, whether the dead hear the earth strike the coffin, the sound softening, until silence?

IVAN. No.

AUBREY. Let me rephrase the question. When you shovel dirt into a grave, *can* the dead hear the earth strike the coffin, the sound softening, until silence? (*Pause.*) The rest is silence. Ever hear that phrase? The rest is silence. I don't think you have.

IVAN. You have what you came for.

AUBREY. Have I? Do you like my tattoos?

IVAN. Miss Gagnier.

AUBREY. Call me Aubrey. May I call you Ivan? Please say no.

IVAN. The dead don't bury themselves.

AUBREY. Yet, they stay dead, don't they? But that doesn't mean they stay silent, does it? Does it, Mister Stillman?

IVAN. Why ask me?

AUBREY. Who should I ask? A spiritualist?

IVAN. Ask who you want.

AUBREY. I am. You, the gravedigger, the coffin maker.

IVAN. Now I recognize you.

AUBREY. You do?

IVAN. Yes.

AUBREY. From where?

IVAN. You were there. Graveside. Behind a black veil. Silent.

AUBREY. My tattoos give me away? Yes, I was at Danny's burial. Just you, me and Preacher Paul. Weren't for me, Preacher Paul would'a stayed holed up in his most holy church. Weren't for me, the county would'a buried Danny, not you. I assume you're aware how the county buries a man. Body bag, cardboard coffin, pauper's grave, grave dug with a backhoe, filled in with a backhoe. Preacher Paul pay your bill?

IVAN. Yes.

AUBREY. I gave him the money. Don't ask how I got it. Shames me. Still, it's in your pocket, not my dope dealer's.

(He places two more bottles of lampblack ink on the table.)

IVAN. 'S all I got. Go on, take 'em.

AUBREY *(takes the ink)*. Thank you, again. *(Touches the unfinished coffin.)* Cedar?

IVAN. Yes.

AUBREY. Smells good. I could only afford pine. *(Grasps a rope handle.)* Make your own rope?

IVAN. Yes.

AUBREY. Strong.

IVAN. 'Tis.

AUBREY. You sell it?

IVAN. No.

AUBREY. Give it away?

IVAN. No.

AUBREY. Danny weighed nothing when he died. An overdose, heroin, laced with fentanyl. Ever hear of fentanyl? That was a stupid question. Course you have. You dig graves. Fentanyl. Not a poetic word, is it? No, scientific. Chemical. Fentanyl. We died together, Danny and me, in a filthy alley, hypo needles still stuck in us. But the dead don't always stay dead. I didn't. Ever hear of Narcan, the brand name for naloxone?

IVAN. No.

AUBREY. Why would you? You're not in the rescue business. Narcan reverses opioid overdose. A resurrection drug. Take it from me, though, resurrection's not what it's cracked up to be.

IVAN. Sorry about your addiction.

AUBREY. Everyone is sorry about my addiction, which is a lie. Most people hate me because of my addiction. That is one sharp shovel, Mister Stillman, very sharp indeed. Guess it has to be. Why is ground in a graveyard so hard? Why isn't it soft, easy to dig, welcoming? Do you ever sing while you work?

IVAN. No.

AUBREY. You should. You have a lovely voice. Tell me, who are your friends?

IVAN. My what?

AUBREY. Friends. Who are they?

IVAN. My work.

AUBREY. Just one?

IVAN. Yes.

AUBREY. I'd proffer you have two, because surely work, the hard kind you do, must befriend sleep.

IVAN. You know sleep?

AUBREY. It's the death of each day's life.

IVAN. You know it?

AUBREY. Only the opiate nod.

IVAN. Opiate?

AUBREY. Nod. The addict's nod? Nodding? On the nod?

IVAN. I don't—

AUBREY. Watch.

(She demonstrates a heroin addict nodding.)

IVAN. Do you know real sleep? Real sleep, not that.

AUBREY *(snaps out of her nod)*. I murdered real sleep.

IVAN. Gentle sleep.

AUBREY. 'S what I was trying to do, in the alley, with Danny, trying to sleep, gently. Do the dead sleep? Do they dream?

IVAN. You ask a lot of questions.

AUBREY. I need a lot of answers. You were the last to see Danny's body. Yes?

IVAN. Yes.

AUBREY. He was blue, wasn't he?

IVAN. He—

AUBREY. Lie to me.

IVAN. Lie?

AUBREY. You can't, can you?

IVAN. He was blue.

AUBREY. Course he was. How could he not be?

IVAN. Are you high?

AUBREY. I have heroin in me, but “high,” no. Not yet. Day’s still young, though, right? Plenty of life left in the day, right?

(He takes her hands into his.)

IVAN. How do you keep your hands steady, your calligraphy?

AUBREY. I don’t. You have strong hands.

(She places his hands on her throat.)

AUBREY *(cont’d)*. Strangle me.

IVAN *(removes his hands)*. Stop.

(He sharpens a different shovel.)

AUBREY. I need help.

IVAN. I hope you find it.

AUBREY. Your help. *(Pause.)* I know your secret.

IVAN. What secret?

AUBREY. *Your* secret.

IVAN. What’s that?

AUBREY. You speak with the dead, so I’m told.

IVAN. By who?

AUBREY. An addict I know.

IVAN. Who?

AUBREY. He lived in a tent, on a hill, next to the graveyard.

IVAN. Hobo camp?

AUBREY. Addict camp. He saw you dig graves.

IVAN. It’s my living.

AUBREY. Saw you lying in one. Saw you press your ear to the dirt wall.

IVAN. I sometimes rest.

AUBREY. In a grave? No, you were listening to someone.

IVAN. I rest.

AUBREY. He saw your lips move. You were speaking to someone.

IVAN. Ever speak to yourself?

AUBREY. All the time. You weren't speaking to yourself.

IVAN. You heard all that from an addict?

AUBREY. Danny.

IVAN. Was he high?

AUBREY. Always, but I saw it too. I lived in the tent with him.

IVAN. Drugs mess with your mind.

AUBREY. 'S why I take them. I need you to speak with Danny.

IVAN. No.

AUBREY. Won't take long.

IVAN. Can't.

AUBREY. Ask him something.

IVAN. Can't.

AUBREY. Just—

IVAN. He's dead.

AUBREY. Ask if he forgives me.

IVAN. For what?

AUBREY. You'll do it?

IVAN. Forgive you for what?

AUBREY. Rather not say.

IVAN. No?

AUBREY. It's personal.

IVAN. Will Danny know?

AUBREY. Know what?

IVAN. What to forgive.

AUBREY. Yes.

IVAN. If he doesn't?

AUBREY. He will.

IVAN. If you're sure.

AUBREY. I want him to forgive me, for surviving.

IVAN. For living?

AUBREY. We had a suicide pact.

IVAN. Death—

AUBREY. By dope. Fentanyl. Enough in those hypos to kill an elephant. Least, that's what we thought. Plan was to shoot up in a meadow, not some filthy alley. Soft grass below, blue sky above, but the second that dope hits your hand, all you want to do is cook it, shoot it in your veins. Do the living and the dead share the same sky, or do the dead have their own sky?

IVAN. My guess, the same.

AUBREY. A stupid bicycle cop found us. He only had one dose of Narcan.

IVAN. You chose to die?

AUBREY. What fucking part of suicide don't you understand?
(Pause.) I'm sorry. Trying hard not to curse. On the street, it's all I do.

IVAN. Thank you for trying.

(She discovers a tattered Bible on his worktable.)

AUBREY. You despise cursing, so I'm told.

IVAN. Who told you?

AUBREY. God.

IVAN. He speaks to you?

AUBREY. Tries. (*Holds up Bible.*) A Bible man?

IVAN. I read it.

AUBREY. Can the dead read our minds? See our souls?

IVAN. I don't know.

AUBREY. I do. He follows me.

IVAN. Who?

AUBREY. Danny. He's here.

IVAN. In this room?

(She nods her head yes.)

IVAN (*cont'd*). You see him?

AUBREY. No. My skin. He touches my skin.

IVAN. What does he want?

AUBREY. Me to speak it, not just think it, speak it.

IVAN. Speak what?

AUBREY. The truth.

IVAN. 'S he telling you that?

AUBREY. I can't hear him.

IVAN. Then how—

AUBREY. Intuition. You never had an intuition?

IVAN. OK, speak it. Speak the truth.

AUBREY. I wanted to die that day, but not alone. So I said, I said, "I love you, Danny. Will you die with me?" Which is a lie. I never loved you. I used you. To steal for me. Score dope for me.