

# ASTRAY

## Abhandengekommen

An Opera in Three Acts

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Second Draft: Köln Bayenthal, 25 July 2023

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## CHARACTERS

KIKI *one of the newly deceased* ..... Soprano  
SHARON *Kiki's support* ..... Mezzo-soprano  
DANTE *one of the newly deceased* ..... Baritone  
VIRGIL *Dante's support* ..... Tenor  
CORA *Leader of a support group for the deceased* ..... Mezzo-soprano  
THE OBITUARIST ..... Soprano  
THE BUREAUCRAT ..... Coloratura Soprano  
THE MOTHER ..... Mezzo-soprano

THE DEAD - SATB Ensemble (minimum of eight singers); Obituarist, Bureaucrat, and Mother can be cast from this ensemble

Scene - A large city

Time - The Present

## **PROLOGUE**

Dante – a man of fashion, influence, and means, content but ambitious – reads his own obituary in the newspaper. Incredulous, he stumbles over his reported cause of death. "This wasn't the death I was supposed to have!" he rails "my death was to be heroic, inspiring! People should have been clamoring to name art school scholarships after me! But this - this is pedestrian, commonplace, forgettable. That's not me."

And besides, he muses, he's not even dead.

Blustering, he hastily prepares to leave the house - he will get to the bottom of this; he will find the illiterate amateur columnist at the newspaper and have him fired. On the empty street, he tries to calm himself. He closes his eyes and breathes deeply - see, he's not dead. Upon opening his eyes, he notices a figure staring at him.

"Come with us..." it says.

"Uh...no thank you!"

He hears it again "Come with us..." a different voice, another figure.

"Thanks; no!

And yet another appears. He begins to panic

"FUCK OFF!" He tries to run, but is blocked on all sides. They're closing in; panic. They take hold of him and begin to drag him, moaning "Come with uuuuuuussss..." A door appears, and like Don Giovanni, he is dragged through it, screaming. Darkness, then brightness. He finds himself..

## **ACT ONE**

... in a fluorescent-lit church basement: old carpet, smell of strong coffee and musty books. The hands that dragged him are now brushing him off, patting him on the back, shaking his own.

A meeting is about to begin: chairs are being arranged, coffee is being poured, and boxes of donuts are being opened. There's a great feeling of camaraderie amongst the people there, and Dante, trying to understand what's become of his day, warily takes it all in.

There's a woman directing the traffic of the scene - she is obviously the leader. He tries to get her attention and she directs him to a seat, saying "Keep your mouth shut and your ears open." Stunned, Dante sits obediently. A few chairs away, a woman sits looking as stunned as he feels. He waves to get her attention and starts to address her, but the leader claps twice and the others flock to the open seats. The meeting begins.

"Hello, I'm Cora," the Leader says, "and I'm dead."

"...hello" the others mumble. "She's...what?" Dante whispers.

Cora tells her story: her life was miserable; an unloving spouse ignored her, her children saw right through her, and her job was insignificant and meaningless. Slowly, she felt that she was fading from the minds of everyone – friends stopped calling, colleagues stopped scheduling meetings, waiters never took her order, even the clergy left her off the prayer list. She was forgotten. She never knew why, and that was torture. Left alone, she was determined to end it all, which was when a woman approached her. This stranger knew her whole story, as she herself had lived through the same experience. In that moment, she realized that she was dead to the world – who she had been was no longer recognizable to the world around her. She embraced the rest of her life and dedicated it to helping others with the same affliction.

"My family thinks I'm dead, and I am. Now, I'm free."

The leader turns to Dante and Kiki, the other newbie. "Of course, we're still technically alive," she says, "but the world considers us to be dead, and would prefer that we stay that way. Death can be hard to accept, especially after the fact. But here you can shelve the confusion and anger. Begin with one simple fact and work your way back to the beginning of the end. You're not alone." The others in the meeting rattle off the causes of their deaths: and ill-fated prank, thrill seeking, social suicide, 9/11, lost at sea. All eyes fall on Dante and Kiki, waiting for their stories. Dante, folds his arms and avoids eye contact. After an awkward pause, Kiki begins.

She left home when she was supposed to – to learn, travel, and explore. The letters from home slowly became less frequent, until they stopped altogether. Her friends and family – their lives had gone on without her, and she had a place in their lives.

Deciding on a surprise visit, she found that Customs would not accept her passport. Suspicious Border Patrol agents had no record of her existence. She was brought to a way station,

where she was approached by a woman who brought her to this church basement, without explanation. Seeing no alternative, she took a seat and waited.

Dante rises, “It has been very nice meeting you all, and your work sounds intriguing, but I have urgent matters to attend to...”

Cora holds up a newspaper, “We all read your obituary this morning.”

“That’s a typo,” he says. They all look at him with pity, and he slinks back to his chair. “I thought I was more. I thought I had lived enough to warrant more. I had friends and made enemies; no one had no opinion of me. How could I just be written off? Brushed aside?”

“Then, right the wrong,” Cora says with a sigh. “Bang down the doors, make scenes, do it your way. And you,” turning to Kiki, “follow the threads. Find your family and see if you’re really lost to them. Lord knows it could all be a big misunderstanding.” The others in the group shift uncomfortably, but say nothing. “But, go with support, don’t do it alone.” Two supporters volunteer – Virgil and Sharon, one each for Dante and Kiki. All in the group rally around the four.

## **ACT TWO**

Virgil and Sharon sing to each other about finding love in the afterlife – that even the Lost and the Dead are not impervious to the power of love. Their passion is awkward for Dante and Kiki, who are without direction. Dante pulls Kiki aside, “We need to ditch these two before this becomes La Boheme,” he says. “I’m going to the newspaper to ream out whoever wrote this mess.”

“Oh, the Obituarist! She’s lovely,” says Virgil. “A real friend to the Dead and a meticulous artist with the obituary.”

“Look,” Dante says, “even if I believe this dead stuff, this Obituarist obviously got it wrong. My death would have been much more... *more!*”

“It actually doesn’t matter how you died,” Sharon chimes in, “but how you live your life thereafter.”

“Life thereafter?” Kiki says, “How can you live on after you’re dead?”

“In any number of ways. Most of us aren’t even in-the-earth dead but lost – astray, missing until our presence was eventually or deliberately disregarded.”

“I think that’s my problem?” Kiki wonders.

Sharon goes on: “Take me for instance. Everyone who knew me before 9/11 thinks I’m dead. They waited and waited and eventually when I could not be found assumed that I had perished. The memorial service was intense.”

“You went?”

“Of course! Wouldn’t have missed it!”

“But, didn’t anyone recognize you?”

“Of course not; they were firm in their conviction that I was gone, so I became gone.”

After that sets in, Dante interjects, “Cool story! I have to take care of this.” He walks off. Sharon and Virgil exchange looks and a kiss, then Virgil runs after him.

Kiki looks at Sharon, who says, “‘Follow the threads,’ Cora said. What was the beginning of the end?”

“Not a single card for my last birthday.”

“Before that?”

“They took me off their insurance?”

“That’s not uncommon...”

“I don’t know! They always asked me when I was coming home.”

“Now we’re getting somewhere!”

“But they were the ones encouraging me to go, to get out and see the world, to be the one who left.”

“Do you think they meant it?”

Kiki pauses. Then launches into her story: her travels and adventures, the responses diminishing in their enthusiasm, the awkward holidays home, her city becoming slightly different – streets changing, landmarks disappearing, development sucking up empty space, everything losing its shimmer.

Then, ultimately, a one-sided conversation. Her family and friends could not imagine the things she was experiencing. They said she thought she was better than them, that she had changed too much. That last time at home, she got lost in her old neighborhood, and was late getting back to her family, finding the doors locked and the lights out. Her key didn't work – the locks had been changed.

Away again, and then a surprise visit home with the shock at the border – not valid, not welcome.

“Did I do something wrong? Is there a way to make it right?” Kiki asks.

“We can see what's left of the puzzle,” Sharon says, “and see if your piece still fits.”

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Dante barges into the office of the Obituarist, Virgil racing to catch up. Dante is livid, and demands to know where the information contained in his obituary came from.

“Is the information incorrect?” asks the Obituarist.

“Well...yes.”

“Are you not dead?”

“That's not...”

“I fail to see the problem,” says the unconcerned Obituarist..

Dante regales The Obituarist with the details of the Most Honorable and Exciting Death that he was supposed to endure. His entire life was to conclude in the Most Honorable and Exciting Death, as his entire life had been a prelude to the event. Every day, he reflected on his death five times – a Bhutan custom. He was well prepared, and did not let the reality of his eventual demise cloud his mission on earth. How could he not have had the Most Honorable and Exciting Death that would have inspired millions to reflect and improve upon their own lives?

Obituarist is unimpressed. “I write dozens of obituaries every day. They all read the same – loving spouse, doting parent, committed employee of Who Cares? They all end up in the ground. The spouses move on, the children divert their attention to themselves, the co-workers never cared in the first place. If there's only one memorial service, it saves time and column inches. And who could possibly predict the way they were going to die, and the meaning it would have to others without suicide and a note with the significance of the Magna Carta?”

Dante is sternly silent. Perhaps, he implies, the Obituarist has no such designs, but the wishes of others for their own lives and deaths cannot – and should not – be denounced or truncated by senseless parties in fishbowl offices. Who, he demands, gave the information that he died such a meaningless death?

“Who else,” Obituarist replies, “but the Government? If you want to fight someone, fight them.”

Righteously indignant, Dante declares his intent to do just that, and begins to make an extravagant exit. At the door, he turns back to ask “By the way, if I’m ‘dead’, how can you see me?”

Obituarist answers, “I’m dead, too.”

“Thanks for your time!” Virgil says cheerily, dragging Dante away.

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Kiki and Sharon are standing at a door. “What’s the plan?” Kiki asks.

“Follow my lead,” Sharon replies, “I’ve seen this work.” She knocks three times; they wait.

“Who’s there!?” comes an agitated voice from behind the door.

“Good morning!” Sharon begins cheerfully. “We’re canvassing the neighborhood on behalf of the new community engagement program?”

“Not interested!”

“It’s about keeping a safe and watchful eye on our community’s children. Can we give you a Pamphlet?” There’s a pause.

“Slip it under the door!”

Sharon pulls a fully formed pamphlet from her pocketbook, winks at Kiki, and slides it under the door. “There’s a website with complete information. Thanks for your time!” She takes Kiki’s hand and waits.

“That’s it? What now!?” Kiki protests. Sharon holds up a finger with expectation on her face. Suddenly the door creaks open just enough to show the Shadow of someone peering through the crack.

“I lost a child,” a woman’s voice says.

“I’m so sorry,” both Kiki and Sharon say.

“This won’t bring her back...”

“But it could help the next one...”

The door opens, the woman inside walks deeper into the home and the two follow inside. The woman goes on: “She wasn’t a child by the time I lost her, but I could see that it would happen when she was younger. Always independent, wanting to strike out on her own. She was always running from me. ‘Keep an eye on the way home,’ I tell her. ‘Always know how to get back! When you leave do you even know where you’re going?’

“I’d leave little breadcrumbs, hide around corners, tie ribbons on trees to remind her how to get back, to come home. I’m always waiting at home. Every time she came back she looked different, growing so fast and becoming a stranger, first in our town, then in our home, then in her bed.

“It was so simple: just remember the way home, keep your eyes on the path, look for the markers, narrow your gaze.

“We both lost sight. She, with eyes fixed away, without interest in looking back – like if she did, she’d turn into a pillar of salt. And me taking my eyes off the path to see if she was still on, only to be rewarded with the sight of her slipping away.

“And I’ll only see my little girl in pictures from another past. The prodigal daughter never returned. We assumed she was in the city during the attack. I reported her missing and went back to my path.

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Kiki and Sharon close the door behind them.

“That wasn’t my mother,” Kiki says.

“I know,” replies Sharon. “She was mine.”

“How does this help me? A trip down memory lane?”

“You said they asked you when you were coming home. Was that one time?”

“It was every time. They were always calling – What’s happening? Where are you? You haven’t called in so long. Remember your father’s birthday. I didn’t want to talk to them because I knew they wouldn’t see the future I was building for myself, they wouldn’t understand it.

“Were you ashamed?”

“Of them. I was ashamed of where I’d come from. There was no future and I wouldn’t be born, live, and die in the same place – calcified. I had a brain, so I used it. I needed direction and sought it. I think they backed off, so that if they didn’t see me go, they might think I was still there.”

“Until you weren’t.”

“Until I wasn’t.”

“Do you understand our little excursion?”

“Yes. But that doesn’t explain why my passport was rejected at the border?”

“Let’s meet up with the boys. I have a feeling they’re headed the same way we are.”

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“The government?!” Dante is mulling it all over. “There’s always someone telling me what to do, regulating my actions, policing my thoughts, doling out punishments for perceived infractions. I fought against this my whole life. I’m in charge of me, I’m in control. I know what’s best for me. It’s all my decision. Don’t tell me where to go, what to do, what to read, how to eat...”

“How and when to die?” Virgil says.

Dante glares back. “Who has the right to override the most personal moment of my life?”

“How did you die? You keep saying it was not the Glorious and Meaningful Death that someone – as exalted and respected as you were – were supposed to have had. What was supposed to have happened?”

“My life had a trajectory. I came from very little and, left to my own devices, I achieved more than anyone said I would. There were many rungs on that ladder, and many people had to be left behind for me to keep going, so I left them all behind, showing them the way so they could follow. And follow they did. I had so many followers, and they started to interpret what I said in ways that I didn’t intend. Corrections had to be made, people had to be jettisoned. Some didn’t like that, not

surprised, their jealousy overriding good sense. I was made to be a monster, a man-machine devouring what I could and screwing the rest. These nothings had no idea what struggle I endured and, when I told them, they turned. Like a tsunami gathering strength, they rose up against me, attempting to purge me from the earth. There was no apology to be made so I made none. And then, there I was, washed up onto the pages of a dead newspaper. Without a headline; it's like I'm in exile.”

“Sounds like a social suicide,” Virgil muses.

Before Dante can respond, the women approach. Virgil and Sharon embrace with the same unbridled passion. Dante rolls his eyes and turns to Kiki, who looks preoccupied.

“You see a ghost?” he asks.

“Maybe. Did you?”

“Now that I think of it...” He calls out to Virgil, “What did the Obituarist mean about her being dead, too?”

“Ah!” the Supports say. “The Dead of the world! You’ve met a few, and of course there are more – millions each year, worldwide. Some actually die in the conventional sense – dead and buried. But many others – like us – are very much alive, although the world prefers that we were not.”

“So what do we do?” Kiki asks.

“We fill the gaps, take up the spaces. Like extras in a film, we’re supporting scenery that no one pays attention to. We also work at night, when the Living sleep, doing the work a society needs, but no one wants to acknowledge.”

They’ve wandered back to the church basement. Cora and the other dead join in the discussion. While there isn’t a centralized organization of the Dead, we group ourselves – lost sheep in a lost herd. We fit into a network and find ways to be productive and helpful.

The Dead make the Living believe that their existence is orderly: keeping up the streets swept, the levees maintained, and the grocery stores stocked. They are essential, but criminally paid no notice. They are the radio host pulling the late shift to keep the truck driver awake, the outpost commander making sure no one accidentally launches Armageddon. They tend to the night blooming flowers, fix the crosswalk lights, and make sure the coffee gets delivered.

“And,” Cora adds, “we’re the bureaucrats. We staff the desks, stamp the forms, and keep the wheels of society spinning.”

“Bureaucrats!?” Dante interjects. “You mean, the government?”

“Of, for, and by the Dead,” she replies. “And now, that includes the both of you. Not so bad, isn’t it? Being left alone?”

Dante and Kiki give each other an unsettled look and wearily sit next to each other. The Dead take their seats as another meeting begins.

“I’m forgotten,” Kiki says.

“Will understanding resolve anything?” Dante asks.

### **ACT THREE**

Sharon and Virgil are coaching Kiki and Dante as they approach a huge door with “LAW” written over the top of it. “Have you got all your papers?” they ask.

Kiki stammers, “I don’t have anything but my worthless passport. Maybe they can look me up?” Dante, triumphant, raises a single document from the obituarist stating that the info she used came from this office. He points accusingly at the door.

Sharon and Virgil try to be supportive, but that’s not much to go on. “We’ll be waiting right here,” they say. “Look for the gray door.”

“You’re not coming with us?” Kiki asks.

“Some support you are,” Dante grumbles.

They give patient smiles and repeat, “We’ll be waiting right here.” Dante and Kiki summon their courage and enter together.

Inside there is emptiness, save for a single screen which flashes the number 6. There’s a ticket machine next to the screen with an out of order sign taped to it.

“Now what?” he asks.

“Look!” she exclaims, “A grey door!”

They run to it but a booming voice declares. “No appointments are available today!”

“We’re dead and we need help!” he shouts.

“Take a number!” the voice says.

“The machine is broken!” she says. “Is someone there?”

“No!! This is a recording,” the voice says.

“I have a document with your stamp,” he bellows. There’s a pause.

“This is the wrong door!” the voice answers. Kiki jiggles the handle.

“Don’t do that!” the voice exclaims.

“This must be the door,” Dante yells.

“No, it isn’t!” the voice tries to argue.

They push and pull at the gray door, arguing back and forth with the voice, who eventually loses patience. The door swings open and the two are sucked through it. They land in uncomfortable chairs in a cramped office: stacks of papers, Muzak, pictures of cats, an ancient computer, one bonsai. They appear to be alone. “This is about what I expected,” Dante mumbles.

A pile of papers rustles and an unkempt, incredulous looking woman emerges from it. She is the Bureaucrat.

“Thank you for seeing us...” Kiki begins.

“I’m incredibly busy,” the Bureaucrat, interrupting. “You have no idea how many people like you barge in and demand that I fixed their little problems. And they’re all little problems and I’m only one gatekeeper. You saw how tall this building is; I’ve barely been to the floor above this and everything has to go to the very top and make its way down again. So don’t you get your hopes up. And WHY are you bothering me?”

Kiki begins, “My name is...”

“I KNOW what your name is, and I know your problems; been expecting you for days – set up diversions and traps, none of which worked by the way, and *give me your documents!*”

They hand over what they have. With a huff, the Bureaucrat eyes Kiki. “Your case is simple – it’s actually a typo...”

Dante scoffs; the Bureaucrat shoots him a look and he crumples. She looks back to Kiki.

“Your parents finally reported you missing, they went through the channels and someone mistakenly reported your case was closed. That’s it. You could come back, but you’d have to stay. Everything out there that you’ve built would be lost. And you should prepare for the endless questions. But they’d have you back, and you’d be alive, not a pillar of salt to be seen. Act quick, though – the statute of limitations runs out at... midnight tonight!

She looks at the Obituarist’s document. “And you want a better death?” she says to Dante.

“I could come back too...” he begins.

“Not possible – that, you did to yourself. But...oops, look at this.” She points to the seal and signature on the affidavit. “This is not my stamp.”

“But you’re the Bureaucrat?”

“I am, but this was stamped by my colleague and only he can amend it.”

“May I speak with him?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because he’s dead; in-the-ground dead. He died yesterday.

He slumps into his chair. Then leans forward. “Are you dead?”

“Why would you think that?” she says, offended. “Because I’m a Bureaucrat?”

“Then how can you see us?” he demands.

“Why can’t you see YOURSELVES?! There’s no great mystery in Death, it’s quite routine. But screw with the order and people get twitchy. Does it shock you that the Living have a say over the dead? Didn’t YOU, when you were living?”

Looking at them, the Bureaucrat softens a bit. “Look, there’s always been a barrier between the worlds of the Living and the Dead – sometimes porous, sometimes iron. And though one can usually only go in one direction, the problems of death or life can’t really be solved by fixing typos or the grinding gears of paper and red tape. I don’t know what you thought I could do down here but when the laws of nature and the universe up on the top floor get handed down, we are all lucky to understand them, let alone apply them, and certainly not alter them.

“You have some things to consider, and I have to work.” She disappears beneath the mound of paper.

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Both a little stunned, Dante and Kiki slink out of the building. Sharon and Virgil hastily break their embrace and approach the two with a little trepidation. Their faces tell the story.

“Did you expect otherwise?” Sharon asks.

“I didn’t,” Kiki says. “I go back and I lose everything I’ve built. I stay away and lose them. Even if it’s a typo, so it is written.”

“It’s not written in stone,” interjects Dante. A little surprised, they all turn to look at him. “I have no choice, but you do,” he continues. This isn’t the first time I’ve faced death. I said I came from very little. I actually came from quite a bit, but lost it all. I was thrown out of my parent’s house when I came out. They actually said, ‘You are dead to us.’ I never saw or heard from them again. I started again and made my own path. But it was so hard, I can’t do that again.”

“You do have a choice,” Kiki says to him. “Acceptance is your option.”

“But my life was all I had...” Dante begins.

“Our lives are gone. Whatever they were, we can’t go back. And I know you don’t even want to.” There’s a pause while he considers this; something changes in his face.

“I don’t,” he says. “And neither do you.” He takes Kiki’s hand. The sun is setting, the Dead are appearing.

“Look,” Dante says to Kiki, “you weren’t alone. A lost sheep found by a lost flock.” They embrace in friendship as the Dead gather around them and join in their song:

*Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen,  
Mit der ich sonst viele Zeit verdorben.  
Sie hat so lange von mir nichts vernommen,  
Sie mag wohl glauben, ich sei gestorben.*

I am lost to the world  
With which I used to waste much time;  
It has for so long known nothing of me,  
It may well believe that I am dead.

*Es ist mir auch gar nichts daran gelegen,  
Ob sie mich für gestorben hält;  
Ich kann auch gar nichts sagen dagegen,  
Denn wirklich bin ich gestorben der Welt.*

Nor am I at all concerned  
If it should think that I am dead.  
Nor can I deny it,  
For truly I am dead to the world.

*Ich bin gestorben dem Weltgewimmel  
Und ruh' in einem stillen Gebiet.  
Ich leb' in mir und meinem Himmel,  
In meinem Lieben, in meinem Lied.*

I am dead to the world's tumult  
And rest in a quiet realm!  
I live alone in my heaven,  
In my love, in my song!

A new person enters, looking lost and confused. The Dead turn to look at him in unison.

“Oh shit...” he says.

“Come with uuuuuuussss.....” Kiki and Dante say in a creepy unison.

“No, thank you!” The man looks to run, and the Dead surround him. As they do, Kiki says to Sharon, “This feels weird..”

“I know,” Sharon replies, “but it's tradition.” They catch the newcomer and drag him...

## **EPILOGUE**

...back to the church basement! Dante fires up the coffee machine, while Kiki leads the newbie to his seat.

“Hello,” she says to him, “I'm Kiki, and I'm dead...”

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