

PRESENT IN ABSENTIA

Written by

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FADE IN:

EXT. OLD FARM - DAY.

Rusting tractor sits in tall grass near a large empty barn with faded red paint, tall weeds, broken fences. Two gravestones stand together.

EXT. OLD FARMHOUSE - BACKYARD TREE SWING - DAY.

JAMES and ETHEL MITCHELL sit. James gently keeps the swing moving with his longer legs, they drink iced tea, hold hands. Ethel's head leans against James's shoulder.

A dog lays in the grass nearby as a cat watches birds fly around.

ETHEL

I love this old place. And I love having spent all these years with you, James.

JAMES

I can barely remember when we built this house.

ETHEL

You were twenty and I was eighteen.

JAMES

You made it a wonderful home, full of love. I love you for that, Ethel, and for many other reasons.

James kisses side of Ethel's gray head.

EXT. OLD FARMHOUSE - BACKYARD GARDEN - DAY.

Ethel is kneeling down, planting flowers, wearing sun bonnet.

From inside, James taps on the large back window.

Ethel looks up and smiles.

James kisses the glass, (leaving a print) and winks.

Ethel blows a kiss back.

INT. OLD FARMHOUSE - FRONT ROOM - NIGHT.

James and Ethel slowly dance to the song, 'Moonlight Serenade' from the phonograph. His right hand is on her lower back. His left hand gently holds hers. She looks up smiling, at his face.

ETHEL

I love you, Mr. Mitchell.

JAMES

We should get married and spend our lives together.

ETHEL

Are you proposing to me?

JAMES

Yes. Ethel, will you marry me?

ETHEL

Yes. I will.

JAMES

And will you stay with me until we get old and gray?

ETHEL

There are already over fifty years between 'I do' and 'I have'.

INT. OLD FARMHOUSE - BEDROOM - EARLY MORNING.

Ethel wakes with her husband's arm around her as her head lays on his chest. James is not breathing. She feels his face. Tears run down her cheeks. She kisses him on his lips and lays her head back on his chest.

EXT. OLD FARMHOUSE - DIRT DRIVEWAY - SAME MORNING.

GEORGE and HARRIET pull their car into the Mitchell's dirt driveway.

Ethel stands in her night gown inside the back door way, leaning against the jam, arms hang limply.

The car stops. Harriet gets out, holding the handle of a small basket.

HARRIET

Good morning, Ethel... Is there something wrong?... Ethel?

ETHEL  
(cries)  
Its James. Harriet, he's gone!

George and Harriet hurry over to Ethel.

GEORGE  
Oh, Lord. May we come in?

ETHEL  
(faint)  
Of course, George.

INT. OLD FARMHOUSE - FRONT ROOM - MOMENTS LATER.

George and Harriet step into the house. Ethel turns and leads them toward the kitchen.

Ethel stops and points left, at the bedroom. George and Harriet turn to look into the bedroom at James on the bed.

Ethel, George, and Harriet continue to the kitchen.

INT. OLD FARMHOUSE - KITCHEN.

HARRIET  
(to Ethel)  
Darling, you sit down and I'll make  
some hot water for tea.

Harriet works the hand pump at the sink, fills a kettle, and puts it on the stove, lights the gas burner with a wooden match.

GEORGE  
Ethel, I'll go into town and take  
care of things for you.

ETHEL  
Thank you, George.

George leaves.

ETHEL (CONT'D)  
Harriet, I want to go to James.

Ethel and Harriet go into the bedroom.

INT. OLD FARMHOUSE - BEDROOM - MOMENTS LATER.

Ethel and Harriet stand at the side of the bed, hold handkerchiefs to their faces,  
James's hair is wet and freshly wet and combed.

ETHEL

(crying)

What am I going to do now, Harriet?  
He was my whole life.

HARRIET

I know he was, Ethel. He was a  
good, loving man and a dear friend  
of ours. We know you are thankful  
to have had all those years with  
him.

ETHEL

I want to die with him... I'm  
already dead inside.

Ethel runs the back of her fingers carefully over James'  
cheek.

ETHEL (CONT'D)

I'll never get used to being  
without him. I'll never be happy  
again.

HARRIET

Give it some time, Ethel. We never  
get over a death but we can learn  
to live with it. If you don't mind,  
I'll go check on the water kettle.

ETHEL

I'll wait here with James.

Ethel leans over and puts her cheek against James' cheek.

ETHEL (CONT'D)

(whisper)

James, come back. Come back to me.

EXT. OLD FARMHOUSE - DIRT DRIVEWAY - LATER.

Through the bedroom window, Ethel sees George pulling into  
the driveway, followed by a hearse. Hearse parks and two men  
exit. They walk to the back, open the doors, pull out a  
stretcher.

Ethel and Harriet come out of the house.

FIRST UNDERTAKER and SECOND UNDERTAKER tip their hats to Ethel.

FIRST UNDERTAKER  
Ma'am.

SECOND UNDERTAKER  
We're sorry for your loss.

GEORGE  
Ethel, let me take them in. You ladies wait here.

George leads the two undertakers, carrying a stretcher, into the house. Ethel and Harriet wait by the door.

Minutes later George leads the stretcher out. It stops.

FIRST UNDERTAKER  
We're very sorry, Mrs. Mitchell.  
We'll take good care of him.

Ethel walks alongside the stretcher to the hearse, fusses over her husband's clothes and gray hair all the way, adjusts his pajama collar, steadies his head with one hand while holding his hand with her other hand, fingering his wedding band.

The stretcher stops at the back of the hearse.

SECOND UNDERTAKER  
Mrs. Mitchell, please, you'll have to let go of his hand.

Ethel looks down at her hand, tightly gripping her husband's hand, shakes her head.

ETHEL  
No. I can't. I don't want to! Don't ask me to let go. I'm going with him. Please!

HARRIET  
Dear, you really must release his hand. James has to go now. They will bring him back for the funeral.

Harriet places her hand on Ethel's. Ethel slowly slides her shaking hand back, cries. Harriet puts her arm around Ethel's shoulder. Ethel collapses in Harriet's arms, weeping.

FIRST UNDERTAKER  
Ma'am, someone will contact you  
soon about arrangements.

Standing in the driveway, Ethel, George, and Harriet watch as the back doors of the hearse are closed, hearse pulls away, fades into the dusty country road.

GEORGE  
Ethel, what can we do now? How can we help?

HARRIET  
We're your neighbors. And we're just a half mile away. How about I spend the night with you?

ETHEL  
No. I'll be fine. I would like to be alone.

HARRIET  
Okay. But we'll check on you in the morning.

Ethel and Harriet drive away.

Ethel pauses on the threshold of the door, looking into the house, still wiping the tears.

ETHEL  
I miss you, my love. I miss you.  
Why aren't you standing there?

Ethel enters the house and stares at their black and white wedding picture on the mantle.

ETHEL (CONT'D)  
I'm not sorry for one moment since then.

INT. OLD FARMHOUSE - KITCHEN - NEXT MORNING.

Ethel, George, and Harriet are having coffee at the small kitchen table.

HARRIET  
Ethel, did you get any sleep last night?

ETHEL  
Not a wink. I just laid there without my good night kiss.  
(MORE)

ETHEL (CONT'D)

I found myself reaching over for James. I leaned our wedding picture against his pillow. It helped.

GEORGE

I hate to bring this up but the funeral is in two days. Is there anything we can do for you?

ETHEL

Harriet and George, just be here for me.

HARRIET

We will. With all our love, as usual.

EXT. OLD FARM - DIRT DRIVEWAY - DAY.

Hearse stops in the driveway.

Ethel, George, and Harriet come outside.

FIRST UNDERTAKER

Good morning. Mrs. Mitchell, we were wondering if you might want to see your husband before the burial.

ETHEL

How? Where is he?

Harriet places her hand on the coffin.

HARRIET

Darling, James is right here. You should look. It will help.

GEORGE

He's got a nice suit on. He looks very handsome.

(Ethel looks disoriented.)

GEORGE (CONT'D)

(To undertakers)

Go ahead, fellas. Bring it out and open it.

The two men take out stands and set them up. They roll the coffin out and carefully open the lid.

HARRIET

Go ahead, darling.

Ethel slowly steps up and looks into the coffin.

ETHEL

That's not my James. 'This' man is dead. George, make them close it!

GEORGE

(To undertakers)

Close it, fellas.

(As the coffin is being closed, the light on James' face, dims.)

EXT. OLD FARM - SOLITARY TREE - TWO GRAVE STONES - DAY.

James' headstone has fresh dirt.

INT. OLD FARMHOUSE - FRONT ROOM - NIGHT.

Its raining.

In the reflection of the light of a oil lantern on the dark back window, Ethel notices the kiss print from James. A smile forms across her face.

ETHEL

(whisper)

Kiss me my darling like you always do.

Ethel closes her eyes, tilts her head up, and purses her lips.

INT. OLD FARMHOUSE - FRONT ROOM - MORNING.

Ethel opens a window. A breeze pushes the curtains aside and gently rocks James's rocking chair.

Ethel's eyes grow wide. She takes a step and looks around.

ETHEL

James, is that you? Say something my love. Show me something else.

INT. OLD FARMHOUSE - FRONT ROOM - NIGHT.

Dog sleeping on the rug, quickly comes to attention, runs to the kitchen, excitedly wagging its tail. Ethel calls out from her rocking chair while staring into the dark kitchen.

ETHEL  
Darling?... James? Do you want tea?  
Come sit with me.

Ethel sits forward in her rocking chair, staring and listening.

INT. OLD FARMHOUSE - FRONT ROOM - DAY.

House cat lying on the rug in front of the fireplace, suddenly stares over at the bedroom.

The cat runs and jumps up on James' side with her tail straight up, begins to purr.

Ethel stares from her rocking chair before she stands and walks to the bedroom door.

ETHEL  
Where is he, Tabby? Did you see  
him? Sweetheart, are you in the  
bedroom? I'm coming in to be with  
you.

INT. OLD FARMHOUSE - BEDROOM.

Ethel walks into the bedroom and lays on the bed, facing her husband's side. She reaches over and touches their wedding picture resting against his pillow.

ETHEL  
I know you're still right here with  
me.

INT. OLD FARMHOUSE - FRONT ROOM - MORNING.

Bird flies through the open window and lands on the bedpost on James' side, Ethel making the bed.

ETHEL  
(smiles)  
Yes I know. I 'do' know he's still  
here. How sweet, James. You sent  
that bird to remind me.

INT. OLD FARMHOUSE - FRONT ROOM - NIGHT.

Ethel cranks up the phonograph ('Moonlight Serenade'), holds her arms like she's dancing with someone.

ETHEL

This has always been our song,  
hasn't it, James?

INT. OLD FARMHOUSE - KITCHEN - AFTERNOON.

George and Harriet sit at the kitchen table with Ethel,  
drinking coffee.

HARRIET

(skeptical)

But can you actually see him?

ETHEL

(excited)

No. But I 'know' James is still  
here. Tabby and Sport see him! Can  
either of you feel him right now?  
You can, can't you?!

GEORGE

We're sorry Ethel, but we can't.  
James has passed, you know.

ETHEL

And just what does 'passed' mean?  
Passed doesn't have to mean that  
loved ones have altogether left us.

HARRIET

Do you ever actually hear his  
voice?

ETHEL

(confident)

Yes! My husband speaks to me in my  
head and sometimes I think he  
whispers to me! He sent a bird to  
comfort me!

HARRIET

Our dear Ethel, you simply must see  
a doctor. He will give you  
something to calm you and help you  
to accept what really has happened.

GEORGE

And that is, your husband, and our  
beloved friend, has died. Now  
please, let us take you to the  
doctor.

ETHEL  
(excited)  
No! You must understand that James  
is still here! He hasn't gone  
anywhere! He just left his body,  
that's all.

The two visitors stand to leave. Harriet kisses Ethel on her cheek.

HARRIET  
We love you. You know that, right?

ETHEL  
Of course I do.

GEORGE  
Think about our offer for the  
doctor, Ethel. We'll see you soon.  
Good-bye.

INT. OLD FARMHOUSE - BEDROOM - NIGHT.

Ethel holds their framed wedding picture on her chest, smiling and staring toward the ceiling, tears run down the side of her eyes, eyes close, face relaxes, her grip on the picture frame loosens.

INT. OLD FARMHOUSE - FRONT ROOM - MORNING.

George and Harriet knock on the door before entering.

HARRIET  
Ethel, dear?... Ethel?

George and Harriet take several steps into the house and look into the bedroom, and then at each other.

HARRIET (CONT'D)  
Ethel?... It's George and Harriet.

GEORGE  
Ethel, are you awake?...

George and Harriet enter the bedroom, stand next to the bed.

Harriet takes a handkerchief out of her purse.

HARRIET  
(crying)  
Oh, dear God.

EXT. OLD FARM - DIRT DRIVEWAY - DAY.

Same two undertakers arrive in the hearse, carry stretcher into the house, George and Harriet follow.

Undertakers bring the stretcher out with Ethel's body and carefully place it into the hearse.

FIRST UNDERTAKER

We're very sorry for the loss of your friends. We'll take good care of her.

SECOND UNDERTAKER

Someone will contact you about arrangements.

George nods.

The undertakers close the doors, drive hearse back down the dusty road.

GEORGE

Harriet, let's go back inside and take care of things. We don't know how long the house will be vacant.

George and Harriet go back into the house.

INT. OLD FARMHOUSE - KITCHEN.

George silently gathers perishable foods, puts them in a box.

INT. OLD FARMHOUSE - BEDROOM.

Harriet goes through Ethel's dresses, shoes.

INT. OLD FARMHOUSE.

George walks around emptying the oil lamps.

INT. OLD FARMHOUSE - FRONT ROOM.

Harriet stands at the big window facing the back yard, getting ready to pull the drapes closed, notices a kiss print on the sunny window facing the garden.

HARRIET

Oh, how sweet. George, come look at this.

George walks over from the kitchen.

GEORGE  
What is it?

HARRIET  
Look here. It looks as if James  
kissed the window. Ethel must have  
been outside. How darling.

Suddenly, another kiss print, (different from the first), slowly overlaps it. Swing in backyard begins to move back and forth, drawing attention to the breeze-less afternoon.

George and Harriet look at each other. Harriet abruptly closes the curtains. George and Harriet hurriedly gather the two pets, the box of perishables, dress and shoes, quickly leave the old farmhouse.

EXT. OLD FARM - SOLITARY TREE - TWO GRAVE STONES - DAY.

Both graves have fresh dirt. --

EXT. OLD FARMHOUSE - EVENING.

The windows are boarded up, tall weeds grow all around the farmhouse, top of James and Ethel's headstones peak above tall grass around the solitary tree.

INT. OLD FARMHOUSE - FRONT ROOM - SAME EVENING.

Dim light of the setting sun comes through the narrow spaces between the boards on the windows, barely illuminating the room.

(James and Ethel are again, the young newlyweds in the framed wedding picture on the mantle.)

'Moonlight Serenade' plays from the old phonograph as YOUNG JAMES places his right hand on YOUNG ETHEL'S lower back and softly takes her other hand. They slowly dance.

Young Ethel looks up at Young James and smiles.

Young James looks down at Young Ethel and winks.

FADE OUT.