

PRESENT IN ABSENTIA

Written by

Bruce Alway

2714 Regway Ave.
Long Beach, CA 90810
540-877-7482
WGA West #1852019

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.

George 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.