

Absence Is Present

a screenplay by
Vladimir Paskaljevic

Toronto, July 2014.

1. INT. EGG FARM. DAY

Intro scene for opening credits: JELENA, 28, collects eggs in an egg farm.

2. EXT. STREET - DAY

A dog barks at PARAMEDICS that gathered around a woman that lies unconscious on a sidewalk. PARAMEDICS put the woman on a stretcher and then in a van.

The dog wants to jump into the van, but they don't let him.

The car goes down the street.

Dog stays on the street.

3. INT. HOSPITAL - DAY

RADA, 50, sits and tries to come to consciousness. A DOCTOR passes a glass of water to her while looking at blood tests.

DOCTOR
How do you feel now?

RADA
I'm okay.

Rada drinks a couple of sips. DOCTOR passes her a pill.

DOCTOR
Blood tests are okay. How did you feel these days?

RADA
I had a headache when weather changed, as usual. I didn't sleep last night almost at all.

DOCTOR
Do you feel nauseous?

RADA
Not now.
(after a couple of beats, frightened)
What happened with my dog?

DOCTOR
What dog?

4. EXT. A STREET IN BELGRADE - DAY

Streets of Rada's neighborhood. Old part of town. Belgrade looks a little bit like Havana: the facades of the old picturesque buildings have not been restored since World War II. Judging by the graffiti on almost all the walls, the residents are not prosperous or happy. Still, the streets seem like quaint old Europe, though the cars are very new. They are parked haphazardly on the sidewalks, making it difficult for pedestrians to move.

Rada goes down the street and calls her lost dog.

RADA
Srećko! Srećko! (Lucky)

Rada comes to the park where a bunch of DOG WALKERS hang around with their pets. She approaches to them.

DOG WALKER 1
Cheerio neighbor!

RADA
I can't find Srećko.

DOG WALKERS fidget.

DOG WALKER 1
He run away?

RADA
I fainted on the street. They took me to the hospital now he's gone.

DOG WALKER 2
Maybe he found a way home already.

RADA
No, he is not there.

DOG WALKER 2
We'll go find him. Come on, let's go!

Rada continues to call Srećko shouting his name loud. DOG WALKERS disperse and they call Srećko too.

Time lapse.

Rada is in front of her building. She looks a little bit tired. She shouts Srećko's name. She stops in front of a door. Her head aches, she wraps her hands around it.

Her neighbor JASNA comes out of the building.

JASNA
Hi, what's up?

RADA
I lost Srećko. I walked all around the neighbourhood and city center. If you see him please call me.

JASNA
I told you never to unleash him. Are you alright?

Rada wraps again her hands around her head. She rocks like she is going to faint again. But she doesn't this time.

5. INT. RADA'S APT. - EVENING

Rada's apartment is typical modest apartment of Belgrade intellectuals, which means that the newest piece of a furniture is bought somewhere in eighties, before the crisis, civil war and UN sanctions destroyed middle class.

Rada enters panting then sits on the sofa.

JASNA brings her a glass of water.

JASNA
So what does the doctor say?

RADA
Nothing. Wait...
(a beat)
I've got to find Srećko. I must find him! Poor boy. Couldn't be worse.

JASNA
How will you search for him like that?

RADA
Can you, please, help me? We should print posters with his

photo and stick them all over
the neighborhood.

Jasna opens the windows.

JASNA

Sure. Let's hope that no one
poisons him. Some psycho
poisoned Albert. You know that
Yorkshire terrier? He was dying
entire night. Bastards.

RADA

Oh, please don't tell me that
now.

Rada takes out a cigarette.

JASNA

When will you quit smoking?

RADA

Oh leave me alone, it's only
three per day.

6. EXT./INT. TORONTO SKYLINE/SUBWAY - EVENING

Camera pans from CN Tower to Jelena riding on a subway.
The train is on a bridge over the DVP. Jelena is tired,
she lean her head against a window.

7. EXT. STREET IN TORONTO - EVENING

Jelena walks and enters one of the townhouses in Eastern
Toronto. The house is not exactly the cleanest place to
live, kind of place which students usually share with
immigrants.

8. INT. JELENA'S HOME - EVENING

Jelena enters the house. The shared rooms are a bit messy.

Jelena enters her own room. In her room is MILEVA, small
dog. Mileva has peed all over floor. Jelena opens the door
of a balcony and wipes the floor.

She goes out and knocks on RIMBAUD's door.

RIMBAUD, 30, opens the door. It is obvious that he hardly
woke up. If he was a little bit more charming, we could

call him hippie, but he is just a lad that often finds excuses for everything, especially to smoke pot.

JELENA
Rimbaud!!!

RIMBAUD
Oh, sorry, sorry, I just came from my job, I forgot.

JELENA
You have a job?!

RIMBAUD
Okay, I will walk him now, sorry! Yes, I got the job!

Jelena does not believe him. She helps him to leash the dog.

JELENA
I was told today that I'm not necessary anymore.

RIMBAUD
Honestly, that wasn't much of a job.

JELENA shrugs. MILEVA, the dog, jumps happily and playfully.

JELENA
Good! She made a mess! I swear I will leave her somewhere! I don't care!

RIMBAUD
Oh, she's so cute! How come you don't love her?

JELENA
You don't love her either, shut up!

Rimbaud walks out with the dog.

Jelena slams the door of her room. Finally she is alone. She sighs.

After a couple of beats she turns on her computer and calls her mother on Skype.

**9. INT. RADA'S APARTMENT - NIGHT/ INT. JELENA'S ROOM -
EVENING**

On the other side of Atlantic her mother RADA answers the call.

Photos of Srećko are being printed as Rada speaks to her daughter. Neighbor Jasna is behind the screen camera.

JELENA
Hey, mom, how are you?!

RADA
(pretends that she is very well)
Here I am, how are you?

JELENA
Good mom, a little bit tired,
but good! How is Srećko?

RADA
He is fine, Jasna took him to
the park. I have some kind of a
headache.

Jasna who is listening to the conversation is a little bit perplexed because Rada is lying.

JELENA
So, you are not well, mom?

RADA
No, but it's just when weather
that changes and it makes me
tired. And Jasna wanted to walk
the dog.

The story seems a little bit strange to Jelena.

RADA
What's new with you? Where is
your new dog?

JELENA
He peed all over the room, the
idiot didn't take her out for
the entire day.

Rada is angry.

RADA
Why did you let him bring the
dog in your shared space?

JELENA
He is landlady's son!

RADA
What's going on with your job
search? Were you at some
interview?

JELENA
Nobody called me still.

RADA
Give me a break, you are there
more than half of the year and
nobody called you! What's wrong
with you?

JELENA
Mom, I don't have Canadian
experience! I've been sending
my resumes to everyone. My
career here has to develop
gradually. Now it's time here
for filing taxes, maybe I will
help one accountant.

RADA
And that is your plan? With a
university degree in Economics?

JELENA
Mom, stop it!

RADA
The son of my friend got the
real job there? What do you eat
there?

JELENA
Food! Bye!

Jelena turns off Skype.

JASNA
You have to show that you
support her! Or she will return
here.

RADA
Maybe that would be better.

10. EXT. PARK - NIGHT

Studentski park. Documentary scene, to be shot on the spot. Young people sit in groups all over the park in the night. They drink beer out of plastic bottles. Rada is passing by with Jasna, they are looking for Srećko. Jasna sticks posters to the lamp-posts and trees.

JASNA
Leave this to me. Go home, take
a rest for a while.

RADA
I am okay!

11. INT. JELENA'S ROOM - EVENING

Rimbaud comes back with dog Mileva.

RIMBAUD
Here we are. See you later.

JELENA
Thanks.

Jelena cuddles Mileva a little bit and then stops. Mileva is playful, Jelena seems tired and wants to avoid contact with the dog.

12. EXT. IN FRONT OF TOWN DOG-POUND - DAY

Rada enters town dog-pound.

13. INT. TOWN DOG-POUND - DAY

AN OFFICER shows dogs in cages to Rada.

OFFICER
Here. These arrived today. You
can take a look and see if one
them is yours.

Rada looks at the dogs. The dogs look at her.

RADA
What happens with the dogs if
their owners don't come to take
them?

OFFICER
Nothing. They remain here... It
used to be different before.

RADA
How do you mean 'different'?

DEŽURNI
Different.

Rada watches caged dogs.

14. EXT. KACHA'S PRIVATE ASYLUM - DAY

Kacha's dog shelter is a small private house outside of
the city with a fence around its yard. Inside of the yard,
there are dozens of dogs.

Rada comes to look up for her own dog.

KACHA
I help them as much as I can
with my pension which is not
very high. Some people bring me
food for them. But there's no
many of such people. Some
neighbors have complained the
city, and want the dogs to be
taken away to the dog-pound.
And you know how many of them
were killed in a dog-pound? At
that time in dog-pounds they
were killing dogs. Now it's
different. Do you have an idea
how many of them died?... And
people who don't want to keep
their dogs anymore they come
and just leave them in front of
my door. I love all the dogs
and I adopt them all. But I
can't help all.

Rada is impressed, she watches the dogs, she looks as she
would like to adopt some of them.

KACHA

Today I saw some dog that looks similar to the one that you described. But he didn't want to get in. Probably he is afraid of other dogs. There he is!

Rada sees a dog behind the fence. She approaches.

KACHA

Is this your dog?

RADA

It's not.

15. EXT. ROAD - DAY

Rada is walking towards the bus station. The dog is following her.

Rada comes to the bus station. The dog sneaks around. She watches him. He comes and he would like to say "take me".

Suddenly, Rada feels a headache, she puts hands on her head and leans against the wall of the bus station.

She faints. The dog is staring at her.

16. INT. A FACTORY - DAY

Jelena is at a job interview. Lady MANAGER, 39, interviews her.

MANAGER

Why did you apply for this job?

JELENA

So I can help this company grow. I believe this job will build my confidence and improve my skills. It seem like a great job. I would love to grow with this company.

MANAGER

How do you see yourself in five years?

JELENA

After five years, I am reaching higher positions by leading the company as one of the top in list of organizations. During this five years

time period I get more and more knowledge and develop my self each and every second. Finally I see my self after five years as a good knowledge person in our organization.

CUT TO:

Jelena is working on a production line where girls are manufacturing houses out of biscuits. That's her new job and she still has some enthusiasm for it.

17. EXT. A FACTORY - DAY

JELENA sits with a coworker on a curb of a parking lot. They are smoking.

COWORKER
How do you like your new job?

Coworker laughs before she even hears an answer.

JELENA
It's not bad.

COWORKER
It'll get better.

JELENA
Sure.

COWORKER
Do you have a plan?

JELENA
Some. I want to take a course, to become an accountant. And then... I will see.

COWORKER
Wow! Sounds like a plan! I wanna finish the school.

A couple of beats they smoke in silence.

A bell rings for the end of break.

18. INT. HOSPITAL - DAY

Rada is in an office of a DOCTOR that reads results of blood and other tests.

DOCTOR
Blood tests are within normal range. Lactat dehydrogenesis is a little bit heightened. Scanner shows that there is small shade, we have to do markers to check is it a beginning of tumor and find out what is it exactly. You should get an MRI.

Rada is shocked. Doctor writes a referral.

DOCTOR
Here, take this referral... You should know that for an MRI there is a long waiting list.

RADA
How long?

DOCTOR
Well, it depends on where you go and what priority they give you. Try to find a way to get it as soon as possible.

The doctor gives her the referral. She seems frightened.

DOCTOR
Here you are.

The doctor opens a drawer and gives her a card.

DOCTOR
If the line is too long on a State clinic, you can go to a private one. Here you are. These are not very expensive.

RADA
How much would it be?

DOCTOR
I don't know. About hundred-two hundred euros.

Rada takes out her card.

RADA

Here you are. If you need a psychiatrist you can call me anytime.

Rada gets up and walks out.

DOCTOR

Don't be angry, Mrs. You don't have any other option. The whole country is in a mess, I am just offering you a solution.

(tries to turn everything into a joke, after her)

If you are a psychiatrist in this society, couple of hundreds of euros could be easily made!

19. EXT. QUAI OF DANUBE - DAN

Rada and Jasna are walking in a park under Kalemegdan, a two thousand years old fortress.

JASNA

At the end, you have no other solution. Unfortunatelly. If yo have to wait that much...

RADA

(after few beats, shouting)
Srećkoooo! Srećkoooo!

JASNA

Srećkooo!

They are both looking behind bushes. There isn't any dog.

20. INT. RADA'S APARTMENT - NIGHT/ INT. JELENA'S ROOM - DAY

Rada and Jelena talk on Skype. Jelena bought many bags of food. She still hasn't put everything in a refridgerator.

JELENA

Mom! I got a job! I am going to work in a Serbian bakery! Two thousand a month!

Rada is perplexed.

RADA
Congrats.

JELENA
I don't know. I will now have
money to pay for an
accountants' course. Everything
is different now. Now I could
save money even for a trip to
Cuba. Maybe soon I will be able
to pay for you to come to visit
me, mom!

Rada is happy and sad at the same time.

RADA
Alright child, I am glad. I
would like you to make a career
in your field.

JELENA
Take it easy mom. I make now
two times more than you after
years of experience. Now I want
to see Srećko, I miss him so
much!

Rada realizes that after all her daughter might stay in
Canada forever.

RADA
Srećko is sleeping.

JELENA
Come on, wake him up.

RADA
He had stomach problems today,
he vomited. But vet says he
will be okay. I will bring him
tomorrow.

JELENA
Oh, but is he okay?

RADA
Yes, he is okay.

JELENA
How are you?

RADA
I am fine, I am going to sleep
now, it's very late here.

JELENA
Okay, kisses, good night, mom!

RADA
Good night!

The two women end a conversation.

Rada sheds a tear.

Jelena glimpses at dog Mileva and cuddles her. She puts
her in her lap while checking e-mails.

Her face expression changes into panicking fear. She puts
Mileva aside. She calls her mother again.

Rada accepts a Skype call.

JELENA
Mom, what's going on with
Srećko?!

RADA
What?!

JELENA
My neighbor just sent me an e-
mail, asking me if I've found
Srećko yet. He says that you
posted his pictures all around
the neighborhood?!

RADA
Which neighbor?! Come on, that
is some other Srećko!

JELENA
Show him to me!

RADA
Calm down, child!

JELENA
I will come back to find him!

RADA
Go to sleep child, don't bother
me!

Rada closes Skype. She is thinking about what to do.
Jelena gets up, walks around the room, very nervous.
Mileva is kind of frightened. But, still playfull.

21. ENT. RADA'S APARTMENT - DAY

The next day, Rada brings into her apartment the stray dog that looks like Srećko, the one that followed her near Kacha's asylum.

RADA
(to the dog)
Come... come... Srećko. Your
name now is Srećko.

The dog is mistrustful. He jumps on a sofa.

RADA
Get down!

Rada pushes him off the sofa. The dog doesn't want to get down.

**22. INT. RADA'S APARTMENT - NIGHT/ INT. JELENA'S ROOM
- DAY**

Rada shows the new dog - fake Srećko to Jelena.

Jelena is watching the dog on Skype.

JELENA
That is not Srećko.

RADA
I washed him a little bit, he
was very dirty. Don't say
nonsense, it is Srećko... The
screen resolution is bad!

JELENA
What resolution are you talking
about, I am not an idiot!
(panicking)
What is going on with Srećko?
Mom, I got my ways to find out
the truth, tell me what's going
on! What's going on with
Srećko? Mom, you can't lie to

me, I will find out what's
going on!

A beat.

RADA
I lost him... I fainted on a
street, I was not feeling well.

JELENA
No!

RADA
I am searching for him every
day.

Jelena does not know how to react.

JELENA
How are you feeling now, mom?
What was that? Why did you
faint?

RADA
I am okay, I was just tired.

Jelena cries.

JELENA
(crying)
I will come back, fuck all
this!

RADA
I will find him. Me and Jasna
we are searching for him, every
day. We put posters all around.

JELENA
(through the tears)
I will come back. I am going to
make the reservation now. *U*
pičku materinu! (typical
regional curse, not
translatable.)

23. EXT. PARK - NIGHT

Rada takes out the new dog into the park and leaves him
there.

RADA
Stay there.

Rada walks off. The dog follows her. She turns to the dog and treatens with index finger.

RADA
Stay there!

24. INT. RADA'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

Rada lies in a bed with her eyes opened. Through a window she can hear the dog moaning.

Rada closes her eyes. The dog's moaning becomes louder. Neighbors can be heard cursing at the weeping dog. Someone throws a bottle.

Rada teeters wether she should get up or not.

Time lapses.

Rada brings the new dog into the apartment.

25. INT. JELENA'S HOME - EVENING

A potluck party, organized by RIMBAUD. Each of the many guests brought some food to a table, including JELENA who brought *ajvar* (*aivar*), a Serbian traditional food made of peppers. Music is loud, everyone is in a good mood. One GUEST Jedan GUEST tries JELENA's *ajvar*.

GUEST
(to Jelena)
What is this? Mhm, delicious!

JELENA
It's *ajvar* (*ayvar*). We make it out of peppers. I made it.

GUEST
Which country is that?

JELENA
Serbia.

GUEST
Syria?

JELENA
No. Serbia.

GUEST
Ah. Siberia. I know. Russians.

JELENA
Not Russian, Serbian.

GUEST
Ah, yes - Siberian, that's
right. Do you want to try my
couscous? I brought it.

Jelena tries couscous.

JELENA
Hum. Awesome.

GUEST
Which language do you speak?

JELENA
(trying to make joke)
Siberian.

GUEST
Haha! Do you have fun here?

JELENA
(trying to believe)
Yes.

GUEST
Have fun!

RIMBAUD tells some Canadian joke. People laugh. Jelena's
trying to laugh although she does not understand the joke.

26. EXT. PARK - DAY

Rada and Jasna are walking the new dog, searching for the
lost one. They shout, but with less enthusiasm than in
previous similar scenes.

RADA
Srećkoooo!!!!

JASNA
Srećko! ... what are you going
to do with Jelena?

RADA
I don't know. I would like to
see her once again.

JASNA
Oh, come on! You will see her.
Maybe everything is going to be
alright. Maybe it's nothing
dangerous. And we might find
Srećko at the end.

Jasna hugs Rada.

27. INT. FACTORY - DAY

Jelena does her monotonous job in a factory on a
production line. She looks unhappy and tired.

**28. EXT. A CAR/BUS STATION IN BRAMPTON NEAR FACTORY -
DAY**

A male COWORKER, Jelena's countryman, 35, gives JELENA and
her COWORKER a ride. They talk in a car.

MALE COWORKER
(in broken English, to Jelena)
I love Serbia very much. I love
to go there in the summer.
(to Jelena's friend coworker)
Everybody complains about the
situation over there, but it's
not so visible. Cafes and
restaurants are always packed.
People are more relaxed there.

COWORKER
Wow, I must go there, sounds like a party
place.

MALE COWORKER
It is a party place!

JELENA
I don't know. I was not ready
to accept drinks paid by
criminals and dealers.

MALE COWORKER
(perplexed)
I understand...
(a beat)
Do you have a boyfriend? Or
friends?

JELENA
No.

MALE COWORKER
Do you cook? Can you make
chevaphcichi?

JELENA
I can.

MALE COWORKER
(grins)
Oh, it's been a long time since
I didn't eat good chavapchichi.
One day, you can come to my
place. We could make a BBQ with
good chevapchichi! Do you have
a boyfriend?

Jelena grins, her coworker rolls her eyeballs.

JELENA
(not interested)
No...

MALE COWORKER
Do you like your job in a factory?

JELENA

COWORKER
Here would be OK for us. Thank
you for a ride...

A car stops on a bus station.

Jelena and her coworker friend get out. The car goes away
and two girls giggle.

**29. INT. RADA'S APARTMENT - NOĆ/ INT. JELENA'S ROOM -
DAY**

Jelena rushes into her room and calls her mother on Skype.
She doesn't pay attention at Mileva who is wagging her
tail.

JELENA
Hi mom? Are there any news?

RADA

Nothing, we are searching for him. We heard that there is similar dog found in Krnjača district. We are going to look for him there now. Did you buy the ticket?

JELENA

Not yet, but I've made a reservation, to come on Thursday. I will take a loan to pay for it.

RADA

And you will lose your job?

JELENA

I don't care to come back before I find Srećko. And I want to help you.

RADA

You can't help me if you are here. You forgot how it is... I have to do have an MRI, maybe even go to a hospital and all that costs a lot. I won't be able to support you.

JELENA is in a shock when she hears about mother's illness.

RADA

I am going to sell this apartment, to buy a smaller one if I need money. I don't know how I will make it... Stay there for now. I insist.

JELENA

But, mom, why didn't you tell me anything? What's going on?

RADA

We will find out.

JELENA

Mom, I will come now for real. I'm buying a ticket immediately.

RADA
If you come here, I am jumping
out of the window. I am not
joking!

RADA gets up.

JELENA
(panicking)
Where are you going?

RADA
(grins)
Well, to search for Srećko.
(a beat)
Come on, maybe everything will
be alright. We are going to see
what we are going to to.

Two women are looking at each other couple of seconds
before they close the conversation. Jelena is in bad mood.
Mileva tries to cuddle. Jelena wraps her hands around her
her heads.

After couple of moments in a silence Jelena puts a collar
around Mileva's neck and takes her out for the first time
since Rimbaud brought her.

30. EXT. LAKE SHORE - DAY

Jelena walks Mileva on Woodbine beaches. Toronto skyline
is seen in a background.

She sits on the bench and watches as waves hit artificial
rocks.

JELENA
(in English)
Mileva. Come here.

Mileva jumps on a bench beside her. Jelena puts her arm on
her.

She gazes in a direction of a lake and sheds a tear.

31. EXT. DANUBE BANK - NIGHT

Jelena's mother Rada walks her new friend while she shouts
for Srećko.

She sits on a bench. Cacophony of different music can be heard from the barges near by.

She is gazing over a glittering moonlight on river Danube. She closes her eyes. Maybe she lost her consciousness again, we will never find out.

32. EXT. STREETS OF BELGRADE - NIGHT

On the other side of the city Srećko is walking on the street all alone.

An editing sequence in which shadows of dozens of dogs stray through the empty streets of Belgrade in the night...

Fade out.