

THE RUST GARDEN

By

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FADE IN:

EXT. BARREN FIELD - DAY

FISCHER, late 80s, shirtless, emaciated, shuffles forward on a makeshift crutch, eyes fixed ahead. The ghost of purpose on his face.

His bare foot steadies itself in the dirt. The other, a bloodied, cloth bound stump drags along in support.

It's slow going. Painfully slow.

SUPER: NORTHERN BELARUS, PRESENT DAY

EXT. ELA'S CABIN - GROUNDS - DAY

A sieve rests on the ground. It's filled with rusted coins, buttons and a number of shell casings.

NAMOV, 11, freckled, a mop of dusty hair, squats on the back-step of a modest cabin. He brushes the soil from a belt-buckle.

He angles it against the sky for a better look. His eyes widen, shifting beyond the buckle to the field.

ELA, late 30s, dressed in overalls, hair wrapped in a bandana, crouches in a shallow excavation trench a short way from Namov.

She takes her time, gently scraping the earth from around a portion of human hip bone. A care in her work. A respect.

NAMOV (O.S.)

Mama! Mama!

MOMENTS LATER

Namov shadows Ela's side, more curious than afraid.

Fischer halts some twenty feet away. Head bowed.

Namov looks up at Ela -- she's wary, but in control.

Fischer lifts his head, gazes at them both. The barest of smiles finds his face.

He collapses.

ELA
Go inside. Call Bayon.

BARREN FIELD

Ela closes on the fallen man, cautious.

She kneels at his side, eases him onto his back. Her eyes fall on a small 'O' tattooed to his upper-arm.

Ela pulls away in shock.

Fischer clutches a hand to his chest. A worn photograph peeks from his fist.

INT. ELA'S CABIN - KITCHEN - NIGHT

A WOMAN and CHILD stare out from a faded sepia photograph.

SGT. BAYON, late 50s, watery eyes set in a gravel face, turns the picture in his hand. A DISPATCHER crackles over the radio clipped to his tunic, her words garbled with static. Bayon ignores it.

Ela watches from across the table, awaiting a verdict.

BAYON
I were to guess, I'd say a hermit.

ELA
We're guessing?

BAYON
Hard life. Suits for some.

ELA
What about the leg?

BAYON
Gangrene. Frostbitten. Likely removed it himself, pain could reduce a man to such a thing. Went looking for help too late.

Bayon slides the photograph to her side.

ELA
He had family.

BAYON
What he had was a photograph.

ELA
And the tattoo?

Bayon waves the question away.

ELA
It's a blood group indicator. I've
books, pictures, I can show you.

BAYON
Proving what?

ELA
That's an SS group marking. How
does a man like that end up out
here of all places?

BAYON
Such matters are for the examiner.
Perhaps we find some answers.
Likely they're face down in the
dirt--

She looks away.

BAYON
What could you have done? What
could anyone have? Hell of a thing
for you to see.

ELA
I've seen the dead.

BAYON
Of course.

He taps his radio.

BAYON
I ask for radios that work, they
tell me there's no money. They pay
you to come out here and dig up
bones.

ELA
Bones-- you could show some
respect, those were people, our
people. I'm paid to find the truth,
same as you.

BAYON

To find such a thing in a hole.

An impasse. Bayon notices Namov peeking from a doorway, eavesdropping on their conversation. Ela sees it too.

Bayon shrugs.

BAYON

Curious boy. Anything less I'd be disappointed. How's the car?

Ela bristles, how did he know?

BAYON

Saw it on the back of Rudest's tow truck. Roads here can be hard--

ELA

It's nothing, a simple part.

BAYON

I pass this way often, I know engines.

ELA

You want to be of use?

Bayon brightens.

ELA

Start with the dead Nazi in my garden.

Bayon smiles, graceful in defeat.

INT. ELA'S CABIN - NAMOV'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Namov stares from the window.

ELA (O.S.)

What's out there?

Ela places a glass of water on a bedside table.

NAMOV

Ghosts.

She waves him over to the bed.

Namov hops beneath the covers. Ela tucks him in.

ELA
None of that, you'll give yourself
ideas. Kind that keep you awake.

NAMOV
Where did he come from?

ELA
Far away. Just an old man with
nowhere left to go.

NAMOV
Are there more?

ELA
No.

Ela kisses his forehead and retreats to the door.

NAMOV
Did he suffer?

ELA
What a question...

He studies her, his big eyes begging an answer.

ELA
I'm sure he lived a good life.

She switches out the light.

NAMOV
How sure?

INT. ELA'S CABIN - KITCHEN - NIGHT

Ela sits at the table, the old photo set before her.

EXT. ELA'S CABIN - GROUNDS - DAY

Ela kneels, hugs Namov tight. A taxi idles in the driveway
behind him.

ELA
Be good for your father.

They break. Namov scurries towards the car.

ELA

Hey, for her not so much.

A knowing smile passes between them.

MOMENTS LATER

Ela paces the taxi along the drive. Namov waves from the backseat. The car pulls ahead.

Ela slows. Turns to the distance: the forest walls the horizon -- as if concealing something within its depths.

INT. ELA'S CABIN - KITCHEN - DAY

Ela stuffs a spare under-layer into a backpack, a water canteen follows.

She reaches to a high shelf, takes down a sheathed hunting knife. Fixes it to her belt.

EXT. BARREN FIELD - DAY

Ela trudges across the dirt, the backpack slung on her shoulder. She stops, crouches.

A rough footprint in the soil, beside it a drag mark leads to the rounded impression left by Fischer's stump.

Her eyes flick ahead to the forest's edge.

SERIES OF SHOTS - FOREST HIKE

- Ela makes her way through the trees, slowing every so often to track Fischer's path.

- Sunlight struggles to penetrate the canopy. Ela scrambles up an incline.

- Ela wades through a thicket.

- A twisted scrap of metal rises from the brush. A faded German Iron Cross insignia on its side.

END SERIES OF SHOTS

EXT. FOREST CABIN GROUNDS/VEGETABLE GARDEN - DAY

Rusted tin-can lids dangle from a wire fence. The fence rings a vegetable garden. Beyond it sits a rough cabin. An animal shed runs alongside. Sturdy, windowless.

Ela passes the garden. Notes the freshly turned soil.

She stops a short distance from the cabin.

ELA

Hello?

The tin-can lids twist in the silence.

Ela tests the cabin door -- unlocked. She slips a hand beneath her anorak, probing the knife handle. Reassured.

INT. FOREST CABIN - DAY

Light filters through ragged curtains. Crude furnishings. A supply crate topped with a bare mattress for a bed.

Ela steals through the room, eyes absorbing detail...

Wax encrusted bottles line every surface.

She pushes open the door to a back-room.

SHRINE ROOM

Unlit candles encircle a collection of photographs. They bear signs of fire damage. A charred shrine to some distant memory. Some show stern YOUNG MEN in WW2 era Soviet army uniform. Others are of CIVILIANS, OLD and YOUNG -- all in simple peasant dress.

Nestled amongst this is a military cap. Fixed to its cuff is a red star pin inset with the hammer and sickle insignia.

Ela reaches out, touches the pin. Her eyes tighten on a single candle-flame, the wick reduced to a nub.

TINK-TINK-TINK.

Ela lifts the curtain to peer through the grimy pane.

EXT. FOREST CABIN GROUNDS/ANIMAL SHED - DAY

Ela moves cautiously towards the shed. Her nose wrinkles.

TINK-TINK-TINK.

She flips the latch on a sliding door. Leans into it -- it GRINDS back a few inches on its rails.

The smell greets her like a punch. She recoils, gagging.

Ela fits the bandana over her mouth and nose. She CLICKS on a small torch.

INT. ANIMAL SHED - DAY

A beam of torchlight sweeps the floor: pails, plastic bottles, empty blister packs.

Ela creeps towards the TAPPING.

The light settles on an empty saline drip suspended from a wall-hook. Ela traces the tube downwards --

TINK-TINK-TINK.

It connects to a thin wrist. A bony hand knocks a battered tin cup against a nail-head.

Ela gasps.

The beam falls back to reveal a wizened face. Scarred empty sockets turned eyelessly towards the light.

Panic. Ela spins, slips, hits the floor.

She recovers the torch -- finds herself face to face with the RAW MAN, late 80s. He opens his mouth, a stump tongue CLICKS against the roof of his mouth.

Ela scrambles towards the sliver of daylight. The torch reveals glimpses of aged, shivering WRETCHES hunched on cots lining the wall. Gaunt, eyeless faces trace her flight.

EXT. FOREST CABIN GROUNDS/ANIMAL SHED - DAY

Ela drops to her knees. Rips the mask free and dry heaves.

She looks up --

KARKOV, early 80s, unshaven, sinewy frame, leans on a walking stick. A water-carrier held at his side.

Ela stands, pulls the knife.

ELA
Get back.

TINK-TINK-TINK.

Karkov's cold gaze travels past her to the animal shed.

ELA
You stay back!

She circles out of reach, knife held before her as he presses past, sets the water-carrier in the doorway.

ELA
You hear me?

The TAPPING ceases.

KARKOV
Yes, yes. It was heavy.

ELA
Who are you?

He moves to the porch, eases himself onto a stool.

KARKOV
You came here to ask my name?

ELA
What the fuck are they doing in there!

Karkov dead-eyes her, as if the answer were obvious.

KARKOV
They were entrusted to me.

Ela notes the tools lined against the wall behind him. Among them an axe, all within reach. She looks around, frantic.

KARKOV
You are lost.

ELA
Who else is here?

KARKOV
No one.

ELA
You come out!

KARKOV
There were others--

He waves his hand 'gone'.

KARKOV
Only me. For a long time. That was
my house, over there, do you see?

He nods to a stand of brush -- no sign of any structure.

ELA
I don't care what it was.

KARKOV
Tsorky's over there where the
Rhododendron is. The Ash, that was
our church. Wasn't much, it served.
Over there was Mortzo. His father
kept sheep. Dogs also, to guard
against wolves.

ELA
There's nothing there.

Karkov nods, accepting.

KARKOV
They were thorough. The men they
led into the forest. The women,
girls they took for themselves.
Those who survived they drove into
the mine-fields.

A SCRAPING from the shed. Ela glances nervously behind her.
Fearful of taking her eyes from Karkov.

KARKOV
The dogs they starved. Then they
set them on the children... They
waged money on which animal would
kill the most. And when there was
no-one left they burned the village
to the ground.

A CLATTER from within the shed. Ela flinches.

Karkov looks off towards the garden.

KARKOV

Over there was a waste pit. This is where my mother hid me. This is how I know these things to be so.

He removes a tin of chewing tobacco from his pocket, tucks a wad up under his lip.

KARKOV

(re: the knife)

Is that for me?

Ela tightens her grip on the knife.

ELA

It can't be, they're gone, those men, they're all gone.

KARKOV

Do you know Rudolph Alderhaute?

His question meets with a blank stare.

KARKOV

Commandant of Koldichevo, you know this place, Koldichevo?

Ela nods grimly.

Karkov's eyes flicker to a point behind her.

She follows, steps back, startled --

RUDOLPH ALDERHAUTE, 93, skin tight to the bone of his pale frame, stares at her through clouded eyes from the doorway.

KARKOV

Now you know Rudolph.

Rudolph extends a withered hand towards the water-carrier. He bears the same 'O' TATTOO as Fischer to his upper-arm.

KARKOV

You didn't answer my question.

ELA

I'm not lost.

KARKOV

The other one.

ELA
I followed the trail, the old man,
I wanted to see...

Karkov nods to himself, almost impressed.

KARKOV
You hear that, Rudi? Fischer made
it this time. The human spirit,
truly something to behold.

Rudolph opens his mouth, the remnant of his tongue CLICKS
uselessly. A guttural MOAN issues from his throat.

TINK-TINK-TINK.

Another MOAN answers from inside the shed. The sound swells,
a dozen 'voices' join in a chorus of human misery.

ELA
What have you done..?

Karkov creaks to his feet.

ELA
You stay back, I swear!

Ela raises the knife. But she can't mask her fear and Karkov
can see this. He selects a hoe. Trudges off towards the
vegetable garden. Not so much as a glance back.

Ela looks to Rudolph, his clawed hand imploring her for the
water. She backs away, overcome...

EXT. FOREST - DAY

Ela barrels through the undergrowth... stumbles down an
incline... she lands hard, looks around for her pack.

It lays a short way behind her.

Ela snatches it up -- it's stuck. She wrests it free --

A small, yellowed bone tears through the dirt, hooked in the
shoulder strap.

Ela freezes, realising where she is.

Shallow mounds stretch along the base of the incline. Rough,
weathered crosses set at their head. Bones jut from the thin
soil all around her.

A double-barred cross pendant hangs from a branch overhead.

INT. ELA'S CABIN - KITCHEN - NIGHT

Ela stands at the window. She savours the warmth of the tea mug cradled in her palms. Still visibly shaken.

ELA
How long will it take them?

Bayon sits at the table. Thumbs his cap, awkward.

BAYON
It's a long way to come.

She turns, catches the look on his face.

ELA
(forceful)
How long?

BAYON
Sit down.

ELA
I'll call them myself.

She starts towards a phone --

BAYON
You'll sit!

Ela stops. Jaw tightens, indignant.

Bayon raises his palms, an apology.

BAYON
Ela, please.

Ela sucks it down, takes a seat opposite.

Bayon fishes a tin of chewing tobacco from his tunic.

ELA
You think I'm lying? He has them chained up there like animals.

BAYON
You saw them, these chains?

ELA
I saw where he'd cut out their tongues and put out their eyes!

Bayon calmly pinches a wad of tobacco into shape.

ELA

Did you hear a word I said?

BAYON

Every one.

His radio CRACKLES, words indistinct. Bayon switches it off.

ELA

War's over, it's been over seventy years.

BAYON

Then why are you here?

ELA

Maybe I ask you the same thing.

BAYON

And I'd give you the same answer. Cruelty and loss is what you'll find. You could pull it from the earth with your bare hands. Every field, every ditch--

ELA

People have a right to know.

BAYON

It's not the truth they want.

She searches his eyes, incredulous.

ELA

Those men, their families...

BAYON

What would we tell them?

Ela's face reddens in frustration. But she sees the sincerity in his. They stare at one another, lost.

RUMBLE of an ENGINE breaks the silence. Headlights sweep the window. The engine slows to an idle.

A door BANGS shut O.S.

Namov rushes into the room, his excitement tempered on seeing Bayon. He embraces Ela, a wary eye on the Sergeant.

Ela composes herself, musters a smile.

BAYON

Long drive. Tired, no doubt.

Bayon stands. Fixes Ela a look. There's no malice in it, just a man haunted by the weight of the past.

Ela watches him exit the room, his FOOTSTEPS moving down the hall O.S.

Her eyes drift to the tobacco tin on the table, it bears the same brand label as Karkov's. She pulls Namov close.

NAMOV

(concerned)

Mama?

LATER

Namov sits at the table, sips from a cup of hot cocoa.

Ela stands before a hearth. Her thoughts elsewhere, someplace dark. She rouses, drops something to the coals.

She settles opposite Namov. Watches him enjoy the treat. Both of them absorbed in the moment.

A froth of chocolate smears his top lip. He grins, content.

She smiles back.

Fischer's photograph curls in the hearth, the smiling faces quickly consumed by flame.

FADE OUT