

THE RUST GARDEN

By

STEVE MILES

Steve Miles 2016

stevemiles80@yahoo.co.uk

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.

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 delicately scrapes the earth from around a portion of human hip bone. A care in her work. A respect.

NAMOV (O.S.)
Mama! Mama!

Ela looks up, follows Namov's lead.

Fischer stands there some thirty metres out. He raises his head to regard them. He collapses.

ELA
Go inside. Call Bayon.

BARREN FIELD

Ela races across the dirt towards Fischer.

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

She 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

It's not unheard of.

ELA

What about the leg?

BAYON

Gangrene. Frostbite. Likely removed it himself, pain could reduce a man to such a thing.

Bayon slides the photograph to her side.

ELA

He had family.

BAYON

What he had was a photograph.

ELA

And the tattoo? That's an S.S. group marking.

Bayon waves the question away.

ELA

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

BAYON

Such matters are for the examiner. Perhaps we find some answers.

(MORE)

BAYON (cont'd)
Likely they're face down in the dirt.

She looks away, annoyed.

BAYON
It's a hell of a thing to see.

Ela stands, moves to the sink to fix a drink. She gazes out the window.

ELA
You think I'm out here looking for old coins?

BAYON
I don't know what to think.

He taps his radio.

BAYON
I ask for radios that work I'm told there's no money, yet they can form a commission to go around digging up old bones.

ELA
Get used to it. I've evidence of three mass burial sites within a mile of here. I haven't even started to survey the forest yet.

Bayon tenses, uneasy.

She turns to face him.

ELA
Those bones were people, our people, women, children. It's not a question of time. I'm paid to find the truth, same as you.

An impasse. Bayon notices Namov peeking from a doorway, eavesdropping on their conversation.

Ela sees it too.

BAYON
I wish I could be of more help.

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.

She slows. Turns to the distance: the forest walls the horizon, vast, imposing.

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, following the trail to the forest.

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
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.

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.

(MORE)

KARKOV (cont'd)
 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... The
 soldiers waged money on which
 animal would kill the most. 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.

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

He's had them up there for seventy years. He acts as though there were still a war!

Bayon's radio CRACKLES, words indistinct. He clicks it off.

Her eyes fall to the tobacco tin, it bears the same brand label as Karkov's.

BAYON

Why are you here?

ELA

Maybe I ask you the same thing.

BAYON

And I'd give you the same answer. You'll find nothing out there but cruelty and loss. You could pull it from the soil with your bare hands. Everywhere you look, every field, every ditch--

ELA

People have a right to know.

BAYON

What good is truth without justice?

She searches his face, incredulous.

ELA

What about 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.

BAYON

Long drive. Tired, no doubt.

Bayon stands, fixes Ela a weary look. It's without malice, just a man haunted by the weight of the past.

Ela watches him exit the room, his FOOTSTEPS moving down the hall O.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. Looks to the phone. Then to Namov, watching him enjoy the drink.

She drops something to the coals.

Ela settles opposite Namov.

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

She smiles back.

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

FADE OUT