

THE WOODEN HORSE

by

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FADE IN:

INT. PUBLIC RESTROOM -- DAY

JOZEF, fifty, washes his face in the sink with cold water. He turns off the faucet and dries himself with a towel.

Jozef picks his glasses off the counter-top and puts them on. He stares at his reflection in the mirror for a second, before heading out into...

EXT. CENTRAL PARK -- CONTINUOUS

All the sounds of the city flood our ears at once: HORNS HONKING, DOGS BARKING, PEOPLE'S CHATTER, and DISTANT SIRENS mix with the AMBIENT BUZZ OF NATURE.

SUPER: "NEW YORK CITY, 1981"

Jozef walks through the park, past people of all sorts, making his way to...

CHESS ROW: a long line of concrete chess tables outside the Chess and Checkers House in Central Park.

Most of the tables are full. He spots a withered OLD MAN in his late sixties sitting at a table, waiting for an opponent. We stay behind as Jozef walks up to him.

CUT TO:

EXT. CENTRAL PARK -- LATER

Wooden chess pieces, strategically arranged on a battered chessboard.

BOOM UP to reveal Jozef and the Old Man are already mid-way through their game. Jozef moves his bishop to a different spot and CLICKS the timer on the chess clock.

The old man CACKLES as he examines the board, anxious to make his next move.

Jozef takes off his glasses and cleans the lenses with a handkerchief while waiting his turn.

From behind him, the LAUGHTER of children catches Jozef's attention. He turns his head to see a pair of young BOYS, one a few years older than the other, running playfully ahead of their mother.

A sentimental smile breaks out across Jozef's face as he turns back to the chessboard. He puts his glasses back on as the smile fades, replaced with a hint of sadness.

His eyes wander across the board, settling on the knight piece.

MATCH CUT TO:

INT. COTTAGE - BEDROOM -- DAY

A small wood carving of a horse sits on a pitted old desk in a lonely corner.

REVERSE ANGLE on a YOUNG BOY. His blue eyes fixated on the horse, studying its features. He smiles. This is JOZEF, age nine.

We pull back to get a full view of the room. The decor and furnishings suggest this is the 1930s.

Jozef picks up the horse and moves it around the desk as if it's galloping.

The door to the bedroom opens and his older brother DAREK, fourteen, walks in.

DAREK
(in Polish)
Still playing with that old piece
of junk?

YOUNG JOZEF
(in Polish)
It's not junk. Grandpapa said it wa-

Darek snatches the horse out of Jozef's hand.

YOUNG JOZEF
(in Polish)
Give it back!

Jozef snaps up, fighting to grab his toy back. Darek teases him, using one arm to keep him at bay.

DAREK
(in Polish)
Stop being a baby.

Jozef is enraged, his swings wildly hitting Darek in the stomach to no effect. Darek playfully laughs at the effort.

YOUNG JOZEF
(in Polish)
Give it back!

After another weak attempt, Jozef gives up and turns around in defeat. He is about to cry when...

DAREK
(in Polish)
Here. You can have it. I was just teasing.

Jozef turns around and sees Darek holding out the wooden horse. Jozef slowly reaches up and takes it. Darek smiles and ruffles his hair.

DAREK
(in Polish)
You gotta be tougher than that. If you cry every time some jerk picks on you, they'll just keep doing it.

Jozef looks up at him and dries his eyes.

DAREK
(in Polish)
Understand?

Jozef nods.

DAREK
(in Polish)
Good...

Darek stops with a curious look on his face. In the distance a low pitched RUMBLE can be barely heard.

DAREK
(in Polish)
What is that?

Jozef listens for a second and shrugs. Darek looks out the window and sees nothing out of the ordinary.

DAREK
(in Polish)
Stay here.

Darek leaves the room and closes the door behind him. Jozef looks around in confusion for a second, then turns his attention back to galloping his horse across his bed.

Suddenly, A WOMAN'S SCREAM erupts from somewhere in the house, but almost instantly falls SILENT.

Jozef spins around, startled. While obviously afraid, his curiosity prevails as he gathers his courage and approaches the door to his room.

He edges forward, his hand reaching out for the door knob...

The door suddenly opens to reveal Darek. From the look on his face something is very wrong.

Jozef is about to speak when Darek covers his mouth with a cupped hand.

DAREK
(a finger to his lips)
Sssh.

Darek rushes to the window, and pulls it open. He motions for Jozef to follow him and climbs outside.

EXT. COTTAGE -- CONTINUOUS

Jozef climbs out of the window, holding the wood carving of the horse in one hand. Darek helps him down and rushes him towards the nearby woods.

The ground almost seems to vibrate with the RUMBLING OF HEAVY MACHINERY that draws closer.

The boys reach the foot of the woods. Jozef speeds ahead, while Darek slows down and looks back.

He sees something we don't, and whatever it is, it scares the hell out of him. He turns around and races after Jozef.

EXT. WOODS -- LATER

The boys run through the network of trees and brush, twigs and dried leaves CRACKING under their feet. Their pace relentless.

Finally, Jozef slows to a stop, exhausted. Darek follows suit, panting heavily, trying to catch his breath. They stare at one another, too out of breath to speak.

From behind them, a twig SNAPS as they hear FOOTSTEPS.

Darek motions for Jozef to duck beneath a nearby bush. Darek hides himself behind a large tree.

The FOOTSTEPS draw closer, accompanied by the CRACKLING of dry foliage.

Darek anxiously presses his back against the tree trunk, trying to control his fear.

Then, suddenly, the footsteps stop, leaving only the RUSTLING of the leaves in the wind.

Darek sees Jozef peek up from behind the bush, trying to get up, but Darek shakes his head "no" and Jozef ducks his head back down.

They wait patiently for a few moments and hear nothing out of the ordinary.

Darek begins to relax, regaining a bit of courage. He steps out from behind the tree and starts towards Jozef when...

MAN'S VOICE
(in German)
Stop!

Darek stops mid-step. He turns his head to see...

A young NAZI SS OFFICER standing there, a smoking cigarette dangling from his lips, and a LUGER PISTOL in hand aimed at Darek.

SMOKING NAZI
(in German)
Who's with you?

Darek shakes his head.

DAREK
(in Polish)
Please. I don't understand.

The Nazi rolls his eyes in disgust.

SMOKING NAZI
(grunts, in German)
Ignorant fucking peasants.

Darek turns his head slightly towards Jozef, who looks on unseen through the bushes.

A GUNSHOT rips through the air, startling Jozef, as Darek falls over on his back, blood spreading across his shirt. He tilts his head on ground and finds Jozef in the bushes. They lock eyes for a moment.

The Nazi walks over to examine his handy work. He stops over Darek, levels his Luger, and readies himself to fire another shot...

THIN OFFICER (O.S.)
 (distant, in German)
 Dieter! What the hell are you
 doing?

Another pair of GERMAN HEER (ARMY) SOLIDERS walk up, a THIN OFFICER and a fresh faced GRUNT. The thin officer surveys the situation coldly. The grunt is obviously disturbed by the sight of the dying boy.

THIN OFFICER
 (all business, in German)
 Come. You've wasted enough time...

Jozef shifts his weight clumsily in the bushes. The grunt perks up noticing. Luckily, for the moment, the two others do not.

THIN OFFICER
 (in German)
 ...we've got to catch up to the
 rest of the column.

JOZEF'S POV: Through the bushes he sees the grunt staring at him.

ON JOZEF: He knows he has been spotted. His eyes wide with fear.

SMOKING NAZI
 (chuckles, in German)
 Don't worry. Warsaw isn't going
 anywhere.

The smoking Nazi aims the Luger at Darek, and contemplates squeezing the trigger. Instead his cold grey eyes study the dying boy's face.

THIN OFFICER
 (walks off)
 Just hurry up and finish this.

The grunt lingers for a moment. He shifts his gaze from the bushes over to Darek. He gives the smoking Nazi a dirty look from behind and walks away.

Seemingly satisfied with himself, the smoking Nazi takes a last drag from his cigarette, before throwing it out and heading back to join the others.

After a few moments, we hear SNIFFLING as Jozef emerges from his hiding place. He approaches Darek, tears rolling down his cheeks, and kneels down in front of him.

Darek looks up at him weakly, unable to speak. We see the life fading from his eyes.

After a moment Jozef reaches into his pocket and pulls out the wooden horse. He gently opens Darek's hand, and places the horse in it.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. CENTRAL PARK -- DAY

The trance is broken as Jozef pulls his gaze away from the knight piece.

He turns around to see the young boys and their mother walking in the distance.

The CLICK of the chess clock pulls him back to the present as Jozef turns back to face his opponent.

OLD MAN
(thick accent, grins)
Now let's see how you get out of
this one.

Jozef studies the board for a second. He looks up at the old man.

JOZEF
(in German)
It took me a lifetime...

Jozef moves the knight piece into position.

JOZEF
(in German)
...but I finally found you.

The old man stares at him with a confused look, the fear building up in his cold grey eyes as the realization settles in.

OLD MAN
(His voice cracks)
What?

Jozef CLICKS the chess clock and looks the Nazi in the eyes.

JOZEF
Checkmate.

FADE OUT.