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THE CHINA HORSE

A family drama screenplay by

Glenn & Barbara Schiffman

A teenage girl who doesn't want to live connects with her "reason for being" while traveling from Chicago to Montana with an older woman who doesn't want to die.

Punk-haired LEXIE ANDERSON (15) stands out in her thrift-shop punk-lace dress and suicide attempt-bandaged wrist as she reluctantly attends her dad GREG's (40s) wedding to DONNA ROLLINS (30s) in a Chicago suburb. The festivities pause when STELLA RAMSEY (late 60s), Donna's stepmother, shows up at the very last minute in her well-traveled camper with daschunds Trixie and Ollie yapping out the windows. Donna introduces Lexie to Stella who knows about Lexie's recent suicide attempt. Stella quickly concludes that Lexie is a spoiled city girl who just wants attention while Lexie labels Stella an old hick and totally uncool.

At home, Lexie finds it increasingly impossible to cope with her depressed mom MARINA (late 30s) who privately toasted Greg's remarriage with two bottles of scotch. The next morning after Marina somehow pulls herself together for work, Lexie flees to her father's house. She figures that since school's just let out for the summer she can stay there alone while Greg and Donna are off on their honeymoon cruise. Once they get back, she'll talk them into letting her stay for good. But she's surprised to find Stella still at Greg's house getting ready to drive her camper to the Montana ranch she owns with her brother HOMER (60s). Stella doesn't think it's safe for Lexie to stay there alone and insists she go back home. But when Lexie refuses, Stella sets aside her preference for traveling solo and insists Lexie come with her. Outwardly worried about Lexie's mental state, she also realizes subconsciously that it might not be bad for her to have a companion on the trip "just in case." Her doctor has finally ordered her to slow down -- if she doesn't, he says her heart condition will force her to and it will hurt. Stella instinctively knows she's going home to die, but she's clearly in denial about the seriousness of her medical condition.

At first Lexie's not happy about driving thousands of miles with this crazy old lady. But Stella sweetens the deal by promising that Lexie can ride horses at Homer's ranch. This makes a huge difference as Lexie loves to ride -- the hours she's spent riding on the bridal path through Chicago's Lincoln Park are the only times she's felt truly alive and in control. Her most cherished possession is a miniature china horse Greg gave her during happier times-- it's now tucked safely in her suitcase for good luck. Unwilling to admit Marina doesn't know where she is, Lexie fakes a phone call home for permission to go with Stella. They hit the road before Marina discovers the "don't worry" note Lexie left on the refrigerator at home.

Stella's a staunchly self-reliant woman who grew up in the country and doesn't take "nonsense" from anyone or anything. Married at age 15 to a bootlegger who went on the run to Mexico during Prohibition, she's been on the road most of her life. Unable to have children after a miscarriage, Stella has nonetheless accumulated a huge "family" -- after her husband died, she became a photojournalist for travel and senior magazines and has come to know every "snowbird" (full-time road traveler) in every campground from Cape Cod to San Luis Obispo. Her stubborn streak has allowed her to ignore her weakening heart and she subconsciously fears becoming an invalid by losing control of her body and her life. In contrast, Lexie's an emotionally wounded city girl whose divorced parents are too busy or depressed to give her the attention and support she truly needs. Forced to grow up too fast due to her mother's emotional dysfunctions, Lexie's in touch with her "reason for being" only when she's writing poetry or riding horses. Her sudden suicide attempt infuriated Marina and confused Greg, making them even less able to deal with her. Her teachers and school counselors were not impressed and considered it a ploy for attention. Since Lexie's pretty much a loner at her Catholic girl's school, she's been left to cope with the aftermath of her cry for help alone.

As their journey begins, tensions mount quickly between Lexie and Stella. Lexie's appalled to discover that Stella snores. Lexie's also allergic to the dogs and wakes each morning covered with mosquito bites in the poorly screened-in camper. When they reach Wisconsin, Stella detours to visit a friend who runs a halfway house for retarded adults. Lexie learns a lesson there about being overly judgmental of others and is impressed when Stella take charge of a delicate situation. Later in Minnesota, Stella throws away the barbiturates she finds in Lexie's purse and discovers that Lexie lied about Marina knowing where she was. After finding Lexie's name on a police list of reported runaways, Stella worries she might be held accountable if the cops stop them. Stella gives Lexie the option to go home now, but Lexie refuses. Eager to reach a safe haven in South Dakota, Stella pushes herself too hard and nearly crashes the camper, scaring Lexie who realizes Stella's having a minor stroke.

They're on the run together now, like it or not. But when Lexie denies taking the old pistol Stella keeps around "in case of emergencies," Stella's had enough of the spoiled child. So she ditches Lexie to teach her a lesson. Lexie waits beside the road for Stella to return and finally starts walking toward town, furious at Stella's betrayal --- only to find the camper waiting just over the next hill. Lexie silently gets in and returns the .45, ashamed but still defiant. Then Stella drives to a Lakota Reservation where Lexie is introduced to a different way of seeing life by Lakota teen VIRGIL while Stella gets a "healing treatment" from his MEDICINE MAN grandfather who informs her she cannot stay for the Sun Dance

as she'd planned because Lexie has "walked with death." Lexie thinks this is a lot of crap, but Stella admits Grandfather said death walks with her (Stella) too.

Stella heads the camper for Deadwood, South Dakota where they arrive in time for Deadwood Days, an annual rodeo and street fair. Stella sets up her portable booth to sell photos until her camper's license and Lexie's strange hairdo get noticed. The local police received an APB from Chicago authorities after Marina reported Lexie's been kidnapped, so the cops confront them and arrest Stella. But Lexie runs off and, having nowhere to go, tries to get a job with the rodeo. Her inexperience puts her in a compromising position with the COWBOY who runs the show and she nearly gets raped. Lexie winds up in jail with Stella after she's picked up hitchhiking away from the rodeo. But they're released when Marina refuses to send money to fly Lexie back to Chicago and drops the kidnapping charge. Angry and frustrated, Lexie accidentally breaks her china horse which sends her mental state spiraling. But she has few options left: Greg and Donna are still on their cruise, so she's forced to go with Stella to Homer's ranch until they return.

Things don't get easier, however, as the journey continues. In eastern Montana, an escaped and wounded convict Stella was warned about by the Deadwood police takes the women hostage in their camper. He holds Lexie at gunpoint with Stella's .45 -- but when he falls asleep, Lexie and Stella silently try to escape. He wakes up and shoots at them, but the ancient gun explodes in his hand. The women are declared heroes by the local TROOPERS and receive a \$1000 reward. They eagerly spend part of it on a long soak in hot mineral baths at a spa-and-backpack ranch in the Montana mountains. Lexie finds herself attracted to GUY, the camp manager, who shows her some herbal remedies for her allergies. She gets embarrassed when Guy invites her to read a poem at the community campfire, however, and she finally opens up to Stella who gives her the option to go home once more. But Lexie chooses the ranch, eager to ride Homer's horses in the mountains.

The ranch is as exciting as Lexie hoped, and she asks if she can stay for the summer. Stella insists Lexie get real permission this time. But when she calls home, Marina angrily insists Lexie come home to take care of her instead of some crazy old lady. Lexie screams back in refusal, rushes out of the cabin and rides off into the mountains on Homer's Appaloosa. When she doesn't return by nightfall, Stella takes the camper to search for Lexie as thunderclouds gather. Hours later, Stella's still driving through the mountains looking for Lexie as a sharp pain shoots through her shoulder and stops her cold. She knows she's having a stroke and can do nothing about it, just as she'd always feared. When Lexie soon appears at the camper, dripping wet and leading her horse, she finds Stella on the floor, unable to talk or move. Knowing Stella's survival depends on her, Lexie takes the wheel despite her escalating fears and lack of driving experience. After she manages to maneuver the camper back to the ranch in the driving rain, Homer rushes Stella to the hospital with Lexie by her side.

While Stella's recuperating at the hospital, Lexie makes herself useful by cleaning up the dusty ranch house. She comes across Stella's photo album and gets a different perspective of her new friend from pictures of Stella as a young woman. Lexie visits Stella daily and even sneaks the dogs in one time. As Stella prepares to go home from the hospital, Lexie passes the gift shop and spots a china horse nearly identical to her broken talisman. She decides to buy it with some of her reward money, then changes her mind -- its fragility represents her past, and she's ready for a more solid future. She takes a risk now and shares one of the poems she's written with Stella for the first time. It's very good,

and Stella encourages Lexie to write more. She also proposes that if Lexie will write about Stella's life by annotating her photo album, she'll get it published as an article or book. Excited, Lexie immerses herself in this project, gaining new insights about Stella and also herself.

Several nights later, Lexie suddenly senses something is wrong. She races to Stella's room to find her friend near death. Stella tells Lexie to open the top drawer of her dresser -- inside is a beautiful hand-carved wooden horse. It's Stella's gift to her. She hopes Lexie will think of their summer together and how much Lexie has grown whenever she looks at the wooden horse. It's a tangible reminder of Lexie's "reason for being."

Days later, a somber group stands around Stella's grave. Lexie is between Greg and Donna, holding her new wooden horse firmly. She gathers her emotions to read a poem in Stella's honor. The poem reminds the gathered "family" that Stella's spirit is everywhere -- in the winds, the sunlight, the autumn rain, the birds' flight. As Lexie shares her intimate feelings aloud, it's clear Stella came to terms with death and found her way to let go while helping Lexie connect with her own "reason for being." Both women's lives changed through knowing each other, and Lexie's stronger sense of self-worth lives on in Stella's memory through her new wooden horse.

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