

EXT. FARM - DAY

A stray stick of chalk lies by a milk crate with the words "Goodbye, *sireliner*" written on a slab of asphalt by the base of a sycamore. The wind blows up chalk bits.

And then a pair of FEET swing by, blocking the words for a moment. The words return before the feet swing by again, this time in the opposite direction.

EXT. FARM - DAY

The sun shines on a misty field.

CARD: Four months ago. 1948.

Bees buzz, sparrows chirp, and the hum of a distant lawn mower resounds as a distant FIGURE pushes it through a field of overgrown grass and dandelions.

INT. BARN - DAY

Light pierces through the splintered, wooden walls, illuminating dust particles dancing like gypsies throughout the twenty-foot-tall by thirty-five-foot wide structure.

The lawn mower drones on in the distance.

A small candle aflame on a haystack offers the only other light source. ZANGO, a rambunctious golden retriever, licks his paws clean.

ARSHILE GORKY, 41, lean, lanky, and handsome with hair slicked back, applies vigorous brush strokes to a thirty-inch by forty-inch canvas portraying a woman with soft, round cheeks, black hair, and eyes that resemble his own.

Behind this portrait, against a haystack, rests an equally large canvas bursting with pinks, browns, and the forms of a small boy holding a rose next to his stern, striking mother who hides an almost expressionless glance under a head scarf.

Both figures have their hands scratched out.

A faded photograph depicting the same boy and mother dangles by a tack on the corner of the canvas. *The Artist And His Mother*, the image's title, is scribbled onto the photograph.

Dandelions dangle from the edge of the canvas that Gorky takes a knife to. He shaves a few inches of paint off the chin of the woman in the portrait.

*All conversations Gorky has with his canvases occur in the Armenian language.*

GORKY

My God, Vartush, your cheeks. You look like her, you know that? The way your jaw line turns on the same plane as your mouth.

The VOICE OF VARTUSH booms from the portrait.

VOICE OF VARTUSH

Your cheeks are like baba's.

GORKY

Don't say that.

VOICE OF VARTUSH

Manoug.

GORKY

Please, Vartush, you must stop worrying about me. I'll make double what you sent me from this painting alone.

Gorky kisses Vartush's cheek and gets paint on his lips.

VOICE OF VARTUSH

I know it's difficult. You're so strong. My hero.

Gorky takes the knife to the portrait's nose.

VOICE OF VARTUSH (CONT'D)

Stop.

GORKY

I don't like your nose so big.

VOICE OF VARTUSH

I was born like this.

GORKY

I can make you more beautiful.

VOICE OF VARTUSH

Then it wouldn't be me.

GORKY

It's a question of aesthetics, Vartush. You wouldn't understand.

VOICE OF VARTUSH  
This is my character, Manoug.

GORKY  
You don't know what you're saying.  
Shut up, will you? You have to  
listen to a man sometimes.

Beat.

VOICE OF VARTUSH  
How's Mgouch?

GORKY  
Feisty. Disobedient. Lovely. Her  
parents own a large farm and  
they're letting us stay in it. One-  
hundred ten acres. Maro loves it.  
Like her daddy. We're returning to  
nature finally. No more god damn  
city with its machines and crowded  
streets and...

The lawn mower drones on in the distance.

GORKY (CONT'D)  
..."Human subtlety will never  
devise an invention more beautiful,  
simple, or direct than nature, for  
in her, nothing lacks, nothing is  
superfluous." Leonardo.

Gorky wipes the paint from his lips.

GORKY (CONT'D)  
Da Vinci. De Medici. Raphael.  
"The School of Athens," Vartush.  
Raphael...Raphael...

Gorky turns fast and bolts for the barn door, startling Zango  
who bumps into the haystack with the candle on top before  
following his owner outside.

The candle tips over and a strand of hay CATCHES AFLAME.

EXT. FARM DAY - MOMENTS LATER

Zango barking on his heels, Gorky sprints through the  
trimmed, neat field.

GORKY  
THE RAPHAELS. THE RAPHAELS.

He zooms up a hill towards the Figure pushing the lawn mower, AGNES MAGRUDER, or MGOUCH, 26, five-months pregnant, radiant, sweaty in a floral summer dress, a modest ruby on her ring finger, enjoying the silence of ear plugs.

Gorky jumps in front of the lawn mower, waving his hands.

GORKY (CONT'D)  
THE RAPHAELS. THE RAPHAELS.

Mgouch stops and removes the plugs.

MGOUCH  
What's wrong?

Gorky gets down on his knees and looks into the mower. Zango jumps all over his back. Mgouch turns off the motor.

Gorky looks down at the fallen dandelions crumpled at the mower's mouth. He picks one up, tears in his eyes, and searches for its florets.

He finds one hovering in the air, grabs it, and tries to place it back onto the dandelion's head. For a moment the floret stays, then Zango barks and it flies off.

Gorky pushes Zango away and grabs another crumpled dandelion. Then another. Another. More, gathering in the palm of his hand.

FLASHBACK TO:

EXT. FIELD - DAY

Doves swoop over a vast lake with an island in its middle, surrounded by arid mountains and three distant steeples in a church complex.

CARD: Lake Van, Ottoman Empire, 1915.

The doves glide past the lake's shore over a village meadow where three CHILDREN huddle around the trunk of a charred pistachio tree.

All of the children sulk except one, the YOUNGER GORKY, 12, brazen, who leaves the others behind and walks toward the lake's shore, stepping through a patch of dandelions.

Faint splotches of red murk the water lapping at the shore where the younger Gorky stands stiff, peering into the lake.

The younger Gorky steps forward into the lake. His foot is met by a motionless, outstretched hand. The younger Gorky takes the hand and brings the body onto the shore.

He returns to the water, met by another hand. Again he takes that hand and pulls the body to shore. He holds this hand in his own, studying the cracks and lines of the dried skin.

The wind picks up and brings with it a cadre of dandelion florets that land on the second body, a WOMAN with dark eyes and without a nose.

Gorky looks out into the lake, turns, and returns to the field. He stops at the dandelion patch and kneels. He picks one out of the field and blows on the florets, watching them fly. The children wave for him to join them under the tree.

Gorky takes a pad and pencil from his back pocket and sketches an accurate and impressive portrait of the children by the tree.

He returns to the tree to show them. They pat the younger Gorky on the back. He double takes at the sight of the hair burning atop of one of the children's heads.

RETURN TO:

EXT. FIELD - DAY

Plumes of smoke drift off the top of the barn as Mgouch holds a crying Gorky in her arms.

Sh, baby. Sh. MGOUCH

GORKY  
(swallowing sobs)  
Raphael.

Zango barks at Gorky and leaps at his hip. Gorky looks up and sees the smoke drifting off the roof.

GORKY (CONT'D)  
VARTUSH.

Gorky sprints for the barn, wood cracking and spitting flamed splinters into the sky. Mqouch runs after him.

EXT. BARN - MOMENTS LATER

With his forearm, Gorky blocks the heat wave pulling sweat from his pores and approaches the entrance.

Mgouch tries to pull him back.

MGOUCH

Stop! It's not worth it!

Gorky turns, grabs Mgouch by the shoulders, catches her off-guard with a forceful kisses, throws her to the ground, and jumps into the barn.

FLASHBACK TO:

EXT. FIELD - DAY

One of three steeples of an ancient, stone Armenian church overlooking Lake Van spits flames into the air.

An equally ANCIENT WOMAN shuffles away from the melting church, cradling a BABY in her arms, singing an Anatolian lullaby with remarkable zest.

She hands the Baby off to a MAN ON HORSEBACK dressed head to toe in a white gown. The Man looks the Baby in the eye. The Baby sings the same song to the Man.

The Man rides off with the Baby, and the Grandmother starts dancing, arms raised, wrists twirling, fingers snapping.

Behind her, flames from the steeples billow into the air.