

Sfumato

By Adam Petrosino

CHARACTERS:

PETER LEROUX, male, early 20s, is a philosophy student with a talent for painting. He is rebellious, romantic, witty and intelligent. Also quite arrogant. He finds beauty in the fiery colors of sunrise.

DELANEY BLAINE, female, early 20s, is an art student and a practiced, experienced painter. She is smart, spirited and confident, but also opinionated and self-important. She finds beauty in the golden light of sunset.

DR CARBONE, male, 40s, is a cold and seemingly unsympathetic art teacher. His teaching style is performative and erratic. He has a deep appreciation for experimental art and a soft spot for bold, aggressive students, like Peter and Delaney.

PROFESSOR ALBINI, female, 60s, is an elderly, vulture-like museum curator. She is pointedly traditional and has high standards for what makes great art. Fond of aggressive and mean-spirited artists.

CLASSMATES, any genders, early 20s, are other students in DR CARBONE's elective. They are an optional aspect of *Sfumato*, dependent on the director's vision. Present in scenes One and Nine, the CLASSMATES would react and move about the space working on their own pieces. They may also discreetly react to PETER and DELANEY's conversations. Their canvases would sit upstage of PETER and DELANEY's, mirrored on stage right and left.

SETTING:

Sfumato is set in the late 90s. The clothing styles and painting supplies should represent this time period. DR CARBONE's studio, however, is representative of a time much older. The paintings are framed in gilded fixtures and objects around the studio exhibit a Renaissance quality. The museum's decor, on the other hand, reflects an exaggerated baroque style, desperately clinging to the aesthetics of an old era.

LIGHTS:

The lights of sunrise and sunset should transition seamlessly, gradienting to the next in the way the sky does.

MUSIC:

If possible, the string music throughout *Sfumato* should be performed live. The players would be present downstage of and outwardly adjacent to the stage's window, cellist stage left and violinist stage right. The players should wear clothes representative of the era, even perhaps mimicking the styles of the characters on stage- the cellist resembling PETER and violinist resembling DELANEY. During Scene Ten, the players face the stage, cued by PETER and DELANEY's movements. The players exit with their instruments and stools directly after Scene Ten.

PRE-SHOW:

Faint string music plays and DR CARBONE's studio is visible, cast in the dull orange light of sunset. The lights and sound fade in tandem as the play begins.

SCENE ONE: THE STUDIO

DR CARBONE's elective, "Colors of the Sky," takes place in an eccentric art studio, scattered with empty frames, decorative mirrors and various painting implements. Mounted across the studio's walls are black painted canvases in gilded frames. Two easels and stools mirror each other midstage left and right. Their canvases face upstage, unseen. There are art stations with paint supplies and sinks mirroring each other downstage left and right, pressed to the walls. A single door is set upstage center. The stage is framed by a wooden arch resembling a window and is latticed by thin grilles, as if the audience were looking into the studio from outside.

Seated at the stage right canvas is DELANEY, a girl with curled hair, overalls, and a floral tote bag leaning against her stool. She is bright-eyed and interested, intently observing. Sitting at the stage left canvas is PETER, a boy with messy hair, khakis, and a white button down with rolled up sleeves. He holds a paintbrush in his hand and taps on it anxiously. Between the two canvases and standing just before the downstage window latticing is DR CARBONE, who faces the audience. He wears a smart navy blue suit, holding a brush in his right hand and a palette in the left. He starts, with intensity.

DR CARBONE

Night- where we begin. A blank, black canvas. A sullen sky which slims our sights to shades of gray. Bare, bleak, but brimming with buried potential in that empty black expanse. We see promise in stars, specks of white- dots of light-

DR CARBONE makes quick motions with his brush, dots, towards the audience, as if the air before him were a canvas. He continues to paint with intensity as his speech goes on.

DR CARBONE

-which disperse as the sun, our artist, starts, slowly, to rise. His form not yet settled on our skyline, we nonetheless see the first tread towards day, our star's first subtle brushstrokes. We watch obsidian night compound with navy- cause a charcoal color on our canvas. Gradients of gray and deep dark blue- blend and beckon morning light. We see our star's divine intent and eager, lie in wait-

DR CARBONE mixes colors violently on his palette. PETER and DELANEY lean forward in anticipation.

DR CARBONE
waiting- for-

DR CARBONE suddenly begins again.

DR CARBONE
the sudden spark of daybreak! There, with a single stroke, the world begins to wake. The dark of charcoal tinged with teal, transmutes to a sky where we start to see the birthing hues of blue. The staggering beauty of sunrise. Blinding, beguiling, we wish it to stay. The sky, of course, does not obey. Dawn snuffs the smoke of night from our sky and summons forth true teal. The painter hastens to capture its hues, but the heavens bleed further into blue. Then, at last we finally see- the sky, our endless cerulean sea- as the sun, our artist, enters the scene, completing his ethereal topography.

DR CARBONE steps back to look at his painting thus far.

DR CARBONE
Sun blares its blue across our sky, for hours cerulean stalling to die. Some artists admire this static color- but true artists yearn for the hue to change, longing to watch the pure of blue decay- for how could it contend with the sun's ascent, or the picture painted when it fades? For those without eager artist's intent, tears will fall when the sunshine ends- and that's what decides an artist's strength, at sunset, if their tears are shed. True artists treasure both- the beginning and end. (beat) Nevertheless, just as the sun had risen, so sudden, it descends.

DR CARBONE approaches the canvas again, now painting in frenzy.

DR CARBONE
Darkness clouds our canvas as that brilliant blue heaven turns to teal. Dusk dulls our teal to aspects of gray. Shadowed darker are the remains of day, darker, darker, darker- yes, until there's not a dot of light. (beat) Our canvas is coal- once again, it is night.

DR CARBONE stops his wild painting but still stands just before the window lattice, looking at his work. His gaze is focused and now brimming with angry intensity. He is in full performance.

DR CARBONE

These celestial motions, sunrise and sunset, which paint our skies in stunning, astonishing hues each dawn and dusk- happen in the scant span of three minutes. In this transient time, the sky blends its colors together seamlessly! The blacks, blues, and grays gradient through our sky in a dazzling display of nature's tremendous beauty. And in turn summon forth one of art's most treasured techniques: delicately mingled tones- softened, invisible alterations- hazy forms- *Sfumato*! The sky is a beauty that- if captured with toil and intent, in its fading transient seconds, can become true art. Vincent van Gogh, Camille Pissaro, Caspar David Friedrich, and... you! The capacity to capture beauty lies within any painter! Remember this pivotal lesson I lend- to paint the colors of the sky, you simply must learn from the sun, and ascend!

DR CARBONE turns around towards the class, breathing heavily in exasperation. A silence hangs in the air.

PETER

(in awe)

Holy shit.

DELANEY

(in agreement)

Yeah.

DR CARBONE's voice dulls to a monotone, as he is now shockingly unsentimental.

DR CARBONE

Over the course of the semester in my elective, "Colors of the Sky," you are tasked with creating a single piece of art that displays both your skill in the fundamentals of painting and your appreciation of natural beauty. The rest of the period is yours for research and beginning your projects. I will be in my office.

PETER raises his hand. DR CARBONE walks towards the door, ignoring PETER entirely. PETER and DELANEY watch him walk past in disbelief.

PETER
(Turning backwards)
Sir- your name?

DR CARBONE
(Turning towards PETER)
You may address me as Doctor Carbone. I will be in my office.

DR CARBONE exits, the door shut loudly. Silence for a moment.

DELANEY
I heard he was intense- but that... He's a lunatic!
Brilliant, sure, but definitely a lunatic.

PETER laughs in relief.

PETER
Really though! What's his deal?

DELANEY
You don't know? Carbone was famous for a while- award winning artist, priceless pieces, the whole nine yards. He just started teaching a few years ago. After a long history of blowing his lid at art critics, he decided to shift his ire towards the youth. Hopped universities a few times before he finally ended up here. And now that Dr Carbone does work here, he's got a reputation- doesn't collaborate with other teachers, doesn't cooperate with authority, barely talks to students- he picks his favorites and hates everyone else. (beat) Oh, and this is the only class he teaches. And you know it- tenured! (beat) Personally, I don't hate him.

PETER
Huh. Sounds like a real saint. Thanks for filling me in.
(beat) I'm Peter.

DELANEY
Delaney. (beat) Why haven't I seen you before?

PETER

Oh, well-

PETER leans in, as if telling a secret.

PETER

I'm not actually an Art Major.

DELANEY gasps, teasing him. PETER sucks air in through his teeth.

PETER

I know, I know.

DELANEY

What *do* you do then?

PETER

I study Philosophy. Right now, Nietzsche. He's a nihilist. You know- "God is dead and we killed him." "There are no moral principles and everything is meaningless." Overall he was a pretty big downer. He did have some good things to say about art though- "Art is the proper task of life." I like that one.

DELANEY

Yeah, that one's alright.

PETER

He also said "For art to exist, a certain physiological precondition is indispensable: intoxication." I like that one too.

DELANEY

Charming. You like to talk, don't you?

PETER

(smiling)

I do.

DELANEY

(laughing)

I can see that. So why are you *here* then?

PETER

Alongside seasoned intellectual and distinguished philosopher, I also consider myself an artist- I paint.

DELANEY

Well, I would hope so. This definitely isn't a beginner's course.

PETER

Then you're a full-fledged Art Major, I'm guessing.

DELANEY

I am. All four years. So don't be coming in too cocky- you're the newbie here. Hey, maybe I'll show you some tricks of the trade if you're nice to me for a while.

PETER smiles.

DELANEY

You a senior?

PETER

Yeah. Going for grad school next.

DELANEY

An academic, then?

PETER

I'd consider myself a romantic. I study the aesthetics of it. Naturally, I get good marks too-

DELANEY

Well then, let's see if you can keep up in *this* class, romantic. Nice to meet you Peter.

PETER

You too- Delaney.

DELANEY gathers her paintbrush and palette and begins to work. PETER looks at her for a moment longer before doing the same. The stage fades to a blackout. A violin and cello piece plays as the scene transitions, their notes intertwining.

SCENE TWO: LESSON #1

DR CARBONE takes centerstage. A single spotlight highlights his form while he addresses the audience, in a monologue, a lesson. He now wears a color spattered painters smock and small silver glasses on the bridge of his nose. The string music continues and the scene shifts to the museum behind DR CARBONE, as he talks.

DR CARBONE

A piece of art, a painting, begins with a single stroke of a brush- a spark to kindle what should rise to a roiling flame. You tend to the tiny spark, your tools- brush, palette, paint, canvas- are your tinderbox. As you feed this flame, just as you plaster a painting, in time you will find there is a singular second- one mere moment- that sends that starting spark ablaze. It is in that instant- that a painting gains potential to bloom into beauty. Watch each brush-stroke closely, you'll see- that infinitesimal, consequential moment- a mote of possibility.

The spotlight fades and blackout descends again. The strings continue into the next scene.

SCENE THREE: THE MUSEUM

Lights come up on the museum, a room full of masterful art pieces, paintings of the sky. The space is orderly and elegant, arranged by the museum's curator, PROF ALBINI. The blank black canvases hung in the studio are now alive with color- the various works of DR CARBONE. The two easels now stand closed against the stage right wall, while the other decor and art stations have been removed. A stepladder stands against the stage left wall and a pale white light now illuminates the stage. The window latticing remains.

PROF ALBINI stands stage left, an elderly, vulture-like woman in a garish white dress. She is a sharp contrast to DR CARBONE's dull monotone, her voice a sing-songy warbling noise and her demeanor one of constant intensity, fluctuating wildly between elation and pointed scrutiny. She examines a painting on the stage left wall as DR CARBONE enters, now without smock or glasses. He takes a deep breath, preparing for the dreaded conversation.

DR CARBONE
Professor Albini.

PROF ALBINI
(turning around swiftly)
Ah! Doctor Carbone! Prompt as always my dear.

DR CARBONE
Yes.

PROF ALBINI meets DR CARBONE centerstage.

PROF ALBINI
(shaking his hand with two hands)
It's been so long! How have you been?

DR CARBONE
I've been well. (beat) Yourself?

PROF ALBINI
Oh you know- I've been better! Curating this museum is getting awfully drab. Yes, awfully drab! I hardly come about any traditionalist big-shots like you anymore, Doctor. People just don't know how to use a brush these days. And all this "contemporary" art! Ugh! What nonsense! A waste of paint, that's what I say!

DR CARBONE
Yes.

DR CARBONE opens his mouth to say something but PROF ALBINI begins again. She walks absently around as she talks, DR CARBONE watching on dully.

PROF ALBINI
But *your* additions are always such a joy to observe- yes- and such a magnet for visitors! The sky, so timeless- and so beautifully captured by your hand. You know what I love about your art, Doctor? You take one beautiful moment and lock it away forever, away from change, away from the ugly blemishes of time!

DR CARBONE

Every painting does that, Professor.

PROF ALBINI

And so I curate an art museum! Don't be humble Doctor Carbone, you wield a brush better than anyone I know. Mmm. That's why you have full access to the museum, any time! To bring me more of your art! You really ought to paint more- your time would be much better spent with a brush in hand rather than-

DR CARBONE

Professor Albini. Let me get straight to the point.

PROF ALBINI's face sours.

DR CARBONE

I would like to discuss the details of my collection in the upcoming exhibition- particularly the continued addition of a student piece.

PROF ALBINI begins to wander, not meeting DR CARBONE's eyes.

PROF ALBINI

I don't know why you insist on having these student pieces in your collection.

DR CARBONE

They are the future, Professor Albini. We cannot stay stagnant forever.

PROF ALBINI

The spirit of art is dead in these young people!

DR CARBONE

I disagree.

PROF ALBINI

Oh, let it speak for itself! They think art can be anything these days.

DR CARBONE

Not my students, Professor.

PROF ALBINI meets his eyes again. There is a pause.

PROF ALBINI

Oh really, Doctor. What makes them so different?

DR CARBONE

I teach them what true art is. How to use paint to its full potential. Importance behind each hue. Meaning behind each brushstroke.

PROF ALBINI

You can't enthral *me* with your poetry, Doctor. Tell me. What makes these kids worthy of hanging their canvases next to yours?

DR CARBONE

With the correct lessons and knowledge of fundamentals, a simple student can become a prodigy. By this semester's end they will be capable of masterworks.

PROF ALBINI

Doctor Carbone. You and I both know it is not just mastery of art that is needed to make a masterpiece. You need to be aggressive. You need to be more than aggressive. You need to have a fever that ignites your heart with passion as you paint. That is what makes a masterpiece.

The two are silent as DR CARBONE stares at her.

DR CARBONE

Yes. (beat) But I do have students like that, Professor Albin. Not often, no. But sometimes- there are students who go beyond the bounds of what even I accept. Who blatantly break the rules. Those who can see the fierce beauty that lies in defiance. Those students, though few, make masterful artists. Those students- are worthy of taking their place by me.

The lights fade and the string music begins again.

SCENE FOUR: THE STUDIO AT SUNSET

The studio is set up as before, but the scene begins in a blackout. The music fades. We hear PETER and DELANEY's voices, behind the door at centerstage.

PETER

Hey, Delaney- I know you said "tricks of the trade" a couple weeks ago, but this feels a lot more like breaking and entering.

DELANEY

Oh hush. Gimme a paperclip.

The movement of a doorknob and then a door opening is heard.

DELANEY

There we go. Now be careful- it's dark.

PETER

Yeah, alright.

After a second or two, there is the sound of a paint can falling over.

PETER

Sorry.

There is shuffling for a few more seconds before it stops. DELANEY's voice is heard from downstage left.

DELANEY

Aaand-

The sound of blinds being drawn with a chain is heard, and the stage is lit by pale light, the window being opened. PETER and DELANEY look outwards, at the sky. They exhale.

DELANEY

Now we wait.

DELANEY begins gathering painting supplies to her canvas. PETER follows.

PETER

That seemed remarkably easy for you to do- breaking into the studio. I really didn't take you for a criminal- honestly I'm kinda impressed.

DELANEY

Well it's not my first time. Last year I came here all the time to paint or read or just get away for a while.

PETER

And you're a repeat offender! You never got caught?

DELANEY

Nope. No one else really comes to the art wing at night. No one bothers to check the cameras either. It's like my personal paradise.

PETER

It's a great spot.

DELANEY

You haven't seen anything yet. Just wait til sunset.

The two begin to paint in silence for a time, periodically peeking from behind their canvases to study the sky.

DELANEY

You know- I've been trying to get into Dr Carbone's elective for so long- just because of this window. It's incredible- the only one like it on campus.

PETER

Yeah. The view is amazing- and the sky. You think that's why he got this studio?

DELANEY

Probably.

PETER

Honestly- I still can't get a read on that guy. He seems to care so much, going on his wild tangents and speeches, but then the next second he's completely apathetic and- dismissive! I can't tell if he feels nothing or- I don't know- everything.

DELANEY

I think Carbone's just a very complicated person. He definitely feels though- at least when it comes to art. I heard once he cried at the beauty of a student's painting. (beat) Then berated him like all the rest.

PETER

Wow. Maybe he's a sociopath.

DELANEY

Yeah- maybe.

PETER

Or he just sees something we don't somehow- "And those who were seen dancing were thought to be insane by those who could not hear the music." (beat) Nietzsche.

DELANEY

Mmmm. (beat) That kid's famous now though, the one who made the painting. Being on Carbone's good side can set you up for life as an artist. If you're in his class, that's pretty much the goal.

PETER

Huh- good to know.

The two paint in silence for a few seconds more. DELANEY looks out the window, and then down at a watch on her wrist. She crosses over to PETER and pulls him out of his seat by his arm.

DELANEY

Oh- Peter! Here's my favorite part- what I wanted to show you!

The two stand at center, looking outwards.

DELANEY

An hour before sunset, just as the sun scrapes the horizon...

The two look on eagerly. After a moment or two- once PETER notices- DELANEY drops her hand from his arm. A moment later-

DELANEY

Now.

The lighting shifts to a brilliant gold. DELANEY smiles wide with excitement. PETER looks at her, stunned.

DELANEY

There it is! Golden Hour. For an hour, the entire sky and everything it touches is glittering gold. It's my favorite time of the day- photographers take incredible pictures- artists like us try to capture the beauty while it lasts. Golden light shines through the trees, across the buildings- outlines everything in its- richness- and paints its own beautiful painting on the horizon. Even every person- their face is radiant during Golden Hour. The sky, and every thing, and every one, for an hour, is just so-beautiful.

PETER slowly takes DELANEY's hand while she looks out the window. She meets his eyes.

DELANEY

(flustered)

Peter- you're not even looking-

PETER

I've seen the sky a thousand times Delaney- but you- right now-

Their gaze stays for a moment. PETER leans towards her, but DELANEY panics and runs back to her canvas.

DELANEY

We have to paint it while we have time!

PETER stands at center for a short time, then walks to his canvas and sits, expressionless. DELANEY acts busy for a bit- then looks over at PETER, who stares blankly at his canvas. She suddenly gets up and walks over to him.

DELANEY

Peter-

PETER looks up at her. DELANEY pushes him behind the canvas as she leans in. Blackout. The music of a violin and cello intertwine once again.

SCENE FIVE: LESSON #2

DR CARBONE again takes centerstage, with his smock and glasses. A single spotlight highlights his form.

DR CARBONE

There it is! That miraculous moment when the painting awakens with life, kindled fire burning bright! A brief bridge to paradise. Ancient artists dubbed it Divine Inspiration- as if this fleeting feeling were a gift from God Himself. It is to be impassioned to the height of human passion- to be pushed to the end of ingenuity- to ascend to an aspect of creation worth all the world's wealth. This feeling is art itself. Grasp it tightly and hold fast, the battle's other half- is making that feeling last.

The spotlight fades and blackout descends again. The strings continue.

SCENE SIX: THE STUDIO AT SUNRISE

Light slowly fades in as the strings get quieter. There is a seemingly empty studio, but behind the stage left canvas, PETER and DELANEY lie down, asleep. Just as the strings end, DELANEY wakes. She stands up, looks around her, and then outside. It's morning.

DELANEY

(in a whisper)

Peter- Peter!

PETER gets up quickly, with a start.

PETER

What? What?

DELANEY

It's morning! We're still in the studio!

PETER looks out the window.

PETER

Huh- you're right. (pause) Man, my back is stiff.

DELANEY

How are you so calm!? If Carbone comes in and finds us, we're screwed!

PETER shrugs.

DELANEY

We have to go.

DELANEY grabs PETER by the arm and begins towards the door. PETER stops her.

PETER

Hey- Delaney wait- let's stay here a little longer- paint-watch the sunrise. There's not even any light in the sky yet! I doubt Carbone comes in this early.

There is a pause as DELANEY looks at PETER, in disbelief.

DELANEY

Are you serious?

PETER

Yes.

The two stare at each other- a silent battle. DELANEY finally loses, and smiles.

DELANEY

Okay. But only until the sun rises.

PETER smiles. The two make their way to their canvases and begin to paint, looking out at the sky. There is silence for a bit.

PETER

You know- you're the first girl I've slept with in a classroom.

DELANEY

Oh, don't say it like that- we didn't do anything other than that- sleep. In a classroom. (beat) I can't believe we did that.

PETER

But wasn't it great? Falling asleep surrounded by art, with the night sky, with each other?

DELANEY

(beat) It was. Yeah.

There is silence for a few moments more as the two continue to paint. The light onstage slowly becomes pink, as the sun touches the horizon.

PETER

There it is- the first light of sunrise. You know- the way you love Golden Hour- that's how I feel about the sunrise. The way the lights progress, cast their color into the clouds- it's an everyday wonder if you take the time to look. As the sky changes, especially while I paint it, I think of all of the things the color reminds me of-

PETER begins to paint, peeking out from behind the canvas.

PETER

Pink- Poppies, Petunias, Raspberries, Rose Quartz, Lotus, Lipstick, Cherry Blossom, Blush-

DELANEY stops painting and walks over to watch PETER paint. The sky slowly fades to red.

PETER

Red- Roses, Rubies, Cherries, Cranberries, Coral, Mums, Mars, Beets, Blood- A Heart.

DELANEY watches PETER from his side. The sky continues to orange.

PETER

Orange- Autumn Leaves, Tiger Lillies, Tangerines, Pumpkins-

DELANEY

Peaches-

PETER

Peppers-

DELANEY

Apricots-

PETER

Foxes-

DELANEY

Fire.

The sky tinges to yellow.

PETER

Yellow- Daffodils, Citrines, Sunflowers- The Sun.

PETER darts behind his canvas, painting with focus. DELANEY watches.

DELANEY

I'm not just saying this because I like you- you're a really great artist. The way you blend the colors together in your sky- it's beautiful- it's like Dr Carbone said in that first class- sfumato.

PETER

What's that?

DELANEY

It's a form of painting that blends one tone into another so closely- that there's no outline at all. It's derived from Italian: sfumare- "to soften" and fumo- "to evaporate, like smoke." A figure blends into the background so smoothly through color that it seems to "evaporate" into the air around it. You know- (imitating DR CARBONE) "Delicately mingled tones- softened, invisible alterations- hazy forms-" that's sfumato. Da Vinci invented it with his painting, Madonna on the Rocks.

PETER

That's a beautiful word- sfumato. (pause) And it goes without saying really- your art is brilliant. You're brilliant. The way you see the world too- just incredible.

There is silence as they look at each other for a moment. PETER stands to meet her, at center. A silhouette is seen in the doorframe.

PETER

Delaney- do you think- I mean we're more than just friends now aren't we?

DELANEY

I think so- yeah. I guess we both know beauty when we see it- we're romantics. Isn't that what you called yourself?

PETER

(laughing quietly)

Yes. It was.

DELANEY

Yeah- I think we're more.

PETER and DELANEY kiss, gently. After a moment, the door begins to open. The two panic as DR CARBONE, without smock, enters. He is promptly severe at their sight. The conversation travels in a quick, panicked fashion.

DR CARBONE

What are you two doing here?

PETER

Dr Carbone- we just wanted to work on our paintings some more-

DR CARBONE

What? You didn't have enough time during class?

PETER

We did- it's just that seeing the sky change color in person, through this window- it's just much more... enlightening?

DR CARBONE

I see. So you broke into my studio.

PETER

Well technically she did-

DELANEY
(to Peter)

Hey!

PETER
(recovering)
But it was both of our ideas.

DELANEY
What was the point of that? Just throwing me under the bus?

PETER
I don't know- I panicked. My bad.

DR CARBONE
Enough! Out! Now!

PETER
Sorry.

DELANEY
Sorry.

DELANEY grabs PETER's hand and the two bolt out of the studio. DR CARBONE, suddenly calm, looks around the studio and lands on DELANEY's painting. He studies it for several seconds, crossing his arms. He then moves to PETER's painting. He stares at it with interest for a time as well. DR CARBONE's face draws into a smile. Blackout. The string music plays again.

SCENE SEVEN: LESSON #3

DR CARBONE takes centerstage again, with smock and glasses. A single spotlight highlights his form. Behind him, the scene shifts to the museum.

DR CARBONE
When I appraise a piece of art- or simply stumble upon a painting- the first thing that I search for is that spark. The one that sets the paint ablaze in color, drawn deeply from a painter's heart. In my time teaching I've seldom seen it- but sometimes- a student's genius shines through. An unsuspecting painter produces something of beauty- proving to me, in a single glance, of their potential. But

what I saw in the studio that dawn was something far more special- paintings drawn from the heartstrings of another, for each other. There was strength in these paintings, I never had seen. (beat) This was art to the highest degree- true emotion, true beauty, but thus far incomplete. If these canvases bloom into what they could be- I will want the entire world to see.

The spotlight fades and blackout descends. String music carries on.

SCENE EIGHT: THE MUSEUM

Lights come up on the museum and the string music ends. The setting remains the same, but PROF ALBINI now stands atop the stepladder, pressed to the stage left wall as she examines a painting up close. She is humming to herself loudly. DR CARBONE enters with two canvases, PETER and DELANEY's paintings, which face upstage. PROF ALBINI does not notice him enter, nor hear him speaking.

DR CARBONE

Professor Albini. (beat) Professor. (beat) Eileen!

PROF ALBINI

(nearly falling off stepladder)

Oh! Doctor! I didn't see you! What are you doing here? Are those paintings of yours?

DR CARBONE

No, they aren't.

PROF ALBINI begins descending the ladder.

PROF ALBINI

Mmm. What are they, then?

DR CARBONE carefully places the paintings in front of him, their faces hidden from PROF ALBINI and the audience. He meets her eyes, staring blankly, having not heard her last question.

PROF ALBINI

(dully)

Are you asking me to prom, Doctor Carbone...

DR CARBONE
(just as dull)
What. No.

DR CARBONE leans the paintings against the upstage wall then begins to retrieve and set up the easels set stage right.

DR CARBONE
Professor Albini- this morning I found that two students had broken into my studio.

PROF ALBINI
Oh! Heavens! Is the art alright?

DR CARBONE
Yes. They were my students. Peter LeRoux and Delaney Blaine- both seniors. I believe they'd been there all night, painting.

PROF ALBINI
Just- painting?

DR CARBONE takes a moment to understand her question.

DR CARBONE
(somewhat flustered)
Oh. (Clears throat) I'm not sure.

PROF ALBINI laughs and covers her mouth. DR CARBONE sets the paintings on the easels, centerstage.

DR CARBONE
But their paintings, Professor. Incredible. Truly. These two students- there is something about their art that ensnared me. Yes, there is this- this *romance* about their art.

PROF ALBINI
(putting on her glasses)
Romance! (Laughs) God, Doctor Carbone. Teaching's made you so soft. I remember when art wasn't about *romance*- it was about aggression! And power!

DR CARBONE

Art can be about many things.

PROF ALBINI

Not great art. Not your art. Your art is aggression given form and your art is beautiful!

PROF ALBINI begins examining PETER and DELANEY's paintings.

PROF ALBINI

See- there is no great emotion here! The colors are too muted and soft. The brushstrokes are too gentle. Their skies are too- sentimental. The art is simply not shocking enough.

DR CARBONE

It is different, yes. But I believe there may be beauty in this more- sensitive approach.

PROF ALBINI

They are missing the anger that makes great art!

DR CARBONE

I do not look at the sky and feel rage, Professor.

PROF ALBINI

Please, Doctor. I've witnessed you paint. There's no *romance* in those eyes. No tenderness in the way you wield your brush. There's no love, just wild obsession. Your art is sheer anger.

DR CARBONE

(sharply)

Do not tell me what my art is and what it isn't.

PROF ALBINI

Well, clearly you don't know! The Carbone I met years ago knew exactly what his art was. He was zealous and sure of himself. He demanded a place in my museum. And I gave it to him! Because I saw a boy who knew the merit in being mean.

DR CARBONE

Well, I've grown, Professor Albini.

PROF ALBINI

No, you've lost the path. When did that angry fire you've always had snuff out? (beat) You know- you told me once what you feel when *you* paint. It sure wasn't *romance*.

DR CARBONE

This isn't about me. This is about my students, Peter and Delaney. I want them in the exhibition.

PROF ALBINI

What do you feel when you paint, Doctor? What emotion do you channel?

DR CARBONE

Albini, enough.

PROF ALBINI

Hatred! Hatred, Doctor Carbone!

DR CARBONE stares at PROF ALBINI, gravely.

PROF ALBINI

That's what you told me! That every strike with your brush was steeped in, yes, hatred. Because that's what makes great art. The strongest emotion in the world. Is that still what you channel when you paint?

DR CARBONE is silent.

PROF ALBINI

Well is it?

DR CARBONE wrestles with the answer for a moment longer.

DR CARBONE

Yes.

PROF ALBINI

You want your students to create something as beautiful, as impactful as your art? *Romance* is not adequate. These paintings have a solid foundation, but they lack that spark. Don't you agree?

Another pause.

DR CARBONE

Yes.

PROF ALBINI

Well then, if we want to give them incentive-

DR CARBONE

(agitated)

We, Professor?

PROF ALBINI

It must be a challenge.

DR CARBONE

No. I don't want competition between those two. (beat) I want both of their paintings in the exhibition.

PROF ALBINI turns towards him sharply.

DR CARBONE

As a single collaborative piece.

PROF ALBINI

You are just full of ideas today, aren't you Doctor? My point still stands. If you want a masterpiece from those students, you must ignite a spark of rivalry between them. *That* would make brilliant art. I'll allow this "collaborative piece" if you do that.

DR CARBONE

Professor, I don't want to harm their- relationship.

PROF ALBINI

Nonsense! The most passionate lovers are impassioned by each other's desires. Take note Doctor Carbone! This is how you inspire great artists- you give them something to fight for. Or against.

The lights fade and the string music begins again as the scene shifts to the studio.

SCENE NINE: THE STUDIO

The music dies and as the lights come up. The studio is arranged for class and there is a tension in the air. It is the first class since PETER and DELANEY had broken into the studio. They sit nervously at their canvases.

PETER

You don't think we're gonna get kicked out of the class do you?

DELANEY

I don't know Peter.

PETER

I think we'll be fine.

DELANEY

Okay.

There is silence for a moment before the door swings open, DR CARBONE entering in a fever. PETER and DELANEY watch him with unease. He grabs a paintbrush and palette from a station on stage right and then takes his place at the front of the room, facing the audience.

DR CARBONE

Several days ago, when I visited the studio early one morning, I encountered something quite- surprising. I found that some of your fellow students had the boldness to explore- in their skies, something that not even I had brought to light- the hues apart from gray and blue in our shifts from day and night.

PETER and DELANEY show relief as they sink into their seats. DR CARBONE begins to paint.

DR CARBONE

Sunrise and sunset have colors too, that rather than sadden our sky with blue, ignite our hearts with red hot passion, golden hue, oranges and pinks and yellows. Through bringing these shades to a once insipid canvas, your classmates have truly captured the beauty of the sky. These vibrant colors- so rare and ravishing, yet so soon to vanish. Well done.

With continued effort and intent, these paintings have the potential- to find higher purpose.

DR CARBONE turns towards the classroom.

DR CARBONE

Which brings me to my next point. A renowned modern art museum that I have been associated with for a number of years is holding an exhibition come the end of this semester. I will be presenting multiple pieces of my own, and along with it, I would like to select one piece from this class to be shown as well. Your name and your art will gain swift recognition alongside my own, so do not take this opportunity lightly- it could very well make your career as an artist. The rest of the period is yours to continue working on your pieces. I will be in my office.

PETER and DELANEY are staggered. DR CARBONE walks towards the door, but turns around just after passing PETER and DELANEY.

DR CARBONE

(discreetly)

I expect it should be one of you two, hm?

DR CARBONE reaches into his pocket and pulls out a key, dropping it to the ground at center.

DR CARBONE

Oops.

DR CARBONE exits. PETER picks up the key to the studio. DELANEY and PETER look at each other.

DELANEY

Oh my god.

The stage fades to a blackout. The strings play together once more.

SCENE TEN: THE STUDIO AND CARBONE'S MASTERPIECE

DR CARBONE takes centerstage, in his smock and glasses. A single spotlight highlights his form.

DR CARBONE

Now that the primer has been set for Peter and Delaney, I simply sit and survey. They've a month to make me a masterpiece- undoubtedly no simple feat. But when that grand incentive is present, there's a craving to create that becomes irresistible. I know that feeling- when the very air around you seems to sting with anticipation, sigh in admiration at each brushstroke. Ah, the rush, the fever. (beat) In fact, there was a single day when I truly became an artist- feeling this fervor for the first time. It was in perfecting a technique, invaluable to painters, not simple in the least, a form once manifest in Da Vinci's Mona Lisa. *Sfumato*. Let me show you what I mean.

DR CARBONE crosses stage right, to the station, and begins preparing his art supplies. As he does, the lights come up on the studio. PETER and DELANEY enter with an air of excitement, unaware of DR CARBONE, who inhabits his own scene entirely. The two narratives proceed without acknowledging each other. PETER and DELANEY make their way to their canvases, PETER holding up the key to the studio.

PETER

I genuinely can't believe it. We broke into the studio and Carbone rewarded us for it!

DELANEY

I know! It's insane Peter! And what he said to us at the end there- he really must've liked what he saw!

PETER

Yeah- I guess you're right. We better get to work then. Give him our best.

DELANEY

But Peter- you did hear him right? Carbone's only choosing one piece. Only one of us will be in the exhibition.

A slight tension.

PETER

Yeah-

PETER stands and walks to center. He extends his hand.

PETER

Well- then let the best artist win.

DELANEY meets him.

DELANEY

All right.

The two shake hands.

PETER

"The essence of all beautiful art, all great art, is gratitude."

PETER kisses DELANEY on the cheek and walks back to his canvas.

DELANEY smiles and walks back to her own.

PETER

That's Nietzsche.

DELANEY

(laughing softly)

I know Peter. Let's get to work.

DR CARBONE takes his place at center again, while PETER and DELANEY work behind him. He raises his paintbrush.

DR CARBONE

The first stroke of a brush is innocent, unassuming. A single slash of paint- can become anything. Hardly a notion of an artwork's intention. It's when we begin to add more- more marks- more colors-

DR CARBONE begins to make harsh slashing movements with his brush, his face wincing slightly. As he slashes, PETER and DELANEY's expressions begin to sour.

DR CARBONE

more commotion- more confusion- more chaos- that the painting starts to show its true direction.

DR CARBONE steps back to look at his painting, then walks back to the station stage right. PETER and DELANEY paint in silence.

DELANEY

I think you could at least tell me when you're coming in earlier. I don't have the key.

PETER

Sorry Delaney- I'll let you know next time.

PETER is focused on his canvas. DELANEY stares at him.

DELANEY

How much longer were you here anyway?

PETER

Couple hours.

DELANEY

Hours? So you've been here since like- what, three in the morning?

PETER

Yeah- I just wanted to work on it some more. You know- got the itch.

DELANEY

What happened to friendly competition? Seems a little unfair to me.

PETER

Mmm.

PETER continues to work. DELANEY clears her throat. He looks up from his canvas.

PETER

Sorry- sorry- you're right. Here, you have the key.

DELANEY

Okay.

PETER hands DELANEY the key and she pockets it. The two return to their work. DR CARBONE takes center once again. He continues to paint.

DR CARBONE

The single strokes now start to take shape. A form begins to fade into view, though first unsightly in its striking imperfections. Thin prickles of stray brush hairs. Jarring, pointed angles of paint. What may be good intentions are hidden behind that angry appearance.

DR CARBONE returns to his station stage right. DELANEY has crossed to watch PETER paint from behind. He is visibly annoyed.

DELANEY

I think you could do with some darker pink, maybe magenta, on the edge here- less of a contrast as it blends into the red.

PETER

Alright.

PETER continues to paint on the left right side of his canvas.

DELANEY

Are you gonna do it or not?

PETER

Maybe.

DELANEY

As the art student here- who knows her color theory- I really think you should take my advice.

PETER

Okay- fine. I will. You can go back to your own canvas now.

PETER angrily makes marks on the right side of his canvas.

DELANEY

Hey, don't get angry with me- I just have more experience. I'm trying to help you.

PETER

Yeah. Thanks.

DELANEY walks back to her canvas as PETER stares angrily at his. DR CARBONE takes center once again. He paints with more intensity.

DR CARBONE

The colors begin to clash against, our image coming clearer yet. The form is true but the hues are in strife. They bargain, they reason, attempt to blend- nothing is right. The tones themselves are too abrasive, too ambitious. Red cannot simply become blue. What change will make these stubborn colors subdue?

DR CARBONE takes several steps back to look at his painting thus far. He stands just before PETER and DELANEY, who are in argument, seated at their canvases.

PETER

Honestly- do you think Carbone did it on purpose? To pit us against each other?

DELANEY

I don't know? Maybe? But that's not supposed to matter- we're supposed to work it out. Figure it out- together.

PETER

I know- and we're trying Delaney. I just don't know if-

DELANEY

It's gonna be fine. Come here.

PETER and DELANEY meet and hug at centerstage, behind DR CARBONE. The key to the studio clatters to the ground from DELANEY's pocket. As the key sounds, DR CARBONE's face lights up.

DR CARBONE

Aha! To paint sfumato, the common means of blending color must be plainly ignored! To achieve such smoky, atmospheric effect, a touch of human error is required... Smudging.

DR CARBONE walks downstage swiftly and presses his thumb against the imagined canvas, dragging it across. PETER and DELANEY's hug is ripped apart as they return quickly to their canvases. An argument begins.

PETER

Why don't you go ask Carbone? You clearly care more about what he thinks.

DELANEY

Peter, would you stop that? You know this is important to me. To my career.

PETER

Yeah? Well it's important to me too! And at least I don't feel the need to grovel at his feet for approval! And that private conversation- the hell was that about?

DELANEY

I was discussing my plans for after college! Because- you know- I'm an art student!

PETER

Okay! Fine! You can stop shoving that in my face as if it's some important thing! I don't care!

DR CARBONE rushes over to his station and grabs a rag, returning again swiftly.

DR CARBONE

Pressing the colors across with a rag.

DR CARBONE presses the rag against the canvas. PETER and DELANEY erupt in anger again.

DELANEY

I get it. You're upset because you came out of nowhere and expected to just be perfect- cause you're some kind of intellectual right? A romantic? Bullshit! This took me years to learn! You're not just gonna catch up over a semester!

PETER

But I'm still pretty brilliant aren't I? When you were pressed to that grindstone you talk so much about- I was kicking my feet back. You can't stand that I've got talent and you don't.

DR CARBONE goes to his station once more and produces a second brush, then dashing back to his canvas again.

DR CARBONE

Brush against brush. Bristle against bristle.

DR CARBONE presses the brushes against the canvas. PETER and DELANEY argue again.

DELANEY

I deserve it.

PETER

What.

DELANEY

The place in the art exhibition. I deserve it. I've studied painting for years. I want a career in art. What is this even gonna do for you? You've already got a plan- coming in here with your memorized philosophy quotes-

PETER

God, you're entitled Delaney. You want another quote? "Character is determined more by the lack of certain experiences than by those one has had." Nietzsche.

DELANEY

What're you trying to say with that?

PETER

I'm saying that I'm better at this and I'm gonna win because I know how to feel the art- not just paint it.

DR CARBONE eases the brushes off of the canvas. PETER and DELANEY resume painting in silence.

DR CARBONE

That's enough for now. Almost finished.

DR CARBONE wipes his brow and walks far upstage to see his painting from a distance. As he does, DR CARBONE sets his eyes on PETER and DELANEY's canvases. He studies them.

DR CARBONE

Those kids have done an impressive job. Getting a little messy towards the end I suppose. Well, they've got until tomorrow.

DR CARBONE exits. The lights shift to the stark orange of sunset. There is a raw silence in the room. After a moment, PETER slowly gets up and walks to center, looking out the window.

PETER

The sunset is beautiful, isn't it?

DELANEY

It is.

PETER walks over to DELANEY at her canvas. He watches her paint.

PETER

It looks great, Delaney.

DELANEY

(smiling faintly)

Thanks.

Silence for a moment, as PETER continues to watch.

PETER

You know- you could do with another tree here.

DELANEY

(irritated)

Yeah?

PETER gets level with DELANEY's canvas and raises his brush to it.

PETER

Just right here on the horizon I think-

DELANEY

Peter, stop it. You're too close.

PETER

Just right here-

DELANEY

Hey!

Suddenly DELANEY grabs PETER's arm and a slash is driven across her painting. With it, a low cello note sounds. PETER's face pales as DELANEY flies into a rage.

PETER

Oh my God- I-

DELANEY

Peter!! You did that on purpose!!

PETER

No- Delaney I'm so sorry I swear I didn't mean to-

DELANEY takes her brush, stomps over to PETER's canvas, and drives a streak across it. A high violin note follows her movement.

PETER

Delaney what the hell?! It was an accident!

PETER looks over at his painting, and fury fills his expression. He makes another streak across DELANEY's painting, a thrum of a cello following. DELANEY paints another on his, a violin's shrill call. Then another. And another. The two begin to ravage each other's paintings, a frenzy of violin and cello strings sounding out in chaos. After several seconds, DR CARBONE enters again, in his suit, to see PETER and DELANEY destroying each other's paintings. He stands shocked for a moment before intervening.

DR CARBONE

NO! STOP! STOP! ENOUGH!

DR CARBONE violently steals the brushes from PETER and DELANEY's hands, then returning to center, between them. The frenzy of strings die as PETER and DELANEY halt. There is silence as the two desperately clamber past each other, back to their own

canvases, in front of DR CARBONE. PETER and DELANEY stare and sputter at their ruined paintings, ignoring all else.

DR CARBONE

What- have you two done? It was supposed to be both of you! Both pieces were going to be in the exhibit! Why did you do this!?

PETER and DELANEY are silent.

DR CARBONE

Answer me!

DR CARBONE looks back and forth between PETER and DELANEY in disgust. They look up at him in grief. DR CARBONE's eyes then land on the key to the studio, which lays on the floor before him. He picks up the key. In a moment of realization, DR CARBONE's expression shifts from disgust at his students to great shame within himself. He covers his mouth.

DR CARBONE

No- it was my fault- wasn't it? (beat) Oh- no- I'm so sorry- (beat) I-

DR CARBONE collects himself, clears his throat, then storms out of the classroom, the door slamming behind him. PETER and DELANEY continue to stare at the ruined canvases before them. A single low cello note thrums as the lights fade through the remaining colors of sunset to a blackout. Once again, it is night.

SCENE ELEVEN: THE MUSEUM

The museum begins in a blackout. It is early morning and the room is dark. The walls are now bare, devoid of any paintings. Sitting soberly on the stepladder stage left is DR CARBONE. After a moment, the door opens as PROF ALBINI enters, flicking on the lights. She turns around to find DR CARBONE.

PROF ALBINI

AAH! Doctor Carbone! How did you get in here!?

DR CARBONE

I have full access. You gave me the key.

PROF ALBINI

What are you doing here? Where are your-

DR CARBONE

I'm withdrawing my art from your museum, Professor.

PROF ALBINI

Now, Doctor-

DR CARBONE

Do you know why I feel hatred while I paint? (beat) Because I do not know *how* to feel love. (beat) I think you're the same. That's why we think great art can only be made from anger. I thought that way for a long, long time. Hatred makes beautiful art, yes. But so does its foil. I saw it in my students- something I didn't understand, but something I knew could make masterful art. I called it *romance*. But it was love. Young, naive, eager love. You would have me believe that hatred is more powerful. But it's not. Those are the two strongest forces of creation in the world. And *both* make masterpieces. But in tandem, Professor- destruction. (beat) I ruined those two students. I ruined their art and I ruined their love.

PROF ALBINI

(beat) They were simply not up to the task-

DR CARBONE stands, meeting PROF ALBINI fiercely at center. She recoils from him.

DR CARBONE

No! I ruined them! Because I do not know love! (beat) And neither do you, Professor. We are both defective. Brilliant, arrogant, defective artists who know the value of art, but not love. And when we saw something we didn't understand, we stamped it out with the only force we knew. We tried to make them just like us. We corrupted their love into hatred. And they tore each other apart- without merit- without greatness- without the masterpiece we had hoped for.

PROF ALBINI

There will be more students to come- those who can make art the right way-

DR CARBONE

You aren't listening, Professor! Peter and Delaney *made* a masterpiece! A masterpiece, that through our stagnant, stiff-necked pride, we could not understand! They made true art, but we are blind!

PROF ALBINI

Yes, you're right. We, the award-winning veteran art critics, are blind.

DR CARBONE

No- no- you old woman! You are blind! (beat) I know now. I know what makes a masterpiece. (beat) You go on not knowing.

DR CARBONE swiftly exits, leaving PROF ALBINI alone. She looks around at her empty museum walls as the lights fade.

SCENE TWELVE: DR CARBONE'S FINAL LESSON

Lights come up on the studio, in the dull orange of sunset. DR CARBONE takes centerstage, with smock, glasses, and now, his paintbrush and palette.

DR CARBONE

A final lesson. Sfumato.

DR CARBONE readies his brush. He begins to paint, gently.

DR CARBONE

Devised by Da Vinci, sfumato is a form where a tone is joined so closely with another, the border between, wanes and withdraws. Even colors so boldly distinct, seem to begin to cohere. Until, of course, they disappear. Evaporating, like smoke. Something remarkably new is born, though it's nothing alike those exquisite hues that came before. Coalescence of color in its finest form, shaped from an artist's reckless inflection. To paint sfumato-

DR CARBONE stalls for a moment, carefully resting his brush on his palette.

DR CARBONE

All it takes is a touch of human defection.

DR CARBONE begins to gently smudge the painting with his hand. Before the window, PETER enters from stage left and DELANEY from stage right. They walk towards each other, passing by on campus. PETER holds a stack of books and DELANEY, her art supplies. When a few feet from each other, they make eye contact and freeze. A painful moment passes before the two continue past each other, leaving in opposite directions.

DR CARBONE

Oh, my two truly exceptional students. Just as fast as the sun had risen on their love, I chased it back into darkness. (With a sore humor) The sky completes its journey. But in those scant three minutes, their dawn and dusk- it was beautiful. True art.

DR CARBONE steps back to look at his painting, soberly mixing colors on his palette.

DR CARBONE

I won't be teaching again for a considerable time. Not until I learn how to make art the right way- the way my students painted. (beat) We cannot stay stagnant forever.

DR CARBONE continues to paint for several moments. A red light descends on stage as the sun lowers further. DR CARBONE looks above the audience, at the sky. He smiles faintly.

DR CARBONE

The sunset really is beautiful, isn't it.

DR CARBONE looks to the sunset with guilt, but there is something lifted within him. A light that was previously missing. After a moment, DR CARBONE breaks his gaze and returns his painting supplies to the art station stage right. He then walks to the chain stage left. DR CARBONE addresses the audience.

DR CARBONE

Class dismissed.

DR CARBONE slowly pulls the chain, looking out at the sky. We hear the chain's rattle and the lights descend. Blackout.

END.