

SCENE THREE

Deadman [wryly]: My apologies for the intermission. I'd lost my place in the story so I had to check what was in the script. Plus, this bed is very uncomfortable. **[Complaining]** You've heard it squeak. And if I pull up the sheet too high, my feet stick out **[sighing]**.

But here I am, still here under the bedding, telling you this tale. It's a morality play, really, but you'll know about that by the end. We should get back to the story now.

[Taking a deep breath] As soon as the landlord had gone, I locked the door and sat down with the pile of gold. I started to imagine the kind of life this money would buy. I would be freed from all concern. I could devote myself to art. I would pay my rent, and have dinner. I would buy paints, a mannequin and reproductions to copy. Freed from commercial pressures and the need to sell my pictures, I would become a great painter. As I said all this to myself, another voice began to murmur. It said that, now I could have all those glorious things that I had been deprived of as a poor artist: the fine suits, the stylish apartment. The lure was too tempting. It overcame me. Without further deliberation I grabbed the gold roll and went out into the street. First, I went to the tailor. Then I secured a grand new apartment in the city. I paraded my new self to all. I dined at the finest French restaurant. I drank champagne. **[Pausing]** I had no qualms. Crossing a bridge later that evening I passed my old professor. He was astounded; he gasped at me. I dashed on by without so much as a greeting.

The following day I took up a fistful of coins and in my fabulous suit I visited a local journalist. He addressed me with due respect and without having seen a single work began to compose an article on my great undiscovered talent. It was printed the next morning. I was overwhelmed with joy. **[Boasting]** I had been compared to Van Dyck and Titian! I had been honoured and recognised. Sweeping my brush in a grand gesture over a canvas I thought: now the ladies and gentlemen will come to see my work.

Sure enough, **[excitedly]** the doorbell began to chime. The ladies arrived. They came with their daughters. They came with flattery and gold. I executed their portraits: the daughters and the ladies. I painted as they talked. I almost forgot their presence, but the ladies told me that their dresses must be like this; that their likenesses should be like that. **[Sighing]** As I complied with their wishes, and with all the dinners, the carriages and the concerts, I happily forgot my ordinary work. I gave them everything they wanted. But the sitters complained: "I am too wan, I am too yellow". And so I was forced to wipe off their faces and to paint them as they fancied.

I brought out old copies of classical beauties and retouched them to look like the ladies. The aristocrats were amazed and astounded to see themselves so idealised. When I announced that one particular painting was in fact of Psyche they were all the more convinced that it was superb. The work caused a sensation **[coughs and grunts embarrassedly]**. From hereon I was inundated with offers I could not refuse, even though their demands became increasingly ridiculous and thus impossible to fulfil. Nonetheless, I executed the portraits more quickly and with less consideration everytime, until I acquired the knack of making a painting in just one sitting, and was duly proclaimed a genius. I became an artist of fashion and accompanied the ladies to galleries. I dressed like a fop. Everything was arranged for the pleasure of my sitters. My opinions and ideas came into line with this company. I had the view that the art of the masters like Raphael and Michaelangelo was overrated; that none of them had ever painted well. I announced that: "Genius works boldly, rapidly". But over time this rapidity, this repetition, and the upkeep of my appearance and public profile exhausted me. I could no longer create a new pose for each painting and I became estranged from my work. **[Scathing]** It grew dull, indifferent and monotonous. But I enjoyed the same accolades, if not increasingly so, for my lifeless, unimaginative forms. Only a few old friends remarked how I had diminished my talent. I was deaf to all criticism. Intoxicated by success.

Over the coming years, I was honoured and dignified **[pausing to take a deep breath of pride]**. I held positions of power, from which I fiercely guarded my superiority, violently decimating any emerging talent. Gold became my passion. Its jingle was all that could ignite the fire of my heart, which had once been fanned into flame by beauty. There were others from my time, who had pursued their talent without diversion or corruption. The work of one such painter, once a fellow student of mine, was presented to the Academy one day and I was invited to comment. As I arrived, a crowd were gathered. I prepared the usual criticisms. But as the group parted I was confronted by pure, modest and inexplicable beauty. The painting depicted a trio of women whose features conveyed no vanity or anxiety. I was fixed to the floor. The fellow critics awaited my verdict. I could not however utter a word; all that I would have said was vulgar and inane. I had no description for such a thing. Instead, a sob burst out from my throat and I ran from the Academy a broken man.

I stood in my studio before one of my vacuous portraits. I saw my whole life turn back to that moment when the gold rolls had come to me. I remembered the sparks of my talent. I took up a brush to paint. I imagined a fallen angel. I struggled and strained for the image to emerge. But all my skills, all of my ability had become a mannerism. It ended in foul inaccuracy and feeble brushmarks. I locked myself in the studio. I spurned all visitors, all food. I took out the fashionable and dull portraits I had made and started to rework them. But ignorance and stereotype prevailed. I cried in despair. Then I saw the painting that I had bought from the secondhand store. I looked at the object which had caused my life to change so dramatically, that creature which had tempted me away from my talent. I was wild with rage. I was tormented and I trembled with fury. **[The Deadman groans like a ghoul]**.

Anger subsumed me. Every time I saw a work of any skill or genius, I was possessed by a horrible envy. I formed a plan of vengeance: I bought all the finest works at the highest price and set upon destroying them. I tore them into tiny shreds and scraps with a snigger of contorted glee.

My fits of frenzy abated but ended in a dreadful illness: I saw the eyes of the portrait everywhere, and anyone who came to see me was transformed into the picture of the old woman, in an endless unbearable prism of portraits. They were in the ceiling, on the floor, and in the windows. The room expanded to fit in even more of them. I was so crowded by these hallucinations that I seized up in a final paralysis of agony.

Now I lie here. The two coins you see are all that is left of my riches. How dreadful I am to behold. **[The bedsprings groan as the Deadman turns over to sleep]**.

But you can bugger off now, and leave me in peace. But let this be a warning to you. Oh, and don't steal my money.

THE END

Voiceover artist Greg Ulfan
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Deadman Monologue
Lily Hibberd
Canberra Contemporary Art Space
28 August – 3 October 2009

The Deadman Monologue

The setting is comprised of a single bed in an empty room. Two loudspeakers are laid side by side on the bed, covered by a white sheet. The bedhead is against a black wall with a large white frame is hanging above it. The frame is empty. A 30-minute monologue emits from the speakers, playing in a loop.

SCENE ONE

Deadman: Oh shit – where am I? Ah, here it is. Yes, my lovely, soft bed. Yes, yes. I’m very tired. I think I could go to sleep right now.

[We can hear the covers coming off. The bed creaks. The deadman starts grumbling, then tossing and turning. Suddenly he realises that there is an audience waiting for him to talk].

Deadman: What do you want? Oh, I see. I nearly forgot. You’ve come to hear my story? Let me warn you, there’s a price. But you can pay at the end… You see? I’m not a greedy man.

[He pauses, waiting for affirmation. The bedsprings groan].

Deadman: Yes, yes… We’re at the start. This is Scene One. The old picture shop was one of those variety stores, bordering on an opportunity shop. All kinds of paintings were stacked up fifteen deep. There would have been hundreds of works, all told. But in my books, it was a pile of rubbish. And I… I was the great young artist of my time. I therefore stopped by the window to scoff, as was my habit, at the grotesque gallery of *[cynically]* gaudy, dirty pictures: works of trade, crudely fashioned into art. As I scorned the wretched wares, inwardly laughing at my diatribes, the shopkeeper corralled me and before I knew it I’d been ushered into his squalid premises. *[Clears throat as if slightly embarrassed at his confession].*

“What art!” The dealer said, “It makes your eyes pop out!” I fobbed him off: in a far corner of the shop a portrait had caught my attention. This was a most unexpected occurrence, as I didn’t usually like paintings of people. They disturbed me. *[He drifts off in thought, but jolts back to attention as someone speaks and apologises].*

The truth be told, I have always preferred pictures of animals, however boorish, over and above those of humans (such lowly creatures!) and this painting was no exception. Worse still, it was of an old woman whose face seemed to be frozen in a moment of contortion *[disgustedly]*, or some kind of convulsion. Her origins were obscure but they were certainly foreign, for she had a look in her eyes of a kind that you never see in our parts. They told of torrid times, and yet the great triumphs and torments she had bestowed on others. Such intensity! I was so taken aback that her malevolence was still visible through decades of dust and damage that I took out my linen handkerchief and wiped the grime from her face. This revealed an extraordinary work of no uncertain mastery.

[Gushing] Even though it was unfinished, the skills of a great artist’s hand were undeniable. A wondrous plume of peacock feathers reigned over the woman’s towering crown of variegated black and silver hair, as a great gust of wind swept up her shawl, which should be noted was the colour of violets at midnight, in a grand voluminous gesture around her body, from her shoulders right around her breasts in the foreground and up to her left arm before trailing off into the sordid background. But the eyes, yes, the eyes were still the most entrancing feature. The artist had concentrated all of his powers and attention on the two beady objects so that they stared straight out of the portrait. At this point, the shopkeeper intercepted my study by taking the painting out onto the street into the light, whereupon the eyes glared at the world with an even greater, almost alarming force. As I stepped out the door, a woman cried out from a small passing crowd: “She looks at you, she looks!” and then recoiled in terror, before disappearing into the throng. The old shopkeeper was visibly shaken and quickly snatched up the work by its broken frame and threw it back inside, pulling me in with him before bolting the door behind us to seal the shop.

[A bedspring twangs in the bed as the Deadman shifts around a little].

“Well”, the dealer said, prodding me, “you’d better purchase this portrait don’t you think?” I stammered, with a terrible premonition, just as the thunder and dark clouds forebode a terrible journey for the queasy sea traveller. But the woman’s eyes were beckoning me. They spoke to me in a hoarse broken voice: “Young artist! Hear me. What are you now? You’re just a man of small talent and no means. Make no mistake; I have the power to bring you great fortune and fame.” The dealer became impatient. “I won’t argue with you. I’ll settle for a few dollars. I’ll wrap it up for you right now.” I resisted, standing there silently. But as the eyes were covered over I thought of the bargain. Then, quite unexpectedly, I reached into my pocket and found exactly two dollars in my hand. The old man cried: “Ah well. You’re the first customer of the day! Two dollars. What a steal!” And before I could reply, he’d scraped the coins from my palm, wedged the picture under my arm and pushed me out the front door, which violently clanged the store bell as he swung it shut, and he vanished like a ferret in a hole. *[the deadman sighs, feeling a bit sorry for himself]* The street was dead and I was alone in the world. I clutched the painting and made my way home as the streetlights flickered on for another night’s lonely illuminations. *[Coughing].*

Now please, can you excuse me? I am tired and hoarse. I am just getting a little something to drink. *[There’s a swigging and gulping sound].*

SCENE TWO

Deadman [to the audience]: Okay. It’s not a bad story so far, hmmm? Well, my friends from here it takes a few surprising turns. *[Laughs to himself].*

Where was I? Oh this is Scene Two. Right… so I’d bought the painting and I was making my way home to my apartment, but the portrait kept slipping out of its brown paper as if it were trying to escape. *[Pissed off]* Worse still, I had realised that those coins were my last two dollars. My accommodation was a dive, as one might expect of a young artist in such bleak times. I struggled up the stairs. They’d been mopped but were muddier than ever and patterned with animal prints of all kinds. The hallway was pitch black and it dawned on me that my affairs were in a mess. My rent was in a month’s arrears, and now I had no coins left to feed the electricity meter. I fought with the lock. “Damn it! What a disaster!” I cried. The key suddenly turned but I was still in the dark.

“Who’s there?” said a wobbly voice in the corner. “Oh Mrs May, you’re right here. Please, turn on a light.” “Oh but master, we have no coins.” “Right then. Is there a candle?” “Yes master. But only one.” “Quickly Mrs May, I swear it’s worth more than the memory of your dead husband. Light the candle!”

The poor feeble woman had been holding the candle all this time, waiting for my command and before I’d finished speaking the match was struck and the candle slowly took to the wick. Mrs May stayed where she was and I put the painting on an easel. It was a bedsit, so my studio and sleeping quarters were shared.

“Why are you here Mrs May?” I enquired. “Ah well Mister. Those big men, they’ve been here for the rent again. I was scared they were waiting outside, so I locked the door and waited for you.” “How good you are Mrs May. You know I cannot pay them?” “But what will happen master?” “Let them come!”

My pride and arrogance swelled as I thought of my great skills and artistic vision. Surely such worldly concerns were beneath a man of my genius. I remembered how one of my professors had said to me: “You have talent. It would be a crime to waste it. But you have no patience and too much pride. Be careful not to become a popular artist. Even now, your ideas are too easy and the images fashionable. I can see that some of the pictures are meant to impress your audience in an imitation of

fancy effects such as we see in those snobby galleries in town: all those gaudy flecks of bright colour, beautiful renditions of women and flowers. And look at your attire, the dandy scarf and tilted hat. Yes, of course it is very tempting to paint portraits for rich people, to make those lovely little pictures that match the ladies’ cushions. But remember that your talent will sell with it. Devote yourself to your work. Leave behind the riches. Your time will come.”

These thoughts occupied me as I prepared to retire. Mrs May said she would prefer to stay now that it was so late. I nodded and continued in my reveries as I laid down on the rotten old bed. I thought how I had suffered in my poverty like a great martyr should. But my teacher was right; the fineries attracted me whenever I put down my brush. Moreover, I had no prospects at all. Not even for my dinner. I thought: Why should I sacrifice everything when others are making their fortune with no effort? A cold sharp pain ran through my limbs as my envy turned inward. But then I remembered the portrait. Why had it seduced me so? I’d forgotten its promise.

There she was, staring at me, such an ugly tyrant. Her eyes terrified me. Her lips were slightly parted, as if she were savouring my flesh. I looked at Mrs May. She had dropped off to sleep on a chair. Just then the clouds parted which made way for the light of the full moon to enter the room and cast its beams onto the haunted picture, and suddenly that horrid woman’s face animated in a menacing expression of disgust. I yelped like a terrier. My housekeeper fell off her chair.

“Look, look!” I shouted. “It’s possessed!” Mrs May was addled, still on the floor. The moon retreated. “Can you see it Mrs May?” But the poor housekeeper was still half asleep and the candlelight flickered too much in the draught. Realising I could be delusional, I attempted to divert her attention. “Oh Mr May, I do apologise. Take no notice of me. I had a bad dream.”

She nodded and settled back into the sagging chair. I was left to my self-interrogation: What was happening to me? What was this feeling? Could a painting, a mere imitation, really do such a thing? Or is this depiction able to pierce the human soul? I approached the picture, slowly and silently, hoping to gaze into those spooky eyes and dispel my fears. But to my horror, they leered out at me more viciously than ever. I couldn’t look at the woman any longer. The thing was possessed. I threw my bedsheet over it and I mocked her: “Ha! Ha! This is your demise.” *[The bed makes a chorus of resounding springs as the deadman bounces animatedly on the mattress].*

This accomplished, I returned to my single bed.

[The deadman stops and addresses the audience]. Are you getting bored with this story? It is rather long. Please, just stay with me here a little longer. I cannot bear being alone … You see, as I laid back down the moon sought out the woman even more keenly because she was hidden, sending its electric rays right through the white sheet so that the eyes burned two holes to glare once more out across the room directly into mine. I gaped and gasped. *[Dramatically]* I crawled across the filthy floor unable to breathe and hid behind a screen. I heard footsteps but was too afraid to look up. But then a rustling noise swept past and I raised my head. The frame was empty!

A shadow stood over me. It was covered by a great cloak. I went to scream but only a squeak emerged. The dark figure did not notice me. Instead she shook her robe to release something. A dull thud sounded, and then another. Then a third, fourth and fifth: thud, thud, thud. The five objects rolled across the floor, each wrapped in blue paper and inscribed with the words, one thousand dollars. The woman sat down and unwrapped one of the rolls with her dreadful hands and a cascade of gold coins was released. Whatever fears I had felt a few seconds ago vanished as the gold glistened before me. I saw that one of the rolls had come within my reach. I grasped at it while the cloaked figure swept up the coins she’d unwrapped. I hid the roll under my chest. The woman finished and went to leave. Only she stopped, seeming to realise that

there was something missing. She came over towards me. My chest throbbed. I held onto the coins. The phantom opened her cloak and I screamed… “Ahhhh!”

[The Deadman draws a deep breath, and then releases a sigh]. I am sure, my friends, that you think this is too fantastic and you are right. As in all thrillers the trick was revealed to be the fancy of a young man’s fertile imagination, a mere dream. I was drenched in sweat, nonetheless. My heart pumped so hard I couldn’t breathe. The whole room was aglow with the moon’s white light. I realised that I was lying on the floor, exactly as I had been in the dream. But I had no idea how I could have landed there. I stood up and saw that the portrait had been uncovered. Those eyes were as terrifying as ever. I wanted to flee. I quizzed myself: “Was it a dream?” I drew in closer to the painting. But as I did, the woman’s mouth opened. I jumped back, aghast – and this time I woke up.

So let me pause here and ask you listener: What would you do? How could I know which was the dream, and if I was ever going to be released from this evil spirit, or freed from this nightmare? I clambered out of bed to examine the painting. It was covered as it had been before I’d first drifted off to sleep. I was reassured. *[Sighing]* All fell quiet. A fresh breeze came through the apartment and I was finally able to fall into a deep slumber. Believe me, as you will, but I awoke the next day with a roaring headache, as if I had been blind drunk the evening before. The air was rank. I sat sulking on the daybed and the night’s events came tumbling back into my mind. It all seemed so horrifically real. I removed the sheet and inspected the portrait. There she was, smug as ever, still potent but not a demonic force.

I thought, “Ah, but what a pity that I couldn’t have the money!” And I despaired once more of my lot… *[The Deadman grunts]*

A knock suddenly sounded but Mrs May had departed so I opened the door myself and saw a policeman and my landlord. They walked straight in and stood in the middle of the studio (this was not exceptional behaviour; the landlord often came in unannounced).

“Where’s my rent?” demanded the landlord. The policeman chimed in: Yes, you must pay him what you owe.” Looking around, “Perhaps you could reimburse him with one of these paintings?” The landlord was highly offended at this. “Are you mad? These are worthless! He paints his own housekeeper. It’s depressing. And see the mess in here? No, there is no worse tenant than an artist. This man is a pig!”

I listened to all of this without protesting. I was exhausted.

“Aha!” said the bluecoat. “What’s this?” He seized the haunted painting. But as he was holding it up with his oafish hand the frame cracked and I heard an unmistakable “thud”. I knew exactly what the sound was, and before either of the two buffoons could see what had landed, I’d scooped up the blue paper roll. “What was that sound?” exclaimed the landlord. “I swear that was the sound of money.” I slid the roll under the bed. *[Arrogantly]* “What business is that of yours? Anyway, why are you here? I tell you, I shall pay you today.” The landlord looked sceptical, while the policeman seemed to be instantly satisfied: “So, my friend, he says he will pay you. But if he does not, then we shall all be very sorry, won’t we?” And with this the policeman yanked his pompous hat down over his ears and walked out the door. The landlord lingered a bit, but then followed. As soon as their footsteps had gone quiet, I pulled out the blue roll. And I couldn’t believe it: there it was, just as it had been in the dream, with the same inscription: *1,000 dollars. [The bedclothes rustle and the Deadman grumbles].*

Uhhhh, we’ll have to end this scene here. I am so terribly sorry. *[There’s silence. Then the sound of paper and scribbling]*