



Dora Maar - Double Portrait (1930)

# Dead Mall

By Rick Claypool

A college student arrives for a job interview at a mall.

He hadn't known the address was the address of a mall until he arrived. The 40-minute drive in his little dented car took him onto the highway and then off and then back on and then off again and then down a side road and then up and over a hill. Then he saw the vast empty parking lot and the crumbling columns of the facade and he immediately understood this dead mall was his destination.

He drives the car diagonally through the lot, crossing the faded lines of empty parking spaces, toward the entrance to an anchor store, where he parks. The asphalt is cracked and ruptured like the surface of an uninhabitable planet. Weeds that are almost as tall as he is sprout in clusters from the cracks.

The anchor store looks like an enormous pink brick. The name of the store is missing from the side of the building. A pale rectangle the size of a billboard marks where the sign once was. Overgrown shrubs frame the plywood-covered double doors.

He winds down his window. The only sound is a sound like the distant buzzing of flies. He can't tell where it's coming from.

The ad on the web site said job seekers looking for a "public relations" job should come to this address at this time.

No one else is here.

The student looks at his phone. He's three minutes early. He looks at his face on the sun visor mirror. He thinks his face looks dumb. He sees a spot on his jaw he missed shaving. He adjusts his tie. The tie is green with white stripes. It is the only tie he owns.

He steps out of the car. He's wearing the gray suit his mom gave him for graduation. She helped him pick it out at an anchor store just like the one at this dead mall except not dead.

When he steps up to them the plywood-covered double doors open by themselves. A stench like something dead wafts out. He steps in.

It is dark inside. He turns back toward his dented gray car.

He tells himself he can just leave.

Telling himself he can leave is how he convinces himself walking into the dead mall to look for a public relations job is his choice.

He is not really convinced he has a choice.

He walks into the dead mall to look for a public relations job.

He takes another step and the floor squishes under his new dress shoes. It's carpet. It's wet.

It takes his eyes a minute to adjust to the dimness. The sole source of light is a hole in the far corner of the ceiling where part of the building must have collapsed. Empty clothes racks arranged too close together for him to walk around them form a path he has no choice but to follow if he wants to go on. A few paces in he finds a piece of paper taped to a clothes hanger dangling from a clothes rack. The word “public relations” is scrawled in black marker on the piece of paper. The handwriting looks like it belongs to someone very young or very old.

He takes the piece of paper. He thinks it should have an arrow or something drawn on it to tell him where he should go. He follows the path through the clothes racks deeper and deeper into the store. Soon the cavernous mall corridor appears in front of him. The place where the anchor store ends and the actual mall begins is marked by naked headless mannequins piled up like catastrophe victims.

The floor in the corridor is not carpeted. It is tile. Now instead of squishing the tapping of his footsteps echoes in the dark. He stretches his arms in front of him to feel for a wall or a railing or something to grab hold of. When he comes to an empty fountain he almost falls into it. He gasps, startled, and listens.

Something up ahead is moaning in the dark.

He turns back toward the anchor store. It is only about a hundred feet away but the light behind him seems to have changed somehow. Dimmer. Hazier. Fuzzier. He wonders for a moment whether he sees more mannequins in the pile than there were before. He tells himself of course he doesn't.

Feeling his way around the empty fountain, his fingertips slide against the grainy concrete. His hand knocks a pebble or something into the basin. The moaning grows louder.

He reminds himself he doesn't have to be here.

Then he reminds himself he actually is here though.

If he turns around he will have wasted this entire afternoon for nothing. If he turns around he will have to go back to his dorm room and start over.

Who can say if the path toward the next entry level public relations job interview he finds won't be worse than this?

He walks deeper into the dark.

Between his echoing footsteps he hears a rhythmic tapping or ticking or dripping sound coming from the direction of the moaning.

He stops and listens. Then walks deeper into the dark.

Ahead the corridor is lit by the glow of a red neon light. The light flickers.

And he discovers the moaning isn't moaning at all. It's the sound of a slow, warbly synthesizer coming out of a small, broken speaker. It sounds like a recording on a cassette that has been played more times than it is possible for a cassette to be played. As if this synthesizer sound has been playing on repeat since long before the invention of cassettes, long before the invention of synthesizers.

He's relieved the sound is not really the sound of moaning.

Approaching the red light he looks down and notices movement on the ground by his feet. He thinks the floor is crawling with small swarming things until he steps farther into the light and realizes it is just the pattern on the tile floor that looks like thousands of creeping many-legged things.

The source of the red light is around the corner. Directly ahead, a balcony surrounds a black pit. On the far end of the pit is a stairway leading down. The red neon light is too dim to illuminate the floor below.

He rests his hands on the balcony and looks down.

He thinks there might be something moving down in the pit but he's not sure.

He knows what is down there is just the first story of the mall corridor. He knows down there should be basically the same as up here. But still. He is thankful the stairway is on the opposite side of the pit. He is thankful that if anything comes crawling up the steps to the second story, he will have a head start if he must run.

He walks around the corner and sees the source of the red neon light: a sign above the entrance to a store. The sign reads, "PUBLIC RELATIONS."

Of course, he thinks.

Oh no, he thinks.

So what? he thinks.

There is more light inside the store than inside the mall corridor but not by much. Strings of multicolored lights twinkle and from somewhere farther back a blue light pulses, framing the silhouettes of clothes racks and shelves and with unidentifiable merchandise. The hiss of audio static threatens to overtake the cassette's warbles.

Inside PUBLIC RELATIONS the walls and aisles move like they are breathing. The student watches this movement. It worries him until he realizes there are t-shirts and sheets of tie-dyed multicolored fabric hanging along every vertical surface. The walls and aisles aren't moving, he tells himself. There just must be an oscillating fan in there somewhere that's making them move.

From the shadows a voice like a creaking floorboard scolds, "Finally decided to show up, did you?"

The student steps forward into the pulsing light. Standing alone and still deep inside is the shape of a man. The shape drifts backward as the student approaches. The student can't make out the man's features. In the dark the face resembles a pile of sticks or a bird's nest. He senses the face is scowling.

"Get behind the counter," the voice says. The student is not completely sure the figure he sees is the source of the voice. "Serve the public."

Behind the counter is an array of pint glasses under a line of draft taps and levers. There is a small sink and there are bottles of wine and spirits and mixers alongside a cocktail shaker and rows of glasses. There is a towel and a fishbowl containing torn tickets.

The only light behind the counter is a black light. The black light only illuminates the student.

Then a glowing hand reaches out from the shadows and points to a draft lever. The student fills a glass with beer and gives it to the hand. It withdraws, and more grasping fingers emerge from the shadows.

For what seems like hours, the student serves them.

The faces in the crowd he serves blur and shift as if he sees them through a warped, foggy lens. He never gets a good look. There are shouts and laughter that rise up from the murmuring crowd assembled in PUBLIC RELATIONS, but the student doesn't understand what they say. Even the reaching hands seem to fade and smear into misty insubstantiality.

“Stop,” the creaky voice says. The others are silent. The music has stopped. “That’s enough. Thank you for coming. We’ll be in touch if we want you to come back.”

The college student steps out of PUBLIC RELATIONS and leaves the dead mall the way he came in.

Outside, it is night. It is cold.

His car is gone.

He walks.

The parking lot stretches to the horizon.

He looks back toward the mall.

He takes a step toward the horizon.