

The Pale: Diary of the Dead

By J. McDonald

© J. McDonald 2020

Chapter 1

I awoke to a dense fog. I could make out some graffiti on the brick wall across from me, lit by a dim sconce above a thick metal door, but everything was dull and misty. I slowly stood and turned to get my bearings. My eyes were having trouble adjusting and when I looked down, I was shocked to find a blurry blood-soaked copy of myself slumped against the wall, a knife buried deep in my stomach. With a shaking hand, I reached out to touch the shoulder of my motionless body, but my fingers passed right through it. The only sensation I felt was a slight, cool dampness — like when you let your hand drift outside a car window on an early spring morning. Unnerved, I ran my fingers through my hair and was relieved to discover that at least I — the me that wasn't passed out — was solid.

As a sense of panic at the precariousness of my situation began to set in, I looked around for other people but the alley was dark and the fog was making it next to impossible to see. A realization slowly began to dawn on me — this was obviously a hallucination of some sort. I'd been in a pretty rough spot before I passed out, but the fact that I was capable of wondering what was happening meant that my neurons were still firing. I might be unconscious — but I *must* be alive.

I tried to calm down a bit and focus. *Ok*, I thought, *so if I'm unconscious but bleeding out in a dark alleyway, then what can I do about it?* Calling for help wouldn't do me any good. This was a hallucination, and stopping the bleeding here wasn't going to fix my problem in reality. No, what I needed was to wake up. If I woke up, then I would be back in the real world and I could try to figure out a plan from there. My mind began to race through a list of things that typically wake you from a dream: the phone, inconsiderate neighbours, irritating alarms. For me, it was usually that something terrifying was happening and I scared myself awake. But how was I going to scare myself in a place where there didn't seem to be anything except fog?

I moved out of the alley; the mist seemed to have engulfed the entire city. I hurried through the streets looking for some way to wake up. The air around me was filled with the repulsive scent of urine and filth that permeates the worst parts of any city. Shrouded in the darkness and vapours were people with nowhere else to go — huddled up in doorways as litter blew about them in the slight breeze that had picked up. A sudden inexplicable aversion made me wary of reaching out to them for help.

I decided to venture out further to see if I could find a break in the haze, but the fog didn't let up. After several frantic minutes of searching, the dull glow of neon lights in the distance drew me towards potential signs of life. A rowdy group stumbled out of a bar — four against one might be a good way to get the adrenaline pumping to wake me up. I moved towards where they were gathered and said some choice words to get their attention but they didn't seem to hear me. It was weird — even though I was closer to them, they still looked cloudy and indistinct — but I didn't have time to think about that. They were singing loudly, totally blitzed out. *Maybe I just wasn't loud enough.* I got closer and reached out to tug on one guy's disgusting ponytail but my hand passed right through it — as if he was made of air. Each time I tried to touch any of the drunks, my hands slipped through them with that same damp sensation that I'd felt when I'd tried to touch "my" shoulder.

This wasn't going to work. I had to come up with another plan ... but what? Since this dream world seemed to be loosely based on the real one, I began running down the street in search of a landmark I would recognize. Maybe if I could figure out where I had wandered to, I could come up with some other way to wake myself. While I ran, I was struck by the fact that my steps lacked the wet slapping sound they should have been making on the pavement. It was so quiet, too quiet. There wasn't even any sound coming out of me. By now I should have been panting like crazy — but instead my breath came easily, regularly. This weirded me out so I slowed to a more natural pace.

The streetlamps around me seemed barely able to penetrate the dense mist, but after a few blocks I saw an old café I'd been to a few times. If I continued along this street a bit longer, I would eventually come to Banting Memorial Hospital. I hated hospitals. If the goal was scaring myself, then

maybe there would be something useful there. It took me another five minutes to make my way to the emergency room entrance. It already felt like I'd been in this dream world too long so I began to pick up the pace again. I didn't know how much time I had before the blood loss would be too much.

When I passed through the open doors I was hit by the sterile, antiseptic smell of hand sanitizer and chemical cleaners. Strangely, the thick fog continued inside the hospital despite the harsh fluorescent lighting. The ER was fairly quiet. I decided to start by seeing if I could get anyone to notice me. I walked up to the admissions desk to grab the nurse's attention. Like the people outside the bar, he looked as foggy and distorted as everything else. As the nurse continued to flip through charts, seemingly oblivious to my presence, I leaned forward over the counter and — in the process — stumbled right through it. Standing there, in the centre of a piece of furniture, I had to wonder what the rules of this surreal dream-world were.

So far, I seem to be the only solid object, no one can see or hear me, and everything is shrouded in an all-consuming haze. If I can move through things that are normally solid, I wonder what else I can do. But there wasn't enough time for more than that. I needed to stay focused on waking up. I looked around and saw a sign for the stairwell. Maybe if I could get to the roof and jump — dreams about falling always woke me with a jolt.

I hurried down the first hallway on my left, following the signs for the stairs. I raced to the end of the hall but hesitated slightly when I reached the door. Slowly, I stretched out my hand to see if it could pass through the metal. The cool, gentle mist let my fingers slide easily into the handle and out the other side. Trying not to think about how weird this was, I quickly pushed the rest of my body through and took the first flight of stairs in several large strides. The building was seven stories high, but I never got tired or out of breath as I rushed upward. When I reached the top, I burst through the door and onto the roof.

Never being a fan of heights, it took a minute for the vertigo to pass before I could move closer to the edge. The air seemed a bit clearer up here but the light pollution washed out the sky with the dull orange glow of the reflected streetlights. It was eerily quiet. There was the faint hum of some traffic below, but my feet made no sound as I walked across the gravel towards a low brick ledge at the corner of the roof. Cautiously, I looked down and immediately regretted it. My stomach began doing backflips and my vision grew dark. I stumbled backwards and tried to clear my head.

“This is insane. What the hell am I thinking?” I asked no one in particular. My voice was shaky and my breath started to catch in my chest. “Even if this is a dream world, how am I going to get the nerve to jump? What if it doesn't work and, instead of waking myself, I end up brain dead?”

I didn't have time to waste being afraid. The panic began to spread through my body and my chest got tight.

STOP IT!

Suddenly I was six years old, standing in my parents' kitchen.

“STOP IT!” my mother whisper-screamed at me — her hand leaving a stinging burn as she slapped me across the cheek. “Cut that out right now or you'll wake your father.”

That's right, there are worse things than heights. I took a deep breath and stepped towards the edge. Without looking down, I tried to place my foot on the low wall. It seemed to be solid. After another deep breath, I put my weight on my foot and brought myself all the way onto the ledge, staring straight ahead the whole time. The door had been vapour but the ground was firm. *If I'm wrong, if this fall can't scare me awake, then I don't know what will happen to me — both here and in the real world. But what other options are there? How long has it been already? How much longer do I have?*

With one final breath, I closed my eyes and tilted my weight forward. Instant remorse. My eyes snapped open and my arms flailed wildly, reaching for anything that might save me. I was too terrified to scream and this seemed to be doing nothing to wake me up. At least the thick fog made it hard to see the ground that was racing towards me. I closed my eyes again and decided to just wait for it to be over. It wouldn't be long now. I felt pressure underneath me as I fell.

Am I falling in slow motion? This feels like it's taking forever. I couldn't help a quick glimpse to see how much further I had to go. To my surprise, I was already lying face down on the sidewalk, a discarded piece of gum right in front of my nose. *Damn it! I survived it but I'm still not awake. What the hell do I have to do? Jump again? Jump from higher up?* This was bullshit. I rolled over and looked back up towards the roof. The darkness and fog only allowed me to see about a storey up. What was I going to do? If this wasn't enough to wake me, then what?

Defeated, I decided to make my way back to the alley. If nothing else, I would be near my body for whatever was going to happen next. The sun had begun to rise, but like the lights in the hospital, it did nothing to dispel the mist that saturated everything. A similar veil had begun to descend upon my hopes. As I shuffled along the sidewalk, pondering what my next move would be, I mindlessly kicked at a can laying in my path. My foot passed through the vapour and I was reminded of how powerless I seemed to be in this world. The one bonus so far was that I hadn't grown tired or hungry. At least I didn't need to worry about my more basic needs. That would let me focus on finding a way out.

Loneliness from this sudden isolation began to set in — but I'd been alone before. If there was one thing my parents had done, it was ensure that I never relied on anyone for anything. I'd learned very quickly that the only person you can count on is you. I supposed that was part of how I'd ended up in this mess to begin with. When you only look out for yourself, there's never anyone to watch your back.

By the time I got back to the alley the sun had risen enough that some of the bums had begun to stir. Their misty forms moved slowly as they started to gather up their few belongings to face another day. One man mumbled, wondering where he had left his watch, worried that he was late for an appointment. Another grinned, a huge cat-like smile spread across his face as if he was up to no good.

Since no one could see me, I wasn't too worried about going back down the alleyway by myself. *Is my body still there, or will it have vanished while I was gone?* I had to walk all the way to the end before I could be sure. I knelt down and tried once again to touch it — *if only I could shake myself awake.* Like the can, I was met with no resistance and my hand passed through the dimly-lit air that resembled me.

"I'm sorry for your loss."

I nearly jumped out of my skin at those words. I turned around quickly and a small girl, probably about twelve years old, was looking down on me with a face full of compassion. Not only did she seem to see me, but she was also the first thing I'd seen that didn't look all misty. I must have looked confused because she repeated herself.

"I'm sorry for your loss."

"You can see me?" I asked, still in shock, not really taking in what she was saying.

"Yes. I followed you here from the hospital. You looked lost and now I see why."

"What do you mean? What are you talking about? Why do you look normal?"

Her eyes were soft and her thin lips formed a patient smile. She knelt down beside me and gently placed her hand on my shoulder. I could feel its warmth through my sweater.

"My name is Ava. Why don't we find somewhere a little nicer to talk?"

Her eyes darted to the blood-soaked areas of my shadow self. She was calm, but I could tell that she didn't want to be here.

"Why don't we just move to the bench across the street?" she suggested, gesturing behind her.

I stood up and followed her as she led the way out of the alley. Ava had taken my hand like I was a child who needed help crossing the street. I didn't resist: it was the first thing I had really felt in hours. The gentle firmness of her grasp was comforting and felt like a life raft in this sea of anesthetic fog. She was small with dark brown hair braided into pigtails that went to her shoulders. She wore a denim jacket with flowers on it and acid-washed jeans. Her sneakers were fire engine red and her striped t-shirt looked like a rainbow. The bright colours of her clothing contrasted nicely with the darkness of her skin. She moved towards a wooden bench in front of a boarded-up old deli. It faced the alley and I could just make out the entrance where the sun had begun to illuminate it.

Ava sat down and patted the spot next to her, indicating that I should do the same. I didn't — partially because I didn't want to, and partially because I didn't know how. Everything else I had encountered was as solid as a cloud. I didn't feel like falling on my ass and looking like an idiot.

"What's going on here? What is this place?" I snapped. My rudeness didn't seem to faze her.

In the same calm and gentle tone she'd used before, she said, "This is the Pale."

"And what the hell is that?"

She paused for a moment and tried to take my hand again. I jerked it away and stared her down. I was done being patient.

The kindness didn't leave her face — if anything, it deepened. She returned my stare with a gaze full of pity. Then she spoke very quietly, as you might when trying to reassure a frightened animal, "The Pale is where some people go when they die."

Ice ran through my veins. I wanted to laugh in her face and storm off, but everything I'd experienced last night told me she was telling the truth. *But she has to be wrong. I'm just unconscious, I've lost a lot of blood, but I'll pull through this. If I can keep her talking then maybe she'll give me an idea of how to get out of here.*

"What do you mean some people?"

"Not everyone who passes away comes to the Pale. I'm not entirely sure what the rules are, but I know that those who choose to end their lives don't end up here."

"Why?"

"I don't know. I've only been here a little while. There are others who've been here longer, but no one seems to know much about why or how we get here."

Without thinking about it, I sat down. My body wasn't tired, but I was having trouble processing what was going on, and suddenly felt like gravity had been magnified. *If Ava is right, then there might be no going back. I could be trapped here. But I'm not giving up that easily, there has to be a way out.*

"Does anyone ever show up who isn't dead, maybe just unconscious?"

"Not that I've seen. I'm sorry." Her eyes dropped to the ground as she said this.

We sat there in silence for a long time. Not once did she try to cheer me up or make me talk. Ava was patient and seemed content to just keep me company while I contemplated this possible reality.

"My name's Alex," I said with an attempt at a less aggressive tone.

"It's nice to meet you, Alex. I'm sorry that it looks like your trip here was rough."

A harsh laugh escaped my lips. Yeah, that was one way to put it. I'd bled out in an alley. Completely alone. Never to be missed.

A dark figure suddenly blocked my vision and the pain of the stab wound shot through my stomach all over again. I grabbed at his arms, struggling to keep myself upright. His free hand wrapped across my mouth. I still tried to call out for help but it was growing difficult to stay awake.

"Is there anything I can do?" she asked.

Ava's question made the memory disappear as quickly as it had descended. "I want to wait for someone to find my body. I'm sure it will be a while ... you don't need to hang around." This would buy me some time to think. *There still has to be a way out of this mess I've gotten myself into. As much as I appreciate having someone who knows I still exist, it won't be long before she ditches me like everyone else.*

"I'll wait with you," she said.

"Have it your way." *I guess I'm not going to get rid of her as easily as I'd thought.*

We continued to sit there for the next few hours. It was hard for me to concentrate. There had to be another explanation for what was happening. Ava's silent vigil by my side actually turned out to be nice. She didn't seem to want anything from me, and she never tried to move me along.

The street had gotten busy but my body had continued to go unnoticed. By about noon the sun lit the passageway all the way to the back. I too had slowly drifted closer, not able to look away from the pathetic mess I had become. Now fully visible, I realized why no one had seen my body. Everyone kept their eyes forward, not wanting to see or think about the kinds of people who would take refuge in an alley, not wanting to notice those less fortunate than themselves because they wanted to pretend ignorance. A pair of beat cops doing their rounds eventually spotted me. Neither of them looked fazed. They had probably seen their fair share of violence in this area. I followed them to the back and the woman bent to check my pulse. She shook her head to her partner and he called it in. They searched my pockets for ID, but anything of value would be gone by now. It looked like I'd already been picked clean: even my shoes were gone. It seemed I was destined to be another nameless victim of the city's growing crime problem. I continued to watch them as they sorted through the refuse looking for evidence but they weren't turning up much.

It looked like I might have to admit that it was too late. *At least my body isn't going to just sit here — hunched over and rotting.* But that wasn't good enough. *No one will come to identify me, no one will mourn me. No one will avenge me.*

Ava had continued to wait back by the bench but she was standing now. I stood frozen in place as my grim reality descended upon me — but a pity party wouldn't get me anywhere. I needed a plan. To form a plan, I needed information. Luckily Ava seemed like the type who was eager to help. As I circled the alley to have another look around for clues as to who might have killed me, she came over and hovered near the opening.

"You said only some people end up here — you must have a theory as to why we've gotten trapped in this nothing land."

"Well, it could be because we've left something unfinished, some mission we haven't achieved."

"Then why are you here? It doesn't seem like you'd have been alive long enough to even start anything, let alone leave something incomplete."

She smiled a little, "Maybe that means I have many things to accomplish before my time here is done."

I guess she had me there, but this all seemed a little flimsy. I didn't see much point in continuing to discuss theory. What I needed were hard facts.

"So how do things work around here anyway? Can we pop out of paintings or make sensual pottery with the living?"

She laughed again. It was kinda nice making her smile.

"No," she said. "As far as I know, we can watch everything the living do, but they can't see or hear us. We don't need to eat, drink, or sleep, but there are limitations too."

"Like what?"

"Well, for starters, we can't touch anything from the living world. For example, if you want to pass your time reading a book, you can't flip the pages. You have to look over someone's shoulder while they read."

"I see. So no more fixing up motorcycles or working on my needlepoint."

"Sadly, no. Which is too bad, because I'm sure you make some pretty interesting embroidery."

I gave her a sly look and she stuck her tongue out at me.

"Why is it so foggy?" I had begun to feel a little claustrophobic, never able to see more than a few dozen meters ahead, never knowing what might be hiding just out of sight. I was also quickly growing frustrated with the misty vapours of this new world that were making it difficult for me to search for clues.

"I've heard a few ideas. No one seems to know for sure. Everything we know about the Pale is through trial and error or word of mouth. We don't have any way of recording what we learn. One possibility is that since we're no longer trapped in a physical form, we see things more like they are on an atomic level — mostly air and space."

Just then, one of the cops spilled the rank contents of someone's improvised toilet — cutting short their cursory search for evidence. Covering their faces, they both rushed for the cleaner air of the street. It didn't look like the police would be much help. Letting out a sigh, I shook my head. *I shouldn't be surprised that, yet again, I'm the only one I can rely on.*

Ava carried on — almost as if she was trying to distract me from the pitiful circumstances of my untimely end: "But as harmless as it all seems, you still need to be careful."

"What do you mean?" *What around here could possibly be dangerous?*

"If my theory is right, then we're trapped here until we wrap things up and that will be pretty hard to do since we can't interact with anything from the real world. A lot of people drift about aimlessly and their minds deteriorate pretty quickly. You either accomplish what you've left unfinished and move on ... or you get trapped here forever and eventually ... lose it."

Great! So, unless I can figure out how to get outta here — and soon — I'll end up losing my mind. This isn't exactly reassuring. As far as I'm concerned, my time was cut short way sooner than was fair. Then I arrive in some kind of crappy afterlife, and I find out that the clock is already ticking. Sure, the clock was technically ticking the entire time I was alive — but no one ever bothers to think about it. In fact, we spend a good deal of time and money trying to deny the fact that we won't be around forever. Regardless, there clearly wasn't any time to waste. The longer I stood here, the colder my killer's trail would get. He was obviously my unfinished business and I was going to do everything in my power to make sure something finished him.