

DEAD LIKE ME

by Adam-Troy Castro

Adam-Troy Castro is the author of the novel *Emissaries from the Dead*—an interstellar murder mystery, not a zombie novel, despite the title. He’s also written three *Spider-Man* novels and a pop culture book called *My Ox is Broken!* about the television show *The Amazing Race*. His short fiction has appeared in such magazines as *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, *Science Fiction Age*, *Analog*, *Cemetery Dance*, and in a number of anthologies. His work has been nominated for several awards, including the Hugo, Nebula, and Stoker.

“Dead Like Me” is a set of instructions, to a hapless protagonist, about how to survive the zombie plague by joining it. The question that prompted it was: Zombies don’t breathe, so how do they track their victims? “Certainly not by scent,” Castro says. “If not by scent, how? If we know the method, can we fool them? And from there I got to: What will it cost?”

So. Let’s summarize. You held out for longer than anybody would have ever dreamed possible. You fought with strength you never knew you had. But in the end it did you no damned good. There were just too many of the bastards. The civilization you believed in crumbled; the help you waited for never arrived; the hiding places you cowered in were all discovered; the fortresses you built were all overrun; the weapons you scrounged were all useless; the people you counted on were all either killed or corrupted; and what remained of your faith was torn raw and bleeding from the shell of the soft complacent man you once were. You lost. Period. End of story. No use whining about it. Now there’s absolutely nothing left between you and the ravenous, hollow-eyed forms of the Living Dead.

Here’s your Essay Question: How low are you willing to sink to survive?

Answer:

First, wake up in a dark, cramped space that smells of rotten meat. Don’t wonder what time it is. It doesn’t matter what time it is. There’s no such thing as time anymore. It’s enough that you’ve slept, and once again managed to avoid dreaming.

That’s important. Dreaming is a form of thinking. And thinking is dangerous. Thinking is something the Living do, something the Dead can’t abide. The Dead can sense where it’s coming from, which is why they were always able to find you,

back when you used to dream. Now that you've trained yourself to shuffle through the days and nights of your existence as dully and mindlessly as they do, there's no reason to hide from them anymore. Oh, they may curl up against you as you sleep (two in particular, a man and woman handcuffed together for some reason you'll never know, have crawled into this little alcove with you), but that's different: that's just heat tropism. As long as you don't actually think, they won't eat you.

Leave the alcove, which is an abandoned storage space in some kind of large office complex. Papers litter the floor of the larger room outside; furniture is piled up against some of the doors, meaning that sometime in the distant past Living must have made their last stands here. There are no bones. There are three other zombies, all men in the ragged remains of three-piece suits, lurching randomly from one wall to the other, changing direction only when they hit those walls, as if they're blind and deaf and this is the only way they know how to look for an exit.

If you reach the door quickly they won't be able to react in time to follow you.

Don't Remember.

Don't Remember your name. Only the Living have names.

Don't Remember you had a wife named Nina, and two children named Mark and Kathy, who didn't survive your flight from the slaughterhouse Manhattan had become. Don't Remember them; any of them. Only the Living have families.

Don't Remember that as events herded you south you wasted precious weeks combing the increasing chaos of rural Pennsylvania for your big brother Ben, who lived in Pittsburgh and had always been so much stronger and braver than you. Don't Remember your childish, shellshocked hope that Ben would be able to make everything all right, the way he had when you were both growing up with nothing. Don't Remember gradually losing even that hope, as the enclaves of Living grew harder and harder to find.

The memories are part of you, and as long as you're still breathing, they'll always be there if you ever decide you need them. It will always be easy to call them up in all their gory detail. But you shouldn't want to. As long as you remember enough to eat when you're hungry, sleep when you're tired, and find warm places when you're cold, you know all you need to know, or ever will need to know. It's much simpler that way.

Anything else is just an open invitation to the Dead.

Walk the way they walk: dragging your right foot, to simulate tendons that have rotted away; hanging your head, to give the impression of a neck no longer strong enough to hold it erect; recognizing obstructions only when you're in imminent danger of colliding with them. And though the sights before you comprise an entire catalogue of horrors, don't ever react.

Only the Living react.

This was the hardest rule for you to get down pat, because part of you, buried deep in the places that still belong to you and you alone, has been screaming continuously since the night you first saw a walking corpse rip the entrails from the

flesh of the Living. That part wants to make itself heard. But that's the part which will get you killed. Don't let it have its voice.

Don't be surprised if you turn a corner, and almost trip over a limbless zombie inching its way up the street on its belly. Don't be horrified if you see a Living person trapped by a mob of them, about to be torn to pieces by them. Don't gag if one of the Dead brushes up against you, pressing its maggot-infested face up close against your own.

Remember: Zombies don't react to things like that. Zombies *are* things like that.

Now find a supermarket that still has stuff on the shelves. You can if you look hard enough; the Dead arrived too quickly for the Living to loot everything there was. Pick three or four cans off the shelves, cut them open, and eat whatever you find inside. Don't care whether they're soup, meat, vegetables, or dog food. Eat robotically, tasting nothing, registering nothing but the moment when you're full. Someday, picking a can at random, you may drink some drain cleaner or eat some rat poison. Chance alone will decide when that happens. But it won't matter when it does. Your existence won't change a bit. You'll just convulse, fall over, lie still a while, and then get up, magically transformed into one of the zombies you've pretended to be for so long. No fuss, no muss. You won't even have any reason to notice it when it happens. Maybe it's already happened.

After lunch, spot one of the town's few other Living people shuffling listlessly down the center of the street.

You know this one well. When you were still thinking in words you called her Suzie. She's dressed in clothes so old they're rotting off her back. Her hair is the color of dirty straw, and hideously matted from weeks, maybe months of neglect. Her most striking features are her sunken cheekbones and the dark circles under her gray unseeing eyes. Even so, you've always been able to tell that she must have been remarkably pretty, once.

Back when you were still trying to fight The Bastards—they were never “zombies” to you, back then; to you they were always The Bastards—you came very close to shooting Suzie's brains out before you realized that she was warm, and breathing, and alive. You saw that though she was just barely aware enough to scrounge the food and shelter that *kept* her warm and breathing, she was otherwise almost completely catatonic.

She taught you it was possible to pass for Dead.

She's never spoken a word to you, never smiled at you, never once greeted you with anything that even remotely resembled human feeling. But in the new world she's the closest thing you have to a lover. And as you instinctively cross the street to catch her, you should take some dim, distant form of comfort in the way she's also changed direction to meet you.

Remember, though: she's not really a lover. Not in the proper emotional sense of the word. The Dead hate love even more than they hate Thought. Only the Living love. But it's quite safe to fuck, and as long as you're here the two of you can fuck

quite openly. Just like the Dead themselves do.

Of course, it's different with them. The necessary equipment is the first thing that rots away. But instinct keeps prodding them to try. Whenever some random cue rekindles the urge, they pick partners, and rub against each other in a clumsy, listless parody of sex that sometimes continues until both partners have been scraped into piles of carrion powder. The ultimate dry hump.

So feel no fear. It doesn't attract their attention when you and Suzie grab each other and go for a quickie in the middle of the street: to knead your hands against the novelty of warm skin, to smell stale sweat instead of the open grave, to take a rest from the horror that the world has become. Especially since, though you both do what you have to do, following all the mechanics of the act, neither one of you feels a damn thing. No affection, no pleasure, and certainly no joy.

That would be too dangerous.

Do what you have to do. Do it quickly. And then take your leave of each other. Exchange no kisses, no goodbyes, no cute terms of endearment, no acknowledgment that your tryst was anything but a collision between two strangers walking in opposite directions. Just stagger away without looking back. Maybe you'll see each other again. Maybe not. It really doesn't matter either way.

Spend the next few hours wandering from place to place, seeing nothing, hearing nothing, accomplishing nothing. But still drawing breath. Never forget that. Let the part of you still capable of caring about such things count that as a major victory.

At mid-afternoon pass the place where a school bus lies burned and blackened on one side. A small group of Living had trusted it to carry them to safety somewhere outside the city; but it didn't even get five blocks through the obstacle course of other crashed vehicles before hundreds of Dead had imprisoned them in a cage of groping flesh. You were a block and a half away, watching the siege, and when the people in the bus eventually blew themselves up, to avoid a more horrific end, the heat of the fireball singed the eyebrows from your face. At the time, you'd felt it served you right for not helping. These days, if you were capable of forming an opinion on anything, you'd feel that the Living were silly bastards.

It's stupid to resist. Only the Living resist. Resistance implies will, and if there's one thing the Dead don't have it's will. Exist the way they do, dully accepting everything that happens to you, and you stand a chance.

That's the one major reason your brother Ben is dead. Oh, you can't know what happened to him. You know what happened to your wife and kids—you know because you were watching, trapped behind a chain-link fence, as a lurching mob of what had once been elementary school children reduced them to shredded beef—but you'll never ever find out what happened to Ben. Still, if you ever did find out what happened to him, you would not be surprised. Because he'd always been a leader. A fighter. He'd always taken charge of every crisis that confronted him, and inspired others with his ability to carry them through. He was always special, that way. And when the Dead rose, he brought a whole bunch of naive

trusting people down into his grave with him.

You, on the other hand, were never anything special. You were always a follower, a yes-man, an Oreo. You were always quick to kiss ass, and agree with anybody who raised his voice loudly enough. You never wanted to be anything but just another face in the crowd. And though this profited you well, in a society that was merely going to hell, it's been your single most important asset in the post-plague world that's already arrived there. It's the reason you're still breathing when all the brave, heroic, defiant, mythic ones like your brother Ben and the people in the school bus are just gnawed bones and Rorschach stains on the pavement.

Take pride in that. Don't pass too close to the sooty remains of the school bus, because you might remember how you stood downwind of their funeral pyre, letting it bathe your skin and fill your lungs with the ashes of their empty defiance. You might remember the cooked-meat, burnt rubber stench... the way the clouds billowed over you, and through you, as if you were far more insubstantial than they.

Don't let that happen. You'll attract Dead from blocks away. Force it back. Expunge it. Pretend it's not there. Turn your mind blank, your heart empty, and your soul, for lack of a better word, Dead.

There. That's better.

Still later that afternoon, while rummaging through the wreckage of a clothing store for something that will keep you warm during the rapidly approaching winter, you find yourself cornered and brutally beaten by the Living.

This is nothing to concern yourself with.

It's just the price you have to pay, for living in safety the way you do. They're just half-mad from spending their lives fleeing one feeding frenzy or another, and they have to let off some steam. It's not like they'll actually kill you, or hurt you so bad you'll sicken and die. At least not deliberately. They may go too far and kill you accidentally, but they won't kill you deliberately. There are already more than enough Dead people running around, giving them trouble. But they hate you. They consider people like you and Suzie traitors. And they wouldn't be able to respect themselves if they didn't let you know it.

There are four of them, this time: all pale, all in their late teens, all wearing the snottily evil grins of bullies whose chosen victim has detected their approach too late. The closest one is letting out slack from a coil of chain at his side. The chain ends in a padlock about the size of a fist. And though you try to summon your long-forgotten powers of speech, as their blows rain against your ribs, it really doesn't matter. They already know what you would say.

Don't beg.

Don't fight back.

Don't see yourself through their eyes.

Just remember: the Living might be dangerous, but the Dead are the real bastards.

It's later. You're in too much pain to move. That's all right. It'll go away, eventually.

One way or the other. Alive or dead, you'll be up on your feet in no time.

Meanwhile, just lie there, in your own stink, in the wreckage of what used to be a clothing store, and for Christ's sake be quiet. Because only the Living scream.

Remember that time, not long after the Dead rose, when there were always screams? No matter how far you ran, how high you climbed or how deep you dug, there were always the screams, somewhere nearby, reminding you that though you might have temporarily found a safe haven for the night, there were always others who had found their backs against brick walls. Remember how you grew inured to those screams, after a while, and even found yourself able to sleep through them. And as the weeks turned to months, you found your tolerance rewarded—because the closer the number of survivors approached zero, the more that constant backdrop of screaming faded away to a long oppressive silence broken only by the low moans and random shuffling noises of the Dead.

It's a quiet world, now. And if you're to remain part of it, you're going to have to be quiet too. Even if your throat catches fire and your breath turns as ragged as sandpaper and your sweat pools in a puddle beneath you and your ribs scrape together every time you draw a breath and the naked mannequins sharing this refuge with you take on the look of Nina and Mark and Kathy and Ben and everybody else who ever mattered to you and the look on their faces becomes one of utter disgust and you start to hear their voices saying that you're nothing and that you were always nothing but that they'd never known you were as much as a nothing as you've turned out to be. Shut up. Even if you want to tell them, these people who once meant everything to you, that you held on as long as any normal man could be expected to hold on, but there are limits, and you exceeded those limits, you really did, but there was just another set of limits beyond them, and another beyond those, and the new world kept making all these impossible demands on you and there were only so many impossible things you could bear. Be silent. Even if you hear Nina shrieking your name and Mark telling you he's afraid and Kathy screaming for you to save her. Even if you hear Ben demanding that you stand up like a man, for once.

Endure the pain. Ignore the fever. Don't listen to what your family is trying to tell you.

Why should you listen to *their* advice? It didn't help them.

No, this is what you should keep in mind, while you're waiting to see if you'll live or die:

On the off-chance you are still alive when you stumble to your feet tomorrow, don't look at the fitting mirror on the wall behind you. It's the first intact mirror you've encountered in months. Nothing unusual about that, of course: there just isn't much unshattered glass left in the world these days. But the looters and the rioters and the armies and the Living Dead have left this particular mirror untouched, and though it's horrendously discolored by dust, it still works well enough to destroy you.

If you don't look at it you'll be okay.

If you do look at it you'll see the matted blood in your tangled shoulder-length hair and the flies crawling in your long scraggly beard and the prominent ribs and the clothes so worn they exist only as strips of rags and the dirt and the sores and the broken nose and the swollen mouth and the closed slit that was until recently your left eye and you'll realize that this is as close to being Dead as you can get without actually being there, and that it sucks, and you'll be just in the right frame of mind, after your long night of delirium, to want to do something about it.

And you'll stagger out into the street, where the Dead will be milling about doing nothing the way they always do and you'll be in the center of them and you'll be overcome with a sudden uncontrollable anger and you'll open your mouth as wide as you can and you'll scream: "*Hey!*"

And the Dead will freeze in something very much resembling a double-take and slowly swivel in your direction and if you really wanted to you could bury everything burning you up inside down where it was only a minute ago and you won't want to and you'll scream "*Hey!*" again, in a voice that carries surprisingly far for something that hasn't been used in so long, and the Dead will start coming for you, and you won't care because you'll be screaming "*You hear me, you stinking bastards? I'm alive! I think and I feel and I care and I'm better than you because you'll never have that again!*"

And you'll die in agony screaming the names of everybody you used to love.

This may be what you want.

And granted, you will go out convinced you've just won a moral victory.

But remember, only the Living bother with such things; the Dead won't even be impressed. They'll just be hungry.

And if you let yourself die, then within minutes what's left of you will wake up hungry too, with only one fact still burning in its poor rotting skull: that Suzie's faking.