

FEAR OF THE (IN)HUMAN

A FOREWORD BY
CHUCK MCKENZIE

I became aware of that most terrifying of concepts—of things that *look* human, but which absolutely are not—at a very young age.

Yes, I know this may seem a little off-topic for this anthology, but stay with me...

The first time I can actually recall feeling afraid of anything I was probably around three years old, watching a repeat of the 1970 *Doctor Who* story ‘Spearhead From Space’. I’d been popped down in front of that TV show as a literal baby, and my first few years saw me exposed to a variety of monstrous aliens hell-bent upon wiping out humanity. Characters in any given story might be infected by extraterrestrial plagues, shot by death-rays, bludgeoned by reptilian claws, or even *eaten*. The stories themselves could be set anywhere or *anywhen*, what with the titular hero being able to travel in space and time, and many of the settings were appropriately fantastical and unsettling. None of this ever worried me much as a child, though, initially due to my lack of comprehension of what I was seeing, and then to my growing awareness that the creepy planets and evil aliens in *Doctor Who* weren’t *real*.

‘Spearhead From Space’ utterly shattered that comforting reality for me. For starters, the story took place not on some weird planet in the future, but on present-day Earth. The locations were just like those that my mum and I might pass on any given day: a hospital, a factory, a high street shopping strip. All

recognisably real places, all exceedingly mundane and ordinary. And into that world came the Autons.

The Autons were essentially just plastic shop mannequins, like those ones at my local shopping centre. Ordinary, everyday things that I might walk right past without a care. Except that the Autons, animated by an invading alien intelligence, could suddenly jerk to life and murder people. The scenes in which gangs of Autons smash through shop windows and slaughter early-morning commuters in the streets still live rent-free in my head over fifty years later.

Sure, the Autons didn't look *exactly* human, with their featureless plastic faces, but they were near enough to scare the pants off this three year-old. And, as time went by, *Doctor Who* introduced me to other beings that hid behind almost perfect masks of humanity, either as shapeshifters or by possessing the bodies and minds of unfortunate humans. By late childhood I'd become obsessed with such entities and, despite (or possibly due to) the fear they instilled in me, I began to seek similarly-themed fare elsewhere. By age nine, I'd discovered the malignant alien mimic of John W. Campbell's *Who Goes There?*, and a few years later was able to watch the amazing film adaptation by John Carpenter. By my teens I was staying up late to watch old movies such as *It Came From Outer Space*, *Invaders From Mars* and the *Quatermass* films on TV, and was going to the cinema to see *They Live!*, *Lifeforce*, *The Hidden* and *Species*. I was also reading classic novels like Robert A. Heinlein's *The Puppet Masters* and Jack Finney's *The Body Snatchers*. More recently, I have enjoyed Michel Faber's exceedingly creepy novel *Under the Skin*, and tracked down the criminally little-known films *There Are Monsters* and *Significant Other*.

Of course, not all *things* that pretend to be human are alien: Ira Levin's *The Stepford Wives*, Stephen King's *The Dark Half*, Stephen Graham Jones' *Night of the Mannequins*, Jordan Peele's *Us*, David Schmoeller's *Tourist Trap*, Christian Duguay's *Screamers*...all deal with replicas that are either supernatural or technological in nature, and all terrify me. And don't get me started on zombies. Zombies frighten me because they look not just human, but exactly like your neighbours, friends, and family—because that's what they *are*. Or *were*.

Someone once suggested that my fear was tied to The Uncanny Valley, which documented revulsion in some people of things that look human but which are either inhumanly perfect or slightly 'off' in some way. It was a fair supposition. Despite originally being posited to explain our reactions to viewing unrealistically flawless humanoid automatons, The Uncanny Valley demonstrably impacts anyone immersed in a book or film involving the inhuman pretending to be human, except that, in such cases, we respond to the creeping suspicion (or foreknowledge) that these entities aren't what they appear to be, and in anticipation of the big reveal and whatever might follow, rather than to visual stimuli alone.

That's not why *I* find such things terrifying, though. Not entirely, at least.

You see, there's another type of monstrous pretender, pretenders that don't trigger our alarms until it's far too late...because these pretenders are utterly human. The cannibals. The abusers. The tyrants. The predators. The serial killers. They dominate our media and books, in fiction and nonfiction alike. We are in equal parts fascinated, terrified, and appalled by them. There's a small comfort, no matter how frightening the journey, in being able to finish a book or a TV show or a film and go to bed that night knowing that you absolutely won't be replaced by a pod person as you sleep. But human monsters are real. We know this. We can all-too-easily imagine the very worst of them working alongside us. Living on our streets. Knocking on our doors.

I don't think I'm terrified of things that pretend to be human because their masks hide something alien. I think I'm terrified of things that pretend to be human because I've always known these fictional entities serve to remind us of a horrifying truth; a truth that aliens, should they ever encounter our race, will also discover:

That sometimes the monster beneath the mask is *just a human being*.

And those are the worst monsters of all.