

Slouching Towards Bethlehem

Part 1

They came in peace, at first.

Not peace towards us, obviously. They didn't give a fuck about us. But they certainly weren't expecting a fight.

There's this science fiction trope where some beings from another planet voyage across interstellar space just to visit us, to tell us they come in peace or whatever. As though, by the time they get here, any civilization even remains where they came from. As though we might or might not have some resources which, paid for using goodness knows what, they take all the way back across the reaches of space to their home world hoping, even if their species still exists, that there hasn't been a complete collapse in the price of iron, or rubber, or fish-oil or whatever terrestrial goods they might have thought there was a market in. Such a world would have very strange futures markets.

This particular invasion though was subject to none of the usual rules of interstellar commerce and none of its uncertainty. They were not even alive. Strands of RNA, the Galactic language of life, were bound up in balls of proteins and other chemicals they had come up with. They could drift across the interstellar medium for billions of years, and they did. We might exercise ourselves about Dark Matter but the real concern, it turns out, was this sort of suspiciously gray-looking matter. Also and as it happens, they were not strictly spherical but more a flattened sphere in outline. Saucer shaped, even.

Their lifecycle was a complex one. Find a living being, penetrate some of its cells and replace their DNA with its own RNA, the repeat the process from cell to cell. But not for them the simple matter of hitting on some mucous membrane and then waiting to be sneezed out. These pan-galactic visitors were more like those infections you hear about where the thing infects some ant, takes over its brain and starts directing its motor actions in line with some longer range set of requirements to the benefit of the disease agent. It had all the makings of a zombie apocalypse.

We now know there must be, or have been, intelligent life out there. The lifecycle of these alien visitors depended on it. Not for them some ant pushing leaves about in a tropical rain forest. They needed creatures with language to propagate and survive. This would enable the later stages of the lifecycle to break free of any chemical or biological interaction altogether and carry out their bidding using whatever mass media exist on the hosts planet.

The vector of infection was something that every smart creature in the universe apparently possesses: an arsehole. Once it latched onto one of these it moved across into any nearby nerve ducts before making its way to the brain, where it silently and steadily took over. Most day-to-day functions were unaffected: the host organisms could still eat and shag and of course defecate. What they took over was at a higher level than this. There is evidence that the (what? Words like creature or life form don't really work. Some rough beast, let's leave it at that), that this rough beast differentiates into two kinds of hosts. In one, typified by resources and power, it takes on one set of behaviors – presenting an unearned illusion of credibility, of credit-worthiness, amassing influence even while anything the host says may make little sense. In the other, the vast majority of hosts, it simply hollows out imagination, art, any sense of being part of some community, replacing these

with more or less nothing other than the ability to consume; to lay waste its powers, getting and spending.

These two kinds of host never use the same toilets.

There is some evidence that they also needed to find a planet whose inhabitants had put up satellites. Perhaps this follows from language as surely as books or stelae. In any case, after some centuries of stony sleep they found a little spinning world with whole strings of low-orbit satellites, hitched onto a bunch of those and waited for an orbit to decay.

Finally the time came around when one of these satellites dropped out of orbit. It hit the upper atmosphere somewhere over the American mid-west, heading east. On re-entry an outer core of heavy metal salts was burned off the invaders before the remaining stages dropped off and floated Earthward.

And so this rough approximation of life, its hour come round at last, slouched towards the steel-making towns of Pennsylvania to be born.