

The Replicants

by Jed de Sousa

I hurdled over small children and dodged meandering tourists through the maze of airport concourses, in time to make the redeye flight from Chicago to Los Angeles. Another night's stay would have put me dangerously close to unemployment, not to mention cause me irreparable loss of brain cells; I could not take another evening's bad pay-per-view movies in a drab hotel room.

Feeding the robotic agent a ticket stub at the gate, I heaved and grumbled my load into the overhead compartment and collapsed into a first-class coma. The flight attendant promised to administer intravenous scotches to me during the course of the flight, so I quickly zoned out.

An older gentleman was seated next to me, and next to him sat his wife. I took the aisle seat and before my eyes became slits, I noticed the assortment of average people: young couples, some meaty college boys, a shy young girl, and the typical medley of weary business travelers, most of whom were on the verge of sleep as I was. My eyelids went heavy and the faint glow of fluorescent lighting disappeared.

A passenger heading to the forward lavatory bumped me in the shoulder. A heavysset middle-aged woman, she shuffled to the plastic door, fumbled with the latch and went inside. My eyelids fell again.

A moment later my eyes reopened, awakened by the clatter of the lavatory latch. From inside a man emerged, dressed in a dark suit and tie, wearing dark glasses, his hair neatly fitting his skull like a helmet, no expression on his clean-shaven face. I was puzzled that I had passed out long enough to miss the lady exiting from there, so I raised up briefly from my fetal position and tried to spot her in the seats behind me, and could not. Uneasy, having apparently lost some time out of short term memory, I slunk back into my seat to watch the stranger exiting the restroom and passing me to return aft.

From three rows diagonally ahead, a young man in his early twenties arose, heading to the same lavatory. I grinned and shook off the absurdity of my earlier suspicions, figuring that watching passengers doing john laps was as good as any event I had planned for the evening. This time, though, as I concentrated on the activities, I was sure that no time had passed with me sleeping, and out from the lavatory stepped another man, dressed in dark suit and glasses, returning to the very seat from whence the young man arose. There was no sign of the boy.

I began to breathe erratically. I called for a flight attendant, not knowing exactly how – or if – I could explain what I had been seeing. As she approached, I noticed the dark-suited man turn around in his seat as if to stare directly at me. "Yes sir?" she inquired... "May I help you?"

I choked on my words, feeling the dark-suited man stifling the breath in me. "Uh... I'm sorry miss. I... um... accidentally hit the call button by mistake." With that, she left, and the dark-suited man returned his gaze forward. I sat back, quivering, and watched that same flight attendant head for the forward lavatory. Once again, in her place, came out another man, dark suited and serious. He disappeared into the shadows toward the rear of the plane.

I panicked and could not move. I practically jumped out of my seat to feel the hand of the man sitting beside me, nudging me to pass by in order that he could visit the lavatory. "No!" I thought, but then... what was I going to tell him?! I reluctantly let him pass, keeping my eye on his movements.

A moment later, I was sitting bolt upright and frozen. A dark-suited man excused himself and sat next to me. The woman seated beside him returned to napping, burying her face into his shoulder as if nothing was awry. I could feel his eyes burning holes into the side of my head, but I sat there mute yet hysterical. My eyes were wide and my heart was pounding.

Gradually the night found the majority of the original passengers gone, replaced by these replicants, the remainder of the passengers and crew seemingly oblivious to what was happening.

Except for me.

Terribly panicked.

And now... something new was beginning to alarm me.

I felt the need to go to the lavatory....