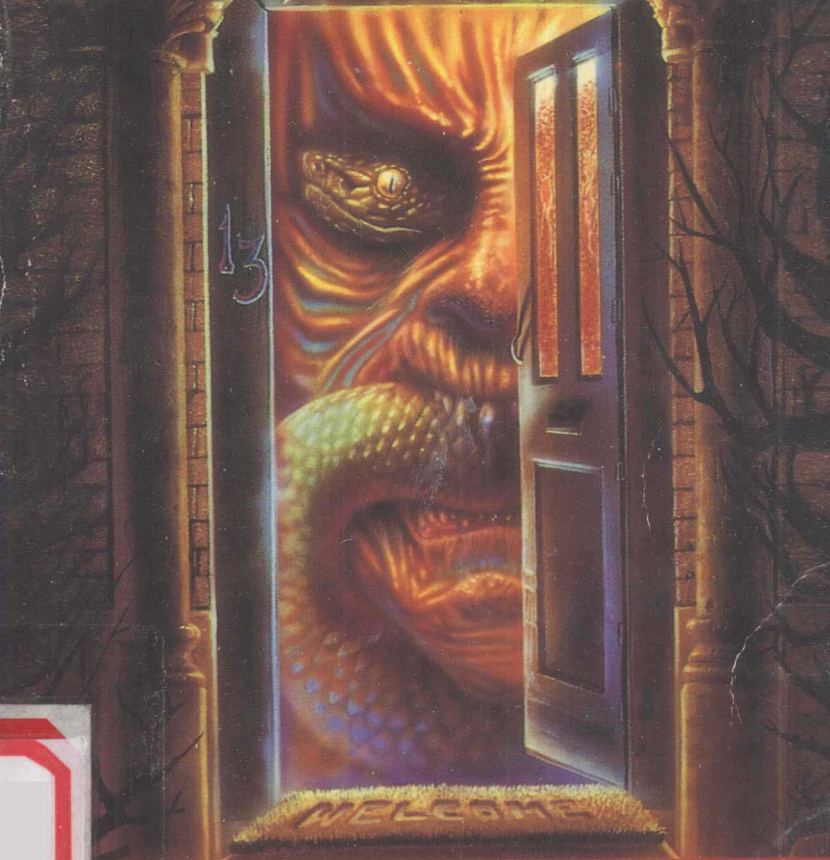


**GUY N. SMITH**

**AUTHOR OF NIGHT OF THE CRABS**

# Phobia



**IN THE HOUSE OF THE UNDEAD, NIGHTMARES CAN COME TRUE**

Guy N. Smith is the author of over eighty books, runs a mail-order bookshop specializing in rare SF, horror and crime and works his own smallholding on the Welsh border. In his spare time he sleeps. He is married with four children.





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**This one is for Frank Norulak, a friend and fan**



PART ONE

Summer





# 1

The house was frightening – all the more terrifying because it had not seemed so during the viewing; nor in the frequent visits prior to today. Not even five minutes ago. Just now. Suddenly.

Leah Strike shivered in the warm summer sunshine and felt her skin prickle beneath the cotton dress she was wearing. Goosepimples triggered off a shudder, and for one awful fleeting moment she experienced an urge to turn and flee. Anywhere. Then, with an effort, she got herself under control.

The feeling had not gone away. It was still lurking in the dark recesses of her mind, but it was uneasiness now rather than terror. A kind of inexplicable revulsion.

She thought she was going to be sick, then that she would faint. She sat down on the low brick wall, leaning forward until the sensation passed. But when it did, she was still left with a nagging sense of foreboding, almost afraid to look again at the house across the street.

Tall and fair-haired, she could have been attractive but for her stubborn resistance to the use of cosmetics. At thirty-five, there were lines on her face that could have been camouflaged, and a visit to the hairdresser's would have put some life into the long strands that straggled about her neckline. Even a smile would have helped, but she rarely smiled because life had become drudgery, a boring routine of cooking, cleaning and washing for a husband and three children. The dutiful but meaningless role in a humdrum existence had left its mark upon her.

She squinted in the bright afternoon sunlight and

forced herself to look across at the house again. It was partly hidden behind the tall removal van parked outside. Number Thirteen, it had to be unlucky – she had not thought of it until now. She shivered once more. It was a typical south London terraced house, no different from the fifty or so others which lined both sides of the road; the same as those in the next street and the one adjoining that. Soundly but unimaginatively built prior to the war to meet the demand of a population explosion, they had cost £750 in 1935, £125,000 in 1989. Identical boxes, they had no room for extensions except the addition of bow windows, stone cladding and anything else which might put their owners one up over their neighbours in their own estimation. Outside, they each had a pocket handkerchief of a garden, a shrub outside the front door. Claustrophobic, drab; it depended upon your expectations of life, she thought. It was basically somewhere to live. Property values were escalating so she kept telling herself that it was a good investment and in a year or two they would be moving on. John had assured her of that. In the meantime, she had to convince herself that it was trendy.

The house in Chiswick had been much the same only more modern; cramped, but light and airy. At least she had looked out on a playground with its untidy grass and strewn litter. Unsightly but not *creepy*.

Leah would have been happy to have stayed there for another year or two but that had not been possible. They had had no choice but to move once the bank promoted John; the promotion was costly when they weighed the mortgage repayments here against the increase in salary. John had said they must look to the future, and maybe he even believed it himself. Being an accountant at a larger branch was a status symbol. Or, at least, he pretended it was because nobody else would even notice;

London banks were big and impersonal, not like provincial ones where you could establish a reputation on the golf course or in the country club. And the bank had not even given him the day off to move house; that responsibility had been left to Leah. So she passed the buck to the removers and let them get on with it. If anything was in the wrong place then John would have to move it later, and serve him damned well right, she thought.

She felt better now, eased herself off the wall and stood up. The house didn't look anything more than just dull; nothing wrong that a coat of paint wouldn't put right. It had all been in her mind, she decided, with the stress, the upheaval and a kind of wanting to reject this new home. She ought to go inside and see what the children were up to.

Sarah was moving things around in her new bedroom, a determined expression on her freckled face. She was mature for her thirteen years, had bought her first bra a fortnight ago and was proud of it. Leah noticed that her daughter had put on some mascara, and some lipstick that was a shade too dark and made her look precocious. But she wasn't going to start that row all over again, not now, anyway. John had said she could wear make-up because most of the girls at school did and it was wrong to try and make your own child different. Leah considered girls grew up too fast these days and looked older than they really were. Which was why a lot of them got into trouble. She experienced a feeling of guilt, one which she had not been able to rid herself of and never would. Because she had got pregnant out of wedlock, and one day she would have to tell her own daughter. And it was no good blaming John; it took two to make a baby.

'You okay, Sarah?' Leah sounded tired, strained, as if she was saying something for the sake of it.

'I'm fine, Mother.'

‘Where are the boys?’

‘Probably in the garden.’

God, the garden was a like a tip. Leah stood looking at it through the open french window. Twenty metres by ten, at a guess; one would have thought that the previous owners could have taken the trouble to keep it tidy. Sam was playing football amidst the debris and weeds, kicking that new plastic ball which he had bought out of his pocket-money. It bounced back off the rickety fence and the nine-year-old drove it back hard, rattling a panel of so-called peep-proof. Little Ben gurgled his delight and ran after the ball, but Sam beat him to it and whacked it against the dilapidated shed. Ben screeched his frustration.

‘Sam!’ Leah’s shout sounded shrill, almost hysterical.

‘What, Mum?’ Sam picked up the ball and held it clear of his younger brother’s outstretched hands.

‘Let Ben play as well, Sam.’

‘I am.’

‘No you’re not. You’re making sure he doesn’t get the ball.’

Ben screamed his rage, jumped and fell over, then began to cry.

‘You’d better come inside, both of you.’ Oh, Christ, they were going to start squabbling again. Maybe it would have been better to have left them out here after all. ‘The men have nearly finished. I’ll start getting some tea.’

‘I’m not hungry, Mum.’

Leah sighed. Any excuse not to stop playing. ‘There’s a fish and chip shop in the next street. Maybe we’ll have chips for tea.’

‘Oooh, yes!’ Sam’s mood changed. ‘I’ll have fishcakes, please, Mum.’

‘All right, in about twenty minutes.’ Even Ben had stopped crying after she’d taken the easy way out. ‘Now

go and get cleaned up, Sam, you're filthy. And I'm going to give Ben a wash, too. Then we'll see about chips.'

And if John wanted any when he came home he could fetch his own.

Ben's enthusiasm for chips ended after the first half-dozen or so when he threw one across the table at Sam.

'Stop it, Ben!' Leah tried not to shout and resisted the urge to slap the three-year-old when he deliberately dropped the next two on to the floor. He was overtired but probably wouldn't sleep in his new surroundings, and would end up in bed between John and herself. And would probably wet the bed into the bargain. 'Ben, why don't you play with your Lego?'

'Don't want to.' Which was just as well because Leah could not remember in which carton she had packed it.

'All right, you can get down. And no fighting. Do you hear that, Sam?'

The boys were getting on her nerves. Since school finished a week ago they had done nothing but quarrel and fight. Sam should have known better, he was becoming a bully.

'Okay, Mum.'

'Any fighting and it's straight up to bed, both of you. D'you hear?'

They nodded, but she knew it wouldn't make any difference. Sending them up to bed was not the solution because they would continue their quarrelling upstairs.

Sarah was still in her bedroom, probably sticking posters of pop groups all over the walls with Blu-Tack. And anything would be an improvement on the existing interior decorations, Leah decided. The Graftons must have lived like pigs; they had obviously been quite happy to let the place fall into a state of disrepair all around them. Which was why John had been able to knock the

estate agents down a thousand. She was glad she had never met the previous occupants of Number Thirteen.

The boys were back outside playing football, and for once Sam seemed quite happy to allow Ben to kick the ball. Apart from their ages the two might have been mistaken for identical twins. Both had John's olive skin and dark curly hair, even the makings of his strong lithe physique. Handsome like their father, and doubtless they would pull the girls just like he did, she reflected wryly.

She heard a vehicle in the street outside and went to the window. A bright red Suzuki four-wheel drive, gleaming with its latest coat of turtle wax, scintillated in the late evening sun as the driver expertly reversed into a small space, edged it to within an inch of the green Golf parked behind, and switched off the engine. John was home.

'Hi.' John Strike stood surveying the row of unpacked tea chests and cartons in the hall. 'Everything go all right?'

'I suppose so.' She sensed a criticism because the containers had not been emptied and their contents put away. 'I wouldn't know, because you supervised our last move.'

'It's bound to be chaotic for a day or two.' He looked around for somewhere to deposit the waxed Barbour jacket which hung limply on his arm, and draped it over one of the boxes. 'God, the traffic! That's the first and last time I go to work in the jeep. I wouldn't have done today except that I'd've had to go all the way over to Chiswick this evening to fetch it. What's to eat?'

'Fish and chips,' she answered, 'and they're ready and waiting for you at the shop in the next street.'

Outside in the garden, Sam and Ben were just beginning another quarrel.

\* \* \*

Thankfully the children were all asleep. Leah had checked on them one last time before she and John turned in. Sarah's room resembled a record shop, posters of Police and Michael Jackson hiding the frayed and grubby wallpaper. Sam had begun putting up his soccer stars, mostly centre spreads torn from football magazines. Tomorrow Leah would have to find something to paste up for Ben so that he did not feel deprived. She gently closed the door of the small end bedroom and tiptoed away.

John was already in bed, sitting up reading a copy of *Today*, immersed in his favourite feature article about some man who had made a million from nothing, a fellow who kept a jeep parked outside his house, polished it every weekend and went to the office in a thornproof jacket, rain or shine. And wore green wellies in winter. And if you hadn't made your first million and just worked in a bank you did exactly the same. He was like a bloody child with his fantasies.

She pretended not to notice his erection as she pulled back the duvet, slid in beside him and turned to face the other way. Surely this was one night on which she might be spared!

She tensed as his slender fingertips began to stroke her buttocks, easing up her nylon nightdress. She experienced the same feeling of guilt that she had had earlier, because Sarah was growing up and soon she would have to warn her not to do what she had done – and that made her a hypocrite.

In a way it was worse with the light off. She was lying on the back seat of John's old Cortina thirteen years ago. She had not lost her virginity until after her twenty-first birthday, and even then it had scared her to hell. All right, she was old-fashioned, everybody slept around these days. Except her. She had only let John because all



the girls were after him, and if she wouldn't there were plenty who would. Strangely, she had enjoyed that first time and had been almost willing the second.

She'd insisted he used a condom every time but, all the same, periods were a relief, a nightmare if they were a couple of days late. It had taken her two months to become really passionate and make it to an orgasm. She'd got an engagement ring off him and provisionally fixed a wedding date six months hence. And then disaster had struck.

It was just like tonight, in the dark with John desperate to push into her. God, she had been a damn fool letting him have it without a Durex. His glib tongue had worked on her soft warm lower regions until she would have agreed to anything, and then he had convinced her that as her period had only finished a couple of days ago it would be safe without a condom.

She had moaned as his naked hardness slid right into her and started to thrust. No, John, *please!* Oh, *yes*. I want you to. She hadn't had any choice. She'd been writhing and pushing at him as he started to orgasm. Just like tonight.

And she had known right away that she was going to be pregnant, lying there in the darkness with his sperm warm inside her, convincing herself that she could feel a baby moving in her womb. At least that couldn't happen tonight, she thought thankfully.

That was when she heard Ben start to scream. In one panic-stricken moment she uncoupled and groped for the light-pull. Smoothing her nightdress down, she ran for the door, with the warm wet patch seeming to scald her fingers. And then her guilt was replaced by fear, that same gut-wrenching terror that had almost made her faint out in the street a few hours ago. The scream started to rise in her throat.