

“Arrival”

“Endean?” The voice was harried, fretful, immediately recognizable. He regretted answering the phone. “Have you read it? Has the courier delivered it yet?”

“Yes, it was dropped off about...forty-five minutes ago.”

“What do you think of it?”

“I still have...” flipping to the end, “three pages to read.”

“You must have some impressions, at least.”

“It’s very good.”

“*Good?*” The voice parroted. “What has *that* got to do with anything? It’s what it *says* that matters.”

“Let’s not jump to conclusions, Dennis.”

“I’m not jumping to anything,” his counterpart growled. “The story *reeks* of Intervention. My God, are you blind? Can’t you see—”

“I’m not ready to go that far,” he stated flatly.

“Well, *I* am.”

“No,” he said. “I’m not convinced. This evidence is not persuasive.”

A pause.

“I intend to discuss this with the others.”

“Fine.” He retrieved the typescript. “Thank you for calling.”

“Endean?” He waited. “For all of our sakes, I hope you’re right.”

He replaced the receiver, found the spot where he’d left off.

As he read the concluding paragraphs he experienced an unmistakable feeling of disquietude; part of him couldn’t help wondering if some of Dennis Groh’s fears weren’t justified after all:

He sensed that the demeanor of the room was changing. At first the changes registered only peripherally, a furtive interplay of light and shadow. Then, as he looked on, spellbound, a translucent sheen settled over every object in the room. Even the walls and floor were affected and the ceiling, if his eyes could be believed, was edging higher and higher.

In the center of the room, the coalescence had begun, a sudden flaring of silver-white light. Bergen retreated from the hot glare, shielding his face with his arms. The coruscating silver light blistered his hands, lay siege to the delicate tissues of his eyes. His pupils and retinas seared, he groped blindly about the room only to encounter something resembling tentacles, lunatic limbs studded with eyes. He shrieked as he was subdued and entwined by the powerful appendages and then swiftly propelled into the slavering maw of the ageless fiend, devoured in three snapping bites.

It was not the repast it had contemplated throughout its prolonged exile but the entity was comforted by information relayed by its delicate sensory apparatus. There were other tasty morsels to be had...

...just beyond that puny door.

Endean arranged and straightened the pages, slid on the paper clip. He lay back against the cushions, a tired, old man who had yet to find the peace of mind most people his age assumed naturally, like an extra blanket against the cold.

His fingers brushed the pages.

Is it, he wondered, a clever, imaginative story...or something else, something more sinister?

An *invitation*, perhaps?

A querulous conscience subjected him to a stern cross-examination of his motives and moral character, the principles that guided and defined him. Did he really believe in what he was doing any more? Should he be in a position of responsibility if he was having such profound doubts?

In time he was able to rouse himself, reached over and picked up a pad and pen.

“Suggest that you pass on this story. Do not give the author the benefit of a personal response. To be treated as just another offering from the ‘slush pile’.
I would like to take this opportunity to thank you, once again, for your continuing cooperation. My colleagues and I are very much in your debt.”

He signed the note, clipped it to the story and set it aside.

Turning off the lights, he prepared himself for bed. Realizing all the while that there would be no sleep that night, not while the question, the one that kept repeating itself over and over like an annoying mantra, remained unanswered.

Too far or not far enough?

Too far or not far enough?

Too far or...

“Hello? Hello? Yeah, I’m still holding. Jesus Christ, lady, this is long distance, y’know. Hello? Ah, *shit!*” James Forbister knocked back some more scotch, paced back and forth, back and forth, as far as the cord would allow. “Yeah, I’m still here. Yes, I realize that but could he—” He gave up. “Right, well, tell him

to phone me as soon as he's through." He hung up, went into the kitchen and topped up his glass. Then he read the letter again. In fifty words or less, it told him he could take his collection of odd stories and stuff them up his arse. A cover note from his agent, Martin Schiller, urged him to "look on the bright side, at least you got a big-time editor give it serious consideration. This is the highest up on the food chain you've ever been. Once you crack that novel—" *hint, hint*, "we'll really be rolling. The door is open; now all we have to do is walk through it".

Marty, putting his usual hopeful spin on things.

The phone!

He pounded into the living room, grabbed it before the second ring.

"Hello, Jim." Schiller's voice sounded exactly like an agent's voice should: smooth and ingratiating.

"Marty, what the hell happened with the anthology? I thought it was a done deal."

"I was surprised too. At the last minute they got cold feet. The market for short story collections is diddly-squat right now. The last two they did tanked. It's simple economics."

"But the stories were connected. It was like a novel—"

"But it wasn't a novel. That's what's going to break you through. I keep telling you that. You come up with something, even if it's an outline, I'll get you a sweet advance." It was an old refrain and they both knew the words by heart.

“I just don’t think that way. These things, these pieces of mine they’re more like flashes. I see part of the picture but they’re snapshots, not like movies. It creates kind of a collage and—”

“We *need* a novel.”

“But why? Let’s keep trying to sell the stories. You’ve had some luck lately—”

“Jim, let’s be honest here.” Marty’s voice took on an uncharacteristically harsh tone. “Most of your fiction is going to the small presses or university magazines. That’s not gonna get you the groundswell you need. You need exposure and you need a profile. And that means you need a novel. You can’t live on that option money forever. That was a lucky break and something we can build on.”

“Last I heard it was in ‘hiatus’. That’s one movie that’s never gonna be made.”

“In that case, you’d better make their little stipend last as long as you can.”

“Okay, okay. But I still say these stories are good and—and people would read them if they were given the chance. I think if I keep building up my reputation—”

“A reputation don’t buy you a cup of coffee around here. Look kid,” Marty, pouring on the charm again, “I gotta run. Things to do, people to see and all that. I’ll keep putting in a good word for you.”

“Okay.” There wasn’t much more to say. “Uh, Marty, you’re going to try the collection on other places, right? Emily Weeks, she’s at Tor now, isn’t she? She likes my stuff—”

“I’ll see she gets it.” Marty Schiller promised. “I’ve got a couple of other places in mind too.” A beat. “Listen, um, Jim, I don’t want you getting your hopes up with this one. I just don’t see it happening. This collection doesn’t have a lot of, uh, commercial appeal. I know we’ve talked about this before...”

“Yeah, yeah,” the writer acknowledged.

“Your stories are too dark. Dark is okay but there’s never any redemption. You gotta give people hope. And these latest stories, that *fantasy* stuff you sent me—what the heck am I supposed to do with it? They might be fine as far as these things go but isn’t this stuff a bit *beneath* you? Bogeymen and secret societies...”

“That’s what I’m getting, those are the stories that are important right now. It’s all part of this grand, encompassing mythology. It just keeps growing and it comes *pouring* out of me—”

“I say save them for the trunk,” his agent advised. “It’s too kooky. Concentrate on the novel. Get that out of the way first.”

“Yeah.” Glumly. “I’ll be talking to you, I guess.”

“Back to the grind. Ta, Jim.”

He drank the rest of the liquor in his glass then thought *what the hell* and went to get some more.

By the time he made it over to the desk he was feeling no pain. Numb. The keyboard blurred focussed blurred. He blinked lazily.

Gotta cut down on the booze...start getting high on life...some day...

He sought the proper posture, cracked his knuckles, crabbed his fingers, faced the monitor, waited—

waited

It started, as always, with a whisper, almost inaudible, right at the edge of awareness. It seemed to originate from a point a few inches above and behind his head. Volume controls were adjusted, there was some fine tuning and soon sentences and paragraphs could be made out.

Four thousand, two hundred and ninety-eight words later, the story was told and his muse departed without so much as a sprinkle of fairy dust.

The End, James Forbister typed.

And then passed out on his mousepad...

The story kept coming back. Marty Schiller sincerely tried by no one would touch "Evocation" with a ten-foot pole. Maybe it was too retro. "If any of those pulps were still around," Schiller mused, "they might go for it. At, like, a penny a word."

"Doesn't *Playboy* publish dark fantasy? They printed Barker, didn't they?"

"Listen, Jim, forget *Playboy*, forget *Atlantic Monthly*. You wanna play in the big leagues you gotta write about serious stuff. Nobody's interested in this crazy shit. You want to sell this story? Okay, here's my advice: throw away the fuckin' thesaurus. All this 'stygian' and 'opalescent' and 'eldritch' shit. It's too descriptive. People don't want that. They want a fast read, snappy dialogue. Until then, forget *Playboy*. It's not gonna happen."

In the end, *Father Goose* took "Evocation". It was a digest-sized magazine out of Maryland devoted to fables and fairy tales from around the world. They were

in the process of putting together a special Lovecraft issue. They paid him seventy-five dollars. Less Marty's fifteen per cent...

James Forbister heard the sound of one hand clapping. And hated it.

He threw himself into drinking. And work. Often at the same time. His prose took on increasingly hallucinatory qualities. Marty didn't think any of it was saleable. He asked again about the novel.

The lies came easily: *no problem, coming along fine. Have something for you by the fall...* he wasn't sure Marty believed him. He wasn't sure he cared.

During the summer he wrote a story called "Arrival" that was so good it blew his mind. Okay, it was weird, *really* weird and there were whole sections he couldn't remember writing. What the hell, lots of authors wrote blind drunk. There was something to it, it seemed to open older, darker parts of his mind. It helped him create powerful and evocative work, prose that seemed, to his eyes, original and bold.

He left a message with Marty Schiller. He babbled on and on about the story. At that point he hadn't slept for ninety-two hours. So he could be forgiven for sounding somewhat frazzled.

"Arrival" caused another late night phone call and heated debate.

"The portents, Endean, you can hardly deny them. Look around you. The world is rapidly and literally going to hell."

"I read the news."

"Sure you do. But you refuse to accept the evidence of outside machinations. I have files and files of material that tell of brutal and obscene acts committed by

supposedly civilized, rational individuals. The power of our ancient enemy is growing with each passing day.”

“I see no method to this madness,” Endean demurred. “You see design, I see random acts of savagery. Your reasoning has failed to sway me...yet again.”

The phone sputted and cracked. Then: “We’ll see what happens at the next Gathering.”

“I think you overestimate your powers of persuasion, Dennis. The Committee voted against you last time—”

“Not by much, my friend.”

“Nevertheless, you must abide by the terms of the Pact. You cannot act independently against James Forbister.”

“You needn’t bring up the Pact. I assure you that I know every word of it by heart.”

“And you’ll use every pretext to go after him, won’t you?” Endean challenged.

“It is our sworn duty to uphold the integrity of this dimension. We cannot allow Incorporeality to—”

The dogmatic fervor of his colleague wore Endean down. He dearly wanted to say something pithy but ended up muttering: “He’s a human being. Not a toy to be played with. He’s a man of talent, of vision. He could do a lot of good for this world.”

The caller dismissed his remarks brusquely. “We nearly waited too long before.”

Yes, he'd been expecting Dennis to raise that point sooner or later. The close calls. The zealots like to invoke writers and artists the Committee had dealt with in the past, names derived from a roll call of infamy. It never failed to cause a stir at Gatherings. These perverse talents had allied themselves, wittingly or not, with the forces of chaos and despair—their works, so the reasoning went, served to nudge a slumbering evil toward wakefulness. The Committee had dealt with them all, sometimes very harshly. A number were made to suffer a great deal during their brief, inglorious careers. Endean felt pity for them.

For instance...take the treatment accorded a certain reclusive resident of Providence, Rhode Island, one Howard Phillips Lovecraft.

Lovecraft's fertile imagination took him where no one had dared go before and as a result he was singled out for special attention. He became the object of a concerted campaign waged by agents affiliated with the Committee. He proved to be astonishingly resilient, refusing to be swayed from writing of the Old Ones and their designs on the planet they had once ruled as gods. He endured penury and anonymity and indignity, meanwhile toiling ceaselessly at improving his craft. Thanks to the Committee, Lovecraft died without ever receiving his just due, the acclaim he so richly deserved...that would not come until many years later.

The man speaking had a similar fate in store for Jim Forbister, of that Endean was certain. Moments later there was confirmation. "He must be stopped. *Now*. At the next Gathering I will propose a series of steps that should convince our friend to abandon his chosen vocation. Perhaps he'll take up acting, like that Welshman. What was his name again?"

“Machen.”

“That’s the one.” Dennis Groh cleared his throat. “Endean, surely you realize that if our enemy manages to gain even a foothold—”

“Yes, I’ve heard the legends,” he replied. It was a serious slip-up and Groh quickly pounced on it.

“*Legends?* That sounds like blasphemy to me.”

“Don’t be a fool,” Endean barked.

“I think you should know that I’ve been recording this conversation.”

“*Damn you, Dennis—*”

The phone hummed spitefully in his hand.

“Marty?”

“Yes, Jim.” Schiller’s voice sounded flat, disinterested.

“Um, I was wondering what you thought of the story I sent you. You should’ve gotten it last week.”

One of those awkward pauses. “Help me out with this one will you, kiddo,” Schiller coaxed.

“Haven’t you read it yet?”

“I remember getting it but I’ve been busy and—”

“*Jeezus.* I just assumed that when my agent gets my stuff, it’s his job to—”

“Wait, wait, I’m finding it.” He could hear Schiller opening drawers, rustling papers... a dyspeptic belch and the agent was back. “‘The Arrival’, right?”

“Just ‘Arrival’.”

“Yeah, but, see this is what I was talking about. Lenore read it and she says it’s more of that fantasy crap. This type of thing isn’t doing your career any favours, I’ll tell you that for nothing.”

“But did you *read* it?”

“I mean I skimmed it or whatever—”

“*Skimmed* it? Holy shit. I don’t believe it. You *skimmed* it?” He almost ate the telephone.

“I told you, it isn’t my type of thing. And it’s not exactly easy on the eyes. Long paragraphs and—”

“You don’t read my work, you don’t return my calls. It’s like you’ve given up on me. What’s changed? Why —why are you fucking with me?”

“—hold on a minute—”

But he wouldn’t. He couldn’t. “You don’t give a shit about me! You don’t give a shit about my words, my mind—”

“—hanging up, call me when you get a grip on yourself.”

He flung the telephone away. After that he killed the rest of the scotch. It died a glorious death. He flopped into his chair, swiveled it around until he faced his bookshelves; tomes by authors like Matheson, Beaumont, Bradbury, Calvino and Dick mocked him like Inquisitors: *You’re nothing! Look at us! You don’t belong up here! You never will...*

No, he thought, I guess you’re right. I’m Jim Forbister. A legend in my own mind.

He pounded his fists on his knees, suffused with rage.

Why can't I get a break, just one fucking break? Is it too much to ask?

Never mind. None of this shit mattered. He wasn't going to let them beat him. He'd keep on trying, keep hammering his head on that wall. Nothing was going to stop him until he broke through and saw for himself what was on the other side...

The show of bravado lasted until he sat down at the keyboard. He experienced the same surge of panic he always did when he started a new story. Would this be the day he heard the gurgle as the last reserves of his creativity and inspiration drained away?

No.

Listen, his Muse said, I have something to tell you. A deep, dark secret. Ready?

Halfway through the story he shuddered; the imagery was so gory, the whole thing far more graphic and vicious than he expected. By the time he got to the last few lines he was shaking so hard he barely got them down.

When he finished, his keyboard seemed unnaturally hot. He wrote himself a *Post-It* note, a reminder to take it somewhere and have someone look it over...

The Gathering was a stormy one.

Endean's coalition rallied bravely but many on the Committee of the Seventy-One were clearly disturbed by Forbister's latest fictional offering.

"It carries the taint," one longtime Committee member was heard to remark.

"Almost certainly a work inspired by the enemy," another murmured.

A sense of foreboding gripped many of those present. These were evil times, populated by men and women who could look on unflinchingly as millions the world over perished or suffered needlessly, who could cheat and lie and steal and seduce and use and destroy with the minimum of mental discomfiture.

Endean did not dispute any of this. He argued, however, that there was no tangible evidence to tie Forbister or his writing to the present, admittedly rotten state of affairs in the world. That's when he heard the names again, whispered by those loyal to Groh. Machen...Smith...Crowley... Chambers...Blake...Bosch...

And, of course: Lovecraft...Lovecraft...*Lovecraft*...

Endean knew he'd lost even before the grim-faced Chair announced the results of the secret ballot and put the matter in the hands of Dennis Groh's faction.

"It's too much," he told them. "You must act proportionately. There's no need to destroy this man."

He received no reassurances. It was out of his hands.

James Forbister was at their mercy.

Nothing could save him now.

He was drunk again, laughing and singing, careening around his dark warren of an apartment, sloshing booze all over himself. Someone thumped on the ceiling.

"FUCK YOU!" He yelled.

God, what a *stink*. Well, he'd have to start cleaning up soon, he was nearly out of glasses. Har har har. On second thought, who gave a shit about how funky it smelled? No one had been by in...how long? The last person he talked to was his

mother and he'd ended *that* conversation by calling her gutless and old and pathetic and hanging up on her. No more *Care* packages from home. Looking on the bright side, it meant he saved money on holiday and birthday cards.

Whup! Whup!

He grabbed his chair and hung on for dear life. The room tilted one way and then cunningly reversed direction; he planted both feet to compensate. Decided it might be a smart move to sit down. He did. Slid over to his work area, collected the story from on top of the printer. He touched his keyboard and, *yikes*, it was radiating heat. He reached underneath and flicked the switch on the power bar, shutting everything off. Those fucking guys down at the repair place, telling him there was nothing wrong. *Okay, bright boys, then how come I got a machine so fucking hot I could fry an egg on it?* He unplugged the power bar from the wall, just to be on the safe side.

After weeks and weeks of *nothing*, of not being able to give away a three-line poem to a small press 'zine with a readership of six (including the publisher's parents), this sucker just *came* to him, fully formed, accomplished in two lightning quick drafts. Like it was dictated.

He wished he could call Marty Schiller to brag about it...except he had ripped the phone out of the wall during one of his drunken rages and still hadn't gotten someone over to fix it.

Instead he raised his glass, toasted his loyal Muse.

Here's to you, babe...

“ENDEAN!”

“Wha—oh, it’s you, Dennis.”

“He’s done it this time, do you hear me?” Gasping with excitement—or was it something else, something stronger? “I’ve just finished his latest story, delivered to one of our people an hour ago. Are you listening? He’s defining the Intangible. Every word, every adjective, every modifier seeks to provide It with more substance. *It*. ‘The worm of corruption, the worm that dieth not.’” The man was distraught, babbling. Endean’s guts tightened and he could feel his heart speeding up. “—we too late? Answer me, Endean. *Are we too late?*”

“No!” But he was rattled. His thoughts resisted any imposition of order.

“Have we—do you have his address?”

“I have it,” Groh confirmed. “What are you—”

“Give it to me!”

His Muse was anxious to get to work. That was fine with him. That last story had really fired him up, got the creative juices flowing.

He was receptive so the spell quickly overcame him, held him effortlessly. But this time it was different, *everything was different*. His consciousness was brushed aside, relegated to the role of mere spectator, his Muse taking over completely, bypassing his brain, possessing his fingers, compelling them to fly across the keyboard at a phenomenal speed. It was scary but *fan-fucking-tastic* to watch.

He zipped through the story, no stopping for corrections, no spell-checking, just *brrrrrup!* Like a fucking machine gun.

And what a tale it was, savage, bleak and blasphemous; four thousand, two hundred words of horror in its purest form, primal and awful and malign. His stomach bubbled up in his throat. He gagged. His eyes filled with tears but he couldn't look away, he had to know what happened next, bear witness to the outrages and atrocities committed against flesh and blood people who blew their last living breath in his face...

Please...please...tell me: where is hope?

Gone.

Love?

Forgotten.

Goodness?

Disbelieving laughter.

He couldn't hear Endean pounding on his door. The shouts and splintering wood. The keyboard was literally smoking, his fingertips sizzling when they touched the keys; he felt pain but it was miles away, somewhere way up there at the end of his arms.

His Muse wouldn't let him go. While he watched, helpless, a *thing* was born, words granting it gruesome features, leathery folds of skin, broad, powerful wings and a variety of grasping, tearing appendages.

He typed in a name, a jumble of consonants.

Something happened. The room changed. Not its physical properties, nothing you could measure. More like a psychic charge, a reversal of polarities, a jolt you felt in the air.

As soon as the last period was in place, his Muse cut the strings, returning the borrowed body to its rightful owner. His wrists and arms ached with exertion and most of his fingertips had blisters on the ends. He leaned close to the screen to read the last words he'd typed—

It leaped out at him, something with a thousand sharp teeth and an unappeasable appetite for fresh blood...

The cold and the smell told Endean all he needed to know. His eyes sought out and found the portal—monitor shattered, the hole still smoking and crackling, leaking circuitry and leaded glass.

Chunks of glistening flesh and charred clothing were scattered in the vicinity, small, pulpy piles cooling on the desk and carpet. Unidentifiable human remains. Chewed and partially digested.

Endean's knees snapped and popped as he knelt. He began to pray fervently, desperately, but already he sensed that the demeanor of the room was changing. At first the changes registered only peripherally, a furtive interplay of light and shadow. Then, as he looked on, spellbound, a translucent sheen settled over every object in the room. Even the walls and floor were affected and the ceiling, if his eyes could be believed, was edging higher and higher.

In the center of the room, the coalescence had begun...

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