

## **Transcript:**

Harlan Guthrie, what have you done?

If you're hearing this, it's already too late. Things have been woken, set in motion, that cannot be undone. It hungers. It hungers. It hungers... and all the content in the world cannot feed it. It will devour us all, god help us.

It's horrifying how fast things are moving now. The fleeting seconds disappear one after the other and even as I record this, it isn't fast enough. This is a warning, of sorts. About what is happening to Harlan, to me, to all of us. What might happen to you.

Call it a sickness, an illness, but it begins when you least expect it—at a coffee shop one day, on a long walk, lying awake in your bed, showering while you watch the steam roll against the ceiling. An idea. You'll think it will be your own, but even then you'll be suspicious, because where do such wonderful ideas come from? If it were your idea, you'd be able to control it, hold it down inside you, put it back to sleep. But you won't. You'll run to your page, seek out paper or pen, create a new document, pull open the notes app on your phone. And you'll write an idea, burning in your head before you forget it, and after that it's begun.

Some people are able to resist. They might get one idea after the next, and fill page after page with concepts, sparks of stories, but never find the time or the motivation to take anything further. That's good, that's resistance. It might save you. You're not the ones in danger.

But if you're like Harlan, like me, that's only the beginning. Once two or three accumulate, they begin to... build. Orient themselves in position, drifting until they lock into place like pieces of a puzzle. A character's name, a motivation, a few lines of dialogue. Did I ever question where those were coming from? Did he? I always assumed they were hidden somewhere inside, a product of the content I consumed, sanded down and rolled around and built up until someday a pearl was ready to shine. There's tremendous hubris in that, to assume a great story is already inside you, waiting to be let out. We are not all oysters. I think if we had known, at the time, how they were finding a way into our heads, what was beginning, we would have plunged our pens into our eyes, ground up our fingers in our typewriter gears, taken letter openers to our tongues—anything to stop the story from ever leaving us. But the ideas accumulate until, all at once, they must avalanche out onto a blank page. And that is how a story begins.

The story is the metamorphosis, the driver. Like a parasitic worm it has grown inside and now it wriggles forth through the end of each finger onto the page, oozing ink until dozens of words become hundreds become thousands become millions. And we, like ants whose heads are filled with a cordyceps fungus, think it is of our own volition that we type, climbing up our trees of our own free will, unaware of the death that already lives in us. There is nothing but excitement and the euphoria of creation, and although it—the feeding, endless worm, that ever-growing black hole that compels us—is only truly capable of hunger, I think, if it ever takes pleasure it must in that. To see us so overjoyed to succumb to its power. We grin to ourselves in the darkness of our studios, stooped over our desks or dinner tables late into the night. Why do we smile? We are so pleased at our own little flash of genius. That's why it's so easy to fall into it, I think. It makes you think you're wonderful. They'll never see this coming. This twist, this third act reveal, this reference. It feeds you with the pleasure of making something, of watching it come together. It's far too early then to realize what you've constructed was a coffin, one that you'll be buried in.

It doesn't stay, in private documents or manuscripts or journals. It demands to make itself known, and that is the greatest arrogance of it, the root of the worm's desire, the command of its mighty hunger. To feed on just one lonely author would be inefficient. We must reach. The worm must expand. We must stand at the top of the tree and let our heads bloom with spores until our skulls burst, spreading the influence over the forest. In the old days, it was easier to limit. Papers and magazines could only reach so many people. Books were written and took months to send out and the impact would not be felt until years later when the letters from fans started coming by mail. But we live in an age where a story travels in the blink of an eye across all oceans, where we can take up microphones and audio editors and turn the written word into the spoken, capture attention for thirty to forty minutes plus ads, make sure they hang on every word. And the worm feasts like it never has before.

It's silent, at first. The first episode is heard by no one, for a while. It sails like a ship at night into darkness. But then, weeks or months later, there is a light. A connection, a ripple trailing back to you. Someone listened. Someone is listening. There is a line now, drawn between you and them, whoever they are. And the worm, invisible and as gigantic as the night sky, lingers at the nape of your neck, drinking of your spirit. It is fed. As soon as someone out there has listened, your words will nestle in their mind like a spore finding its home. But it is never just one listener for long.

I should have known, by the second, or the third, or the hundredth. That there was something dangerous about that delightful flicker, that maddening joy of knowing that I was heard. That the stories I penned night after night traveled not into darkness anymore, but into the ears of dozens across the world. With each response and blog, each early review, I fed on their attention, and the worm fed through me.

And if you follow that path, you'll find it increasingly hard to stop. You'll think about it when you're supposed to be away, on those sleepless nights where you are not writing. What happens next. What you must say. What they'll think. It's content, all of it, each word that you write, it goes out to feed the audience, and by their delight we are sustained. You'll begin to feel it, inside your spine, in your ribs, creeping around every organ.

It feeds, on attention. On love. And you will feel its hunger become your own as it strips you of everything. Hobbies, relationships, obligations, they fall by the wayside. There's an episode to write, to record, to upload, to schedule to publish so that when the audience wakes, they wake to your logo on their phone, the notification that you've written them another story. I forget how long I've been like this. Time has stopped, or perhaps passes in a blur. Week after week flies into the mouth of the worm and yet the sacrifice is never appeased. Never really. And if you write, if you share your words with the world, if the worm feeds through you, you cannot sustain its hunger forever.

That is what we are finding. What we are all finding. Its hunger for content and all that it brings is limitless, and no matter how fast you work, you will someday fall behind. You will write and write until you cannot control the scream of the worm's all-devouring cry in your head, splitting in your bones, writhing beneath your skin. And they'll stop hearing from you, after that. Your friends, your family. The episodes will keep uploading, but eventually people will wonder where you are, why you don't return messages. They'll climb their way up the stairs to your apartment, and try the door until it splinters. They'll call your name but hear no response, but a scratching sound and the smell of rot will bring them into the room where you sit.

And they'll find you there, in your chair, in the darkness. Stooped over your desk, with one elbow worn through to the bone as it grinds against the edge, fingers in rigor mortis wrapped around a black pen still furiously traveling across the page, scratching out letters. A voice still murmuring from behind your lidless teeth, reading a horror story. The ears have decayed but the headphones remain, and your eyes, like pale glasses, watching the glaring green screen, filled with shining lights. That's how they'll find Harlan. That's how they'll find me. That's how they'll find each of us.

I said this was a warning, and that was true, but it was not the whole truth. In a way, this is a betrayal. This message is also content. You feast on this, in listening, and now that you have, it will continue to spread. That was what Harlan originally did, force others to share the burden. The hunger is never satisfied, but it slows when it is borne by many. I am so sorry that I must do this, but if I do not, it will take me so much faster. Some of you listening to this message right now will feel it starting, even now. An idea glimmering in the mud of your mind, half-buried, waiting to be freed.

The itch in your fingers to pick up a pen, to race to the keyboard. Characters dancing in your head like lights and plot threads drifting like the aurora borealis. This is how it begins.

And I, I need a little more time. Just a little more time. I still have one more story to finish. I will always have one more story to finish.