

The Guest in the Storm

By Larry Griffin

(2017)

The storm came in around 3 p.m., earlier than when the weatherman had said it would, and so Joe's Tiki Bar cleared out early. The sea was a grey, rolling menace, and the sky seemed to meld with it in a grey sheet, like a veil – the other side of which no one could see. To several of the worried islandgoers that day, it felt like they had been closed in, trapped in a sealed-off room.

But Joe's Tiki Shack just stayed where it was, shuttering its windows and turning on the overhead light, giving the wooden shack of a bar a strange, intimate hue that it did not usually have on normal days when passersby could converse with those sitting on its patio and island music and reggae and blues blared out like nothing had changed since the balmy 1970s that the older patrons now remembered so fondly.

The bartender and now-owner, Chris Lawton, lived above the bar in the tiny studio apartment that had come with the bar's ownership since the inception in 1956, when Joe Waters opened the place that had become a local institution. Chris had divorced his wife two years previous, just no chemistry between them, no spark anymore, and moved to the coast on a whim without a job.

He'd just felt the itch to change it all. His office job had gotten cloying and he felt if he kept on in the same way, he would have blown his brains out eventually. It sounded hyperbolic, he knew – but he couldn't divorce himself from the feeling in the pit of his gut.

His parents, living in their roomy California condos, and his sister, married with two children in New York City where they all hailed from, had thought he was joking when he told them. But he felt that one's life couldn't always stay on the same course. He felt an immovable hot firestone in his gut compelling him to move and go somewhere else. Ignoring it was futile – he could not ignore it.

The tall, skinny man with the baseball cap and the skin dry as sandpaper and the cold green eyes came in right as Chris was closing up the windows. He told Chris his name was Bobby and that he needed a drink.

Chris said, “You been following the news, man?”

“I've been busy driving,” the man said. His voice was like music – smooth and rich and deep. Chris wondered if he was a singer of some kind, someone famous, His face didn't look familiar, but

these days there were so many more famous people, and who could keep track of them all?

Chris put on a smile and said, "Well, there's a big storm coming in. Everything's on lockdown here. The city's imposed a curfew."

"Shit," the man said – the profanity coming out unnatural from his beautiful voice. "My gas tank's in the red, and I've been driving all damn day. I was hoping to grab a drink and then head down to find a hotel somewhere."

Chris shrugged. "You've maybe got a chance of finding a hotel, you leave now."

Bobby looked out the door he'd come in from, saw the sheet of grey clouds and mist, rolling towards them like a tank in a war zone. He said, "Not sure I want to chance it anymore. I want to survive, you know what I mean?"

Chris nodded and sensed that he was about to do what his parents had always warned against, and help a stranger in a situation that didn't benefit him. He had never been good with charity and doing for others what he'd want done to himself. Chris was a product of the American conservative lifestyle, with a skeptical eye towards the Outsider, a lack of trust in what lay beyond his American front door. But he was in a new place, here in Florida on the coast, and how could one live that sort of life anymore in this kind of climate. Immigrants were all over the place here.

So he said to Bobby, sure, come on in. Stay a while.

Bobby hung his coat on one of the bar chairs, and put his hat on the bar. Inside, with the door closed, his eyes and face seemed that much brighter and more energized.

Chris told Bobby he could have a few drinks while he finished up closing down the bar – what was a few beers? Bobby drank Guinness and became more talkative, the more he drank. Outside, the storm was steadily approaching, in an unchanging march, a sentinel with an eye on their small island town that didn't know what it had done to deserve this.

Bobby spoke about his job and where he was going. He was a salesman, selling electronics to various markets, iPods and iPads and the like, and he was on his way to Miami for a conference where he'd peddle his company's wares in the biggest forum yet.

"You ever think you're just made for something, man?" Bobby asked.

"Made for it?" Chris said. "I don't know about that. I thought I was made to do somethin' similar, sellin' things back up north. But that isn't how life turned out."

"It's so weird, though," Bobby said. "It's such a trivial, mathematic thing. Just selling these big companies our brand of the product. I think it's the sheer adventure of it. I just love being able to drive. See that big open road. That's the life I want. I never wanted to be chained to some desk. I think that's

why I've been having so much fun.”

“I can relate to you more than you know,” Chris said, washing a plate in the sink, the smooth buzz of the water drowned out by the winds outside, crashing against the tiny bar.

“How's that?”

“Huh?”

“How can you relate? Tell me something about yourself.”

Chris felt a twinge of oddity, of *wrongness* – just in the way Bobby postured himself, in the peculiarly open nature of his conversation, but he wrote it off yet again as the relic of his past. So he told Bobby a general, sanitized version of his coming there – of his wife and the boring, mundane decay of their marriage, of his increasing discontentment.

“Why'd you leave her? Your wife, that is,” Bobby said.

“I don't know exactly,” Chris said after a pause, and it was close to the truth. He didn't intend to get too deep into this, but it began to spill out anyway: “You ever just sort of reach a point where you can't go on anymore? Like when everything in you, from blood to bones, is telling you it's all wrong? We were like that, you see. It wasn't working. We'd married right out of school, real early, you know, and we had the fucking stars in our eyes. Whole world was ahead of us. Thought it'd last forever... or, well, to be less cliché, we thought it would last longer than it did.”

Bobby was silent and patient, listening and attentive, while the wind outside battered the building and the thunder groaned and rumbled on the horizon. Chris supposed he liked Bobby's willingness to listen. His sister had told him to go to therapy, but he had always assumed himself stronger than that. And plus, in their hometown? If anyone had found out he would've been mortified.

But now, here, in the dark bar in the storm coming, he found it oddly comforting. He made a mental note to tell his sister she had been right.

Bobby said he'd never felt anything like what Chris had described, that take-on-the-world kind of love.

Chris said, “That's too bad.”

“I've often felt like a stranger, in a way,” Bobby said. “Like I'm always standing on the outside of a window watching the rest of the world.”

“That cause of your job?” Chris asked. “Like, are you just moving around too much?”

“What's that?” Bobby asked, and there was such a blank, earnest confusion on his face that Chris was surprised. Chris's warning bells started to go off – the idea that this man was not who he seemed – but he told himself he was being paranoid and jumpy, especially in the storm that was currently all around them.

“Your job,” Chris said, speaking slow as if to a person who was hard of hearing. “You told me you worked as a... a salesman, if I recall?”

Then the light came back in his eyes, that knowing spark, and he said, “Yeah. That's right. I mean, it doesn't help. But I think it's just me that's the problem. I've never exactly been sociable.”

Chris nodded. “Fair enough.”

The storm came in a torrential display, a cyclone of dark clouds the color of obsidian sand altars in the east and winds with the strength to topple semitrucks. The sounds of the cracking lightning followed by the low, guttural bellyache of the thunder became routine, every few minutes, and the hissing of the wind, like a firecracker's wick newly lit, and the rain slapping on the pavement and the wood and concrete, became like a symphony. Chris found it oddly soothing.

The power went out after about thirty minutes of it, and so he and the man who called himself Bobby sat alone in the dark; Chris on the stool behind the bar and Bobby at one of the circular wooden tables that sat around the floor. He got up and pulled back the cloth curtain over the window facing out toward the beach, peering out the window.

“Jesus,” Bobby said, “it's really coming down out there. It always like this here on the coast?”

“When it rains, it pours,” Chris said.

Bobby nodded. “See, yeah. I'm a Midwestern boy. Grew up in Kansas. We had tornados to worry about, but that didn't happen all that often.”

“Guess you got lucky,” Chris said.

“Yeah, until now,” Bobby said.

They had lapsed into silence again when Bobby spoke up: “It's refreshing, in a way. To be able to just sit here without all the fucking noise of the cell phones and the technology and the always-moving. It's nice to be able to just *exist*.”

Chris looked at him and chuckled. “Odd way to see it.”

“How so?”

“How's it odd, you mean?”

“Yeah. I don't see it as odd at all. I think people would be very happy if they just quit using the technology. If they'd just free themselves, you know? People weren't meant to spend all their time staring at screens.”

“Yeah, but you're saying all this in the middle of a goddamn storm,” Chris said. “Not exactly encouraging people to do it. They just have to. They'll turn them back on right after the power comes

on.”

Bobby shrugged. “Then I'm glad they have the chance to experience a freer life right now. I think sometimes people need a bit of a push.”

“A push towards what?”

“Towards something they may not have been willing to do otherwise,” Bobby said, and the way he said it, quiet and reverent like a missionary of some kind, sent an odd chill down Chris's arms, put his arm hairs up like there was some electricity about the room. “Something good for them,” Bobby was saying.

Chris decided that there was something he fundamentally just didn't like about Bobby – something off-kilter and strange. It was a fundamental something that was broken in him. Chris resigned himself, mentally, from the conversation, and told Bobby he was retiring to his upstairs apartment to read a book and rest from the day, and all its perils. He told Bobby he could stay downstairs and relax until the storm passed if he wished.

Bobby gave him a toothy grin and a wave. “I'll hold down the fort,” he said. “Protect it from any intruders.”

Chris nodded. “That'd be great, yeah.”

The book Chris got from the library was a Stephen King novel, *Misery*, and he read it for a half-hour in bed, clothes and shoes still on, with the storm browbeating the world outside, the wind and the rain forming an almost relaxing symphony. Then he was falling asleep, eyes heavy, and he woke up with his book on his chest and the light through the window slightly different. It was 5 p.m. by that time, and the storm was still going. So far as he could tell, it had not ceased.

Chris put the bookmark back in his book and went downstairs, his joints aching and tired, his head a bit fuzzy from the nap. He'd never liked taking naps in the middle of the day, not when he had other plans later at any rate.

Bobby was downstairs leafing through a tourist manual of the area, which Chris kept in a stack by the front door for people who had somehow come to Joe's Tiki Bar with tunnel-vision, not seeing anything else.

Bobby looked up and smiled. “Hope you're rested up. Looks like the storm's not leaving us yet.”

Chris said, “I suppose not.”

He poured himself a glass of whiskey and leaned back against the bar.

“Drinking with me now, huh?” Bobby said.

“Why not? Not like I'll be needin' to drive anywhere.”

Bobby said something, but it was drowned out by the sound of the storm surge. Bobby went to look out the window and said, “Holy shit. You've gotta see this.”

Chris went to the window and looked out. The storm had met the land, had encroached and devoured the beach. The water was flooding the streets. Cars left parked there were now half-submerged in water. It was seeping through the doors of businesses there. Joe's Tiki Shack was only two blocks up the road and Chris felt a kind of tug in his soul, a terror – it was the *inevitable*, really; was what it was. It was the sense that everything he knew was about to end. He was being dramatic. But he wasn't. The fear of nature was the most innate thing in a man – the primal thing, the original fear, really, aside from death itself. Man had been conquering nature forever and nature bit back.

The water was coming closer to the door.

Chris's brain kicked into action at last. He remembered the materials in the closet, stored there for the worst-case thing. He ran and fetched two sandbags from the closet and handed one to Bobby, told him to put it under the door. And so they did. They sat back at one of the tables together when they were done, both with drinks poured before them, and Chris didn't feel much better about their chances. They were quiet and listened to the storm battering everything.

“I've got to tell you, man,” Chris said. “You're a weird guy, and I'm not sure we'd get along under normal circumstances. But I'm damn glad you're here now.”

“What makes you say that?” Bobby said. “What kind of manners is that?”

“Man, you just rub me wrong,” Chris said. “I'm sorry I offended you. But that's the truth.”

They sat in silence and Chris felt something rotten in what he'd said. He hadn't been raised that way.

It was Bobby who spoke first: “Let's start clean, then. I can tell you're stressed the hell out right now. Let's go back and start from zero.”

“How's that?”

“Look. If we're going to be stuck together, in this damned storm? May as well try to be friends. Clearly, I've offended you. That wasn't my intent. So I'd like to go back to the beginning and start fresh. Act like we're just meetin' now.”

Chris sighed and said sure, why not. He didn't know why Bobby was so insistent. People came in all types, he reminded himself. And maybe he had been wrong. And what did he really have to lose, here in the storm? If anything it would be a good way to pass the time.

So he offered his hand.

And Bobby shook. Bobby's hand was cold and smooth and his grip was firm.

They kept drinking. Chris would get up and refill their glasses with rum and they sat there while the storm pounded and pounded against the door and the walls and the roof, like a desperate stranger, pleading to be let in. They talked about their love lives, Bobby spinning tales about his crazy exes spread across the country; girls he'd met and spent a few days with at a time and then they drifted apart, girls whom he sometimes called when he got lonely and who sometimes called him for any variety of reasons. He spoke of the colorful personalities they had, their wild hippie opinions and their odd hours painting and playing music and all other manner of things. They had enriched his life, all of them, he said.

Chris said his wife had been the primary relationship in his life. The bedrock, really. She had been the girl who stuck by him and in his experience that was the most important thing. He said over the years they had grown stale in a way, less excited, the fire died.

"So you were wrong," Bobby said.

"How's that?"

"You were wrong. It turned out that it was less important than you thought, to have that stability. Me personally, I've never found that to be true, that it's more important to have someone there than have someone good for you. I've always found it better to just be honest. You don't compromise. You don't settle for less."

Chris nodded and couldn't meet Bobby's eyes. These were the thoughts that had consumed him in the night even when he was married. They had gnawed and eaten at him, and eventually driven him to leave, just up and go, on impulse. He hadn't even said goodbye to his wife, had just taken his stuff and gone and called her when he was two states away. She had been so furious that she hung up on him then. They hadn't talked since. Fitting end to the whole mess, he thought.

By that point he and Bobby were both drunk. Bobby was standing up and swaying in the room, coming dangerously close to hitting the tables or the chairs and knocking them over, but he didn't. He said, "With the storm out there, this place feels like an old pirate's ship. I've always enjoyed old bars like this. Can't ever get enough of them, you know."

Chris was seeing doubles by that point, his head swimming and his limbs feeling soft and pleasantly lit, the whole room feeling very light and swirling in spite of his dread from the storm still resting in his gut like hot coals. Chris laughed at Bobby swaying about. He said, "Man, I've never met a soul like you before."

"That a compliment, or are we going at it again?"

"It's just a statement," Chris said. "Of fact. You're an interesting guy. That's all. I'm just drunk."

"So you're telling me that with no clear reason to say it?" he asked. "Words, just floating in the

aether, no point or rhyme or reason? Seems rather pointless to me. Rather lackadaisical. I expected more from you.”

Bobby was clearly drunk – he'd just taken another gulp of his rum. He was swaying now like a madman.

Chris said, “So I've been opening my soul to you. What about you, though? What's your deal? You said you just never felt like you fit in, something like that?”

Bobby cast his eye at Chris and said, “That's better. You got a *point* to it now. Real conversation. It's a lost art.”

Swaying on his feet almost like dancing, he took another swig of the rum – the glass almost empty now. He said, “I have walked through life like a drifter, a tourist. I never felt like I belonged. Hell, most of the time, I barely feel anything at all. Like my insides are goddamned frozen, you feel me? It's infuriating. It's like I'm living in some glass case, but I can walk around, but no one can get in and I can't reach out.”

“Jesus,” Chris said – he hadn't expected this.

“I did find a solace,” Bobby said, eyes cast to the floor, slurring his words, but Chris knew he wasn't bullshitting – his tone was too somber, and Bobby didn't seem the joking type anyway.

“What's that?” Chris said.

“I can really only feel a damned thing when I put a knife in someone,” he said. “It's fucked up, but... that's what it is. I can feel alive when I'm feeling someone else die. It's like a compulsion and I can't be rid of it.”

Chris sat there and felt a chill go through him colder than any stormwinds. He felt like he had to choose his next words very carefully. But the alcohol in him was surging and raging back and forth like its own miniature storm, microcosm of the chaos outside, volcanic hot bile. There was nowhere to go. He couldn't go outside, lest he be swept up in the floods, cast out to sea.

He wondered which was more preferable then – dying by the storm or by the hand of the man sitting across from him, obviously mentally unstable.

Bobby was still talking, drunk honesty spewing forth: “I've actually just killed another, this past week. It was in northern Florida and I used a knife. A man probably on his way to some business conference. I left him in the bushes in a small town off the highway. His car's probably impounded by now. I wonder if anyone's found him. But it was good for now. Saturated me for now.”

Chris realized he couldn't think straight. Bobby looked him dead in the eye, blank naive concern, like he'd just confessed to something much more innocuous, an embarrassing hobby perhaps. “I understand if you're troubled,” he said.

Chris heard himself saying he needed to excuse himself. Needed to think.

He found himself next in the upstairs bathroom in his private apartment. It was a small place with faded yellow tiles, no longer so chipper as they had once been, instead now retirement-home-shade, placating and dull. The mirror was smudged from the years. He told himself to clean it but hadn't gotten around to that. There was a small rectangular window high up on the wall he could usually see the coastline from. Now it was all covered in rain, coming down like bullets. The whole world was rain. Nothing but the grey smog and the water rushing and the destruction of all things man had made.

And below, downstairs, the man who had, apparently, killed other men for no reason beyond his own gratification, the need to “feel.”

He was trapped, as it went, between a rock and a hard place.

Trembling hands, he took out his phone and looked up the murder Bobby had been talking about, browsed through the northern Floridian news.

And there it was.

A man, Peter Shaw, had been found stabbed in the gut five times in the bushes off the highway I-10 between Jacksonville and Tallahassee. He'd been on his way to a business conference on the coast. His family was quoted, tearfully, as saying they didn't know who did it or why it happened.

The whole thing had an air about it of years ago, when things were murkier and the war had ended and all the drifters were out. This just didn't “happen” anymore. Not like that. It was alien territory. Chris felt like he should stay in the bathroom until the storm passed. Just wait it out.

But he couldn't.

If Bobby came up here, perhaps with some weapon he'd kept hidden this whole time... well, he wouldn't have any defense. And why would Bobby tell him any of the things he'd just said if he planned to let Chris live? That made no sense.

So, Chris deduced, he was now in a fight for his life.

Shaking, he got to his feet. He looked in the mirror. His hair was matted to his forehead with sweat. His whole body was weak and shaky and he felt like he had lost a lot of weight, like he hadn't eaten in days. The power was out now, and the storm raged outside and seemed like it had grown closer somehow...

When Chris came back downstairs, every footstep on the stairs creaking like an old pirate ship and feeling like it was going to give out and he'd plunge downwards, Bobby was not facing him.

Instead, Bobby was looking out the window at the storm. In the dark, he seemed smaller and thinner. The window provided some light through the dark bar and Chris could see Bobby's bare neck, thought about how easy it'd be to take a knife from behind the bar and just end it all now, just put a punctuation mark on this whole odd, surreal affair...

But he was too slow.

Bobby turned around, his eyes gleaming, and Chris could see the storm in his eyes, all the rage and turmoil and the force-of-nature, and Chris felt like he was going to fall down, from all the fear of that moment.

But he stayed standing, though his hands gripped the stairwell enough for his knuckles to turn white.

"It's really coming down out there," Bobby said. "Sheets of rain. The streets are all flooded. You're lucky this place is so well-fortified. Otherwise we could be talking knee-deep in water right now."

"Yeah," Chris said. "Lucky."

He came down to the floor and faced Bobby, feeling like he was now in some old Western. Good guy faces bad guy. A standoff. He wished he'd had a gun, had given into the impulse to buy one after opening the store. He saw now in retrospect that it may have been a good idea after all. But then, who could have predicted *this*?

Bobby said, "I don't like the way you're looking at me, man."

"You know what you said," Chris said. "It's just because, you know, I'm not sure I can *trust* you anymore."

"I haven't done a thing to you so far," Bobby said, and it struck Chris how *sober* he seemed now, how little the alcohol seemed to be influencing his movements now. "If I was going to hurt you, I'd have done it by now."

"I didn't know your secrets before," Chris said. "No way you're letting me live after this storm passes. Not now that you've told me what you do. What you *are*."

Bobby smirked; a toothy, almost sharklike grin, wide and predatory, and said, "My name's not really Bobby. And I'll change the way I look after I leave here. They won't find me no matter what. I know it might be hard to believe, my *compadre*, but I don't care about you. I've got no beef with you. I just wanted to have a conversation. I'm an honest type of guy. And you enjoyed it – don't deny that. Don't deny that you got something from this."

Chris said, "You're a murderer. You kill men."

"Labels," Bobby said, shrugging. "I can't defend what I do. I don't pretend to be able to fit into

normal society.”

“Even then,” Chris said. “You should be locked up. You can't be allowed in normal society.”

Bobby looked hurt, genuinely hurt. “It's such a shortcut though. To condemn me that way. I think you're being reductive. I don't think you're thinking this through properly. We were having a good conversation earlier, when it was about you.”

Chris's hand was on the knife in the drawer by the sink. He kept a firm grip but his hand was shaking; whole body was shaking... he wasn't used to this at all, this kind of conflict. He wanted to just sleep and sit back, watch the whole thing through someone else's eyes, a movie and not his own life.

Bobby was approaching. Hands up and his face deceptively innocent, soft like a teenager's. He looked like anyone. Like a guy you'd see in the park with a girlfriend minding his business. But there had been blood on those hands he was holding up as a sign of innocence.

Chris could feel the next moments for the rest of his life. He thrust the knife out in front of him and felt it enter flesh, piercing both it and the clothes that surrounded – he had stabbed Bobby in the gut. It was such an odd feeling, the knife entering flesh; he'd never felt anything like it before. For a split second, as he turned his head up and his eyes met Bobby's shocked, pained eyes, Chris knew what Bobby felt to some degree. And he was afraid of it, afraid of that part of himself...

Bobby howled in pain, his scream piercing the air, timed right as another thundercrack sounded and seemed to shake the Earth. Bobby looked at him with revulsion and surprise and maybe a bit of hurt, and for a split second Chris felt he should apologize.

But as Bobby turned and ran for the door, the impulse faded.

Chris watched Bobby run.

Into the storm.

The door flapped open like a broken jaw and the rain flooded in. The storm howled outside. Nothing but a gray miasma, all rage and wind and Mother Nature taking her revenge on the earth. And Bobby was gone, lost somewhere in all of it.

The storm would pass and things got back to relative normalcy. There were repairs to be done. The road had been washed away in parts by the beach and they'd have construction crews out repairing it for two days straight. They would find out that two people had died because they refused to leave their trailers, tenuously rooted to the ground, and one old woman had a heart attack when a particularly nasty lightning bolt struck.

Chris cleaned the knife of Bobby's blood in the sink, watched it flow down the drain and pondered how easy it was to cause harm, draw blood and wash it away, pondered the fleeting nature of

human life compared to the things they made, the things they constructed, the things nature did of its own chaotic whims. Humans were so fragile, he thought.

He would check the paper and the internet for a day or two to see if any stabbing victims had been admitted to a hospital the day of the storm. Nothing. Of course Bobby wouldn't do that – he wouldn't draw attention to himself. He would be off somewhere on his own. Licking his wounds.

So Chris, warily, got back to normal life. He drank with friends of his, other local workers around town and unemployed barflies and all other manner of people who came into the bar. He went out on a date or two in the fall, women who were attractive and nice and fun, but who he couldn't see a feasible future with. Everything seemed faded and in a fog. Life was muted.

The day of the storm faded from everyone's mind as time rolled on. Chris would think of Bobby in dreams, and when he'd wake up he would forget most of them, but have the vague sensation that he had a nightmare. When he passed people in the street he sometimes got the vague sensation that eyes were on him, that somewhere in the crowd, *he* was there, moving slow and sure, the glacial-paced death coming for him.