

CHRISTOPHER LA FARGE

The Sudden Guest

*"..... conscience,
the sudden guest, . . . worst of witches,
that makes the moon grow dark, and then the gravestones
move restlessly, and send their dead to haunt us!"*

PUSHKIN

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By Christopher La Farge

HOXSIE SELLS HIS ACRES

EACH TO THE OTHER

POEMS AND PORTRAITS

THE WILSONS

EAST BY SOUTHWEST

THE SUDDEN GUEST

MESA VERDE

To my brother
Francis W. La Farge
for friendship rendered

THE SUDDEN GUEST

I

PROBABLY another false alarm, thought Miss Leckton, and she brusquely turned off the radio. Nevertheless, it was a depressing sort of day, the air both moist and warm. She rose from the morris chair in her library, and went over to look at the aneroid barometer on the wall by the fireplace. It read 29.80. Not low enough, in September, to account for the depression in the air, nor was the air enough, surely, to explain the depression she felt, the sense of thickness in the lungs as though the act of breathing was a difficulty. She could have understood that if the wind had blown from the southwest, one of those smoky storms that make one feel as though one were going to come down with jaundice. I trust it's not my heart, she said to herself. Then she dismissed that as pure nonsense. There was nothing in the world the matter with her. Though sixty is no longer young.

Miss Leckton walked to the door and went into the living room. There has never been an autumn, she thought, when I have had so few flowers in the house. What with the awful drought this summer and no proper servants to help her, the flowers were scarce and poor and their arrangement a chore. The calendulas and cosmos were pretty, but the marigolds were few and wilted quickly. The chrysanthemums weren't out yet, and such dahlias as flowered were clumsy and overlarge for her vases. The roses were not in bloom. If we get another hurricane, she thought, there'll be no flowers at all.

None at all. It was a very unpleasant thought. She walked to one of the south windows and looked out at the afternoon.

The lawn fell gently from the house to the herbaceous border to the south. The border itself was protected by a low hedge of yew, still ragged and with gaps in it. It had not yet grown together, having been planted since the hurricane of 1938. Beyond the yew hedge, the land fell sharply to the rocks of Olneys Point. The tide was high and ebbing, and the two great rocks, The Ewe and The Lamb, showed off-shore only their weed-brown tops in the salt water of the ocean. The wind, Miss Leckton noted, was northerly. North-east, about, and fresh. The waves it created made a white and decorative pattern of broken surf around the rocks. The sky was overcast, the light grey but fairly bright. In the distance she could see the black remnant of Motherledge Lighthouse swept by the passing waves.

The trouble was, she must make up her mind—now. She turned from the window and looked at the clock on the mantelpiece. Three-forty. Either she was going to make preparations for the hurricane—it was to come again, again, her inner thoughts said—or she was not. There'd be only a little more daylight and no one to help her but George Potter, with the somewhat problematical assistance of Mrs. Kluger. She and George would probably have it all to do. There was so much to do, if you once started. So much easier to disbelieve, to say that the really ominous warning on the radio was calamity-howling, that there couldn't be another hurricane, now, in 1944. So much to do. So many decisions to make. And one was alone to make them, nobody to ask, nobody with whom to discuss. Even Leah, Leah was gone. She threw back her head, a little defiantly, and she said aloud, "And a good thing too." But there was still the decision to make, and it seemed to her then that it was almost as though she had to decide, she, Carrel Leckton, alone, whether or not there was to be a hurricane. Again.

She was seized rather suddenly with a sense of anger. Why did this have to happen to her? Wasn't it enough to be in the middle of a terrible war, without having nature rise up

in revolution against your security? Life was hard enough as it was. One could get no proper servants, or if one acquired them (at fabulous wages!), they left on a moment's notice and with no possible consideration. There were no deliveries to Olneys Point now—literally none, not even milk. If she hadn't had George Potter and the car, she could not have opened the house at all this season, much less survived in it. And now George's wife was nearly useless with grief over the son who had been killed in Italy. Or, anyway, reported missing in action. Curious that a Negro couple should have had only one child. Usually they bred so very prolifically. She shuddered slightly and dismissed the thought. If there were to be another hurricane, she would prefer to move George and his wife into the house, make them leave the tenement over the garage. But would that cause trouble with Mrs. Kluger? She might not like having them there, sharing the servants' bathroom with her. It was all so difficult!

The anger grew. It might be just alarmist stuff on the radio, just a scheme to get you to listen to the commercials. There had been false alarms before. Several of them. People expected hurricanes in 1939, being still frightened. It was fantastic to have another one so soon, in 1944. And here she was, alone, to meet it and cope with it—if it came. Five days before she was to move back to New York. A strange cook-general, whom you hadn't had for above a month, a native, more or less, of unknown temper; a Negro chauffeur, old and faithful, to be sure, but getting much too independent, with a wife made undependable by grief. Why couldn't Ella Potter take her loss quietly? Was she the only person in the world who had ever suffered a loss? It was all too much, too much. The lights would fail, the water system would fail, the cellar possibly flood again, the telephone would go out. Even the car—that last link with life—might again have something happen to it. And here she was, all alone, to decide everything.

As her anger faded, turning now into a depression of spirit, a sense of facing a load too heavy to lift unaided, there

flashed (but briefly) through Carrel Leckton's mind an image of recollection that she, accustomed in that capacity, had undertaken to forget or to bury so deep it might not be exhumed. The recollection took the shape of herself, standing in the door of her own house here, the wind tearing at her skirt and hair, and saying to those people, "No. Not here. You'll find a quite good, safe spot at Cottrellton. No. Not here. I am sorry"; and the image of herself moved with the wind inside the house and shut the door, with Catherine's help, against the force of the gale.

She had not wanted them. Not then. Then there was Catherine Lovatt, the waitress, and Anna—Anna Mulvey, the cook, and George and George's wife, Ella, and their boy, Desmond—he must have been about fifteen then, and so useful, too. No, no. There were plenty of people then. It was all quite different. She had neither needed nor wanted all the others. Leah was there then, for part of the day, anyway. Leah. That, at least, was one thing she did not now have to cope with. No. It had been a question then of getting rid of people. This time, thank goodness, there was no Herbert Golotz to get rid of. Or try to get rid of. You could never entirely rid yourself of that sort of man, there was no way to communicate to such as he that he was . . . her mind checked at the words 'not wanted' as she thought, He's dead. That's all over and done now. All over and done. The point was, really, that at least she had only herself and the house and Mrs. Kluger and the Potters to think of. She would know—this time—how to cope with an invasion. That old doorbell was gone now, too. One learnt by experience. One is not strong for nothing. One was still vigorous at sixty. It was a matter of decision.

She looked out the window now with a more seeing eye. The light was beginning to fail quite perceptibly. The wind seemed about the same. A gale. Half a gale, more accurately. Turning, she looked at the clock again. It was nearly four o'clock. She had stood here, doing nothing, for almost twenty minutes. Then she spoke aloud.

Unconsciously, when she did so, her words took the form

of a decision past the realm of her power. "We shall have the storm," she said. Her mind heard the words: they sounded as though she were declaring in favor of a dance or wine for dinner and the declaration were quite decisive; and she amended her words, saying, "We ought to get ready. I must speak to George." She was aware of a curious sense of relief, compounded in part of the act of decision, in part of a realization that there was really not so much to do, that there was time to do it. It was all very different from 1938, when she had been busy with a lot of other decisions, problems, personalities, and the storm had broken on them while they were still scarcely aware of what had smitten them. There had been Herbert Golotz to get rid of, Leah to battle, those people—what was their name? oh, yes, La Perche, La Perche and his wife—to send packing. How astonishingly importunate such people could be! Perhaps their importunity was really the callousness of ignorance, an incapacity to realize that one might not be welcome in someone else's house, all of a sudden, just because the wind blew. The woman was a pale little thing, looked more foreign than he did. He had had red hair. Grover La Perche. From Lonsdale. Funny how one remembered such trifles!

Miss Leckton went back into the library and turned on the radio. It became audible at the end of a five-minute broadcast of local news, and there was the repetition of the storm warning.

"The storm is expected to strike the coast of southern New England some time after eight o'clock this evening. The time will depend on the acceleration of the storm's rate of progress, if any. There is a possibility that the center will still head out to sea and not strike the shore line at all, but this is not now expected by the Weather Bureau. The storm is now estimated to be . . ." There was a loud crackling noise of static that drowned out the words momentarily and the voice resumed, "...and east of Atlantic City. Hurricane warnings have been hoisted all along the coast from Hatteras to Maine and the Coast Guard is busy evacuating persons in seaside resorts in the danger areas. That's the news at this

moment, brought to you..." the static again interrupted, "...of Seventy-six Monmouth Street, Cranston's leading store. Further bulletins on the progress of the storm will be broadcast as received. Attention, please! You have a date with fascinating glamour when..." Miss Leckton switched the machine off.

"They have no sense of propriety," she said aloud.

She picked up the telephone and she called Cottrellton 72-J. After it had rung several times, Ella Potter's voice answered.

"Miss Leckton's garage," it said.

The phrase annoyed Miss Leckton as usual. She had told Ella over and over again that it sounded like a commercial garage. But Negroes, she thought, are like that, you can't teach them some things, and they can be almost as stubborn as the Irish.

"Ella," she said. "Do you know where George is?"

"Yes, ma'am," Ella said. "He's putting the car away all safe and he's fixing up the garage doors so they won't blow off in this hurricane like the last time."

In spite of herself, Miss Leckton heard herself saying, "Oh, we may not get this storm. All right, Ella. Ask him to come over and see me, will you?"

"Yes, ma'am," said Ella.

Miss Leckton hung up.

How stupid of me! she thought. Why did I say that we might not get this storm? Now perhaps Ella would take no precautions in fixing up the tenement windows—although George seemed to have made up his mind pretty independently. Still, it was up to her to act, and not depend on the vagaries of a somewhat hysterical colored woman. She called the garage again.

She interrupted Ella's formal opening to say, "Listen, Ella. There does seem to be a real possibility that there will be another bad storm some time this evening. Have you and George fixed your windows and shutters securely?"

"Yes, Miss Leckton," Ella said. "We've already done all that. We took the canvas chairs off the lawn and put them

in the garage, we did. George, he closed up the tool shed and he has run a rope to that young pine tree, to hold it steady, like. Everything's all right here. You want me to do anything else over here?"

"No, thank you," said Miss Leckton. "Just send George. If I think of anything further, I'll call you. Thank you."

"It's lucky I got all my washing in yesterday," Ella said. "Not like 1938. That was a Wednesday. And I had more help then."

"Yes," said Miss Leckton quickly. If she did not interrupt, Ella would start in about her son. "All right. That's good, Ella. Get George now."

"Yes, ma'am. I did that. He was right downstairs. He'll be right over. Please not to keep him too long, Miss Leckton."

"No," said Miss Leckton. "Thank you." She hung up again.

The thing to do was to go now and see Mrs. Kluger. How extraordinary people were! Imagine Ella remembering that the 1938 hurricane came on a Wednesday! Of course, that meant washing on the line to her. She was a happy and a useful woman then. Not all nervous and wrapped up in her own griefs. In normal circumstances, she could have seized the opportunity to tell Ella how badly the wash was being done. But nowadays one did better to let that sort of complaint go unsaid. Actually, one was fairly lucky to have someone to do the laundry at home.

She went out into the hallway. Through the side-lights of the south door one could see the angry ocean. But it was still just a storm and not too bad at that. The grey of the ocean and of the sky created the illusion that the grass of her lawn was green and fresh. It was not, after the summer's drought.

She went through the dining room. The silver would have to be put in the office cupboards, it would be safer there. The dining-room windows had held before, but one could never be sure a second time. After all, the windows on the south and east of the living room had blown in. Oh, thought Miss Leckton, may that not happen again!

She went through the swing door into the pantry, and through that into the kitchen. No one there. She walked to the foot of the back stairs that came out into the corner of the kitchen, and she called up them.

"Oh, Mrs. Kluger!"

"I'm coming down in jest a minute," called Mrs. Kluger's strong and rasping voice.

It's high time, thought Miss Leckton. Well past four o'clock. It would be tea-time soon.

This was the first good chance she had had to look at the storm to the westward. The waves were rolling far up the sand of Cato's Beach, and the whole long crescent of its sandy shore was white with the spray or reflected the grey of the sky in its shining wet surface. There were even small whitecaps on Ten Acre Pond, which lay north of the beach and behind what was left of the sand dunes. They had been so tall, so beautiful, those dunes, before the hurricane. Now they were short and rounded, and the beach grass was just beginning to grow back on them. God alone knew how much would be left of them if there came another hurricane. Beyond the dunes, the soft greens and browns and yellows of the marsh grass were rippling together. It would have been beautiful if it hadn't had an overtone of fear to it. It looked too much as it had looked before—it was too reminiscent.

Rubbish! thought Miss Leckton then, as she heard Mrs. Kluger's feet on the wooden treads of the stairs. Rubbish! It looks like this every time there's a September storm. The thing may go out to sea. The radio was scarcely infallible. She was conscious that much of her sense of depression had lifted. There was now something to do.

The noise of Mrs. Kluger's big feet on the stairs stopped, and Miss Leckton could hear them begin to ascend again. She did not like to be kept waiting.

"What's the matter, Mrs. Kluger?" she said.

"I jest forgot to turn off my radio," said Mrs. Kluger's voice. "Burn out my tubes."

The heavy steps ascended, and then Miss Leckton could hear her cook's progress on the floor above. Time was fleet-

ing by. There was much to be done. She walked over to the west window again and looked at the waves on the distant beach. It was necessary to do something, to occupy one's mind. Otherwise one would become too vexed and that was something that might prove disastrous. The day was past when it was safe to let oneself be vexed with servants—and show it.

Presently Mrs. Kluger came down into the kitchen.

She was a large woman with heavy legs and ankles and big feet and an enormous bosom. Her face was amiable and her cheeks were covered with a brilliant orange make-up that was unevenly applied and made a shocking contrast to her white hair. She wore a flowered cotton house-dress of a predominantly pink color that clashed with the rouge on her cheeks. Her movements were slow and heavy, but competent.

"Burn out a tube," said Mrs. Kluger, "and it takes them three weeks to replace it at that store in Cottrellton. Folger's."

"Yes," said Miss Leckton impatiently. "Yes, yes. Mrs. Kluger, it sounds now as though there were some possibility that we might get the edge of that storm here."

"Edge?" Mrs. Kluger said. "Sounds like the whole business was going to land right on top of us. According to my radio."

"It is possible," Miss Leckton said. It was extraordinary how much this woman could annoy her. Yet she did her work well, and was far from a bad cook. "At all events, I suppose it best to be prepared. I thought I'd get you to give me a hand in putting things ready."

"Always best to be ready," Mrs. Kluger said. "Now in the last storm, in 1938, my daughter was to Matunuck, expecting her first, and we did get nervous. But we were lucky. We were far from water, and we had a lot of canned goods in the house, and were all right, only thing happened was part of the roof blew off of the barn. To tell you the truth, I could wish my daughter wasn't living to Chog's Cove now. It's low and the wells and cellars there tends to flood easy. And her husband in the navy and nobody knows where, and my husband departed. That was in 1940, he was a railroad man. He certainly scurried around in the 1938 storm."

"Yes," said Miss Leckton. "Now the first thing is food . . ."

"Sure," Mrs. Kluger interrupted her. "I been all over that. I got everything arranged handy." She walked to the big closet that projected onto the kitchen porch to the north. "Everything's in the larder," she said. She opened the door and proudly waved Miss Leckton to inspect it.

Miss Leckton looked. There was no gainsaying it, everything was in perfect order, spotlessly clean.

"Now you'll see," said Mrs. Kluger. "Here is sterno and its stand, plenty of sterno, you want something hot quick. That electric range, that's bound to go out first thing, they always do. And plenty soup and here's some beans, they're nourishing. There's everything right here, ready to hand. I did it after lunch."

It was as she said, Miss Leckton admitted. Everything was in order, there was plenty for an emergency. Or—the thought flicked through her mind—there was plenty for her and for Mrs. Kluger, and even for the Potters, for several days, provided they didn't have to feed a lot of other people. But that couldn't happen again. No. Not again. She could deal with that now.

"Instant coffee," said Mrs. Kluger. "Enough sugar, but God knows that's scarce anyway, makes it hard to whip up a tasty dessert, don't it? Tea here, some of your China tea, though you only got about a half pound left, Miss Leckton, and some of my orange pekoe. Bacon. Eggs in the icebox, and that'll go out too, for sure, but they come in when George Potter come with them today, and they'll keep. A dozen eggs. We should have ordered more maybe, but they might spoil, no refrigerator. Clam chowder, three cans of it. Consommé, tomato soup, and a couple cans condensed milk, been here a long time, seems like. You'll be O.K."

It seemed a little odd to Miss Leckton, this cheerful detachment of Mrs. Kluger. She spoke of it as though she were wholly uninvolved, as though Miss Leckton were to face the storm, and its aftermath of disruption and scarcity, quite alone. It was a little disturbing.

"That's excellent," Miss Leckton said. "A beautiful job,