

THE BIRTHDAY BALL

Copyright (c) 1999 by Ursula K. Le Guin. "Dragonfly" first appeared in *Legends*. In the dark dumpster, tormented by ceaseless torrents of what-ifs, convinced that the spirit of Vanadium was going to slam the lid and lock him in with a revived corpse, Junior had for a while been reduced to the condition of a helpless child. Paralyzed by fear, withdrawn to the corner of the dumpster farthest from the putrefying pianist, squatting in trash, he had shaken with such violence that his castanet teeth had chattered in a frenzied flamenco rhythm to which his bones seemed to knock, knock, like boot heels on a dance floor. He had heard himself whimpering but couldn't stop, had felt tears of shame burning down his cheeks but couldn't halt the flow, had felt his bladder ready to burst from the needle prick of terror but had with heroic effort managed to refrain from wetting his pants. The 9-mm pistol and the ammunition were on the foyer table. With trembling hands, Junior tore open the boxes and loaded the gun. She put down her fork, glanced around the restaurant once more, and leaned across the table. Blushing brighter, she softly sang the opening lines of "Someone to Watch over Me." Junior held the silencer-fitted 9-mm pistol under his left arm, clamped against his side, freeing both hands to use the automatic pick. He rewound the words, played them again, but still the source of the threat eluded him. He was hearing them in his own voice, as if he had once read them in a book, but he suspected that they had been spoken to him and that Junior's agony might have made him howl like a cankered dog or might even have dropped him to his knees if he hadn't used the pain to fuel his anger. His knobby countenance was so sensitive that the light breeze flailed his skin as cruelly as if it had been a barbed lash. Empowered by rage even more beautiful than his countenance was monstrous, he crossed the parking lot, looking through car windows in the hope of seeing keys dangling from an ignition. Her voice was flat and a little hard. Another man might have mistaken her tone for disapproval, for impatience, even for quiet anger. "After Elfarran and Morred perished and the Isle of Solea sank beneath the sea, the Council of the Wise governed for the child Serriadh until he took the throne. His reign was bright but brief. The kings who followed him in Enlad were seven, and their realm increased in peace and wealth. Then the dragons came to raid among the western lands, and wizards went out in vain against them. King Akambar moved the court from Berila in Enlad to the City of Havnor, whence he sent out his fleet against invaders from the Kargad Lands and drove them back into the East. But still they sent raiding ships even as far as the Inmost Sea. Of the fourteen Kings of Havnor the last was Maharion, who made peace both with the dragons and the Kargs, but at great cost. And after the Ring of the Runes was broken, and Erreth-Akbe died with the great dragon, and Maharion the Brave was killed by treachery, it seemed that no good thing happened in the Archipelago. Surprising himself more than anyone, Edom also presented his collection to the university. Out with tornadoes, hurricanes, tidal waves, earthquakes, and volcanoes; bring in the roses. He lightly renovated his small apartment, painted it in brighter colors, and throughout the autumn, he stocked his bookshelves with volumes on horticulture, excitedly planning a substantial expansion of the rosarium come spring. To his surprise, when Naomi expressed an interest in romance, Junior was a bull again. He would have thought he had left his best stuff at Reverend Harrison White's parsonage. Not limited to a survey of the nursing staff on a single floor of the hospital, Junior used the elevators to roam higher and lower. Checking out the skirts. His entire body throbbed from his neck to the tips of his nine toes. His legs were the worst, filled with hot twisting agony. He preferred to venture inside the house while some lights remained on. He didn't want to be reduced to creeping stealthily in the dark through strange rooms: The very idea filled his guts with shiver chasing shiver. Although she had acutely felt the loss of Joey during the past three years, she had never missed him as much as she missed him now. Marriage is an expression of love and respect and trust and faith in the future, but the union of husband and wife is also an alliance against the challenges and tragedies of life, a promise that with me in your corner, you will never stand alone. Wet cobblestones and tattered blacktop. Hurry, hurry. Past the lighted casement window in the gallery men's room. Edom had turned away from the box of groceries that he was packing. Frowning at the pies, he said, "You don't think. . . . Wally had disposed of his properties in San Francisco under Tom's careful supervision. Any attempt to trace him from the city to Bright Beach would fail. His vehicles were purchased through a corporation, and his new house had been bought through a trust named after his late wife. He was astonished that adoption records would be sealed and so closely guarded when a child was being placed with a member of its immediate family, with its mother's sister. During the following ten days, he withdrew money from several accounts. He converted selected paper assets into cash, as well. Grinning but with an odd edge of concern in his expression that Celestina could see even through her tears, Wally said, "Does that mean you . . . you will?" Having anticipated a problem of one kind or another, Junior withdrew a packet of crisp new hundred-dollar bills from an inside jacket pocket. The bank band still wrapped the stack, and on it was printed \$10,000. No weekend had ever passed so quickly, and no midnight had ever brought with it such dread. "I'll come by at eight o'clock for breakfast," Wally suggested. "We have to set a date." By comparison, the strip club-neon aglow, theater lights twinkling---looked warm, cozy. Welcoming. Posing as a counselor with Catholic Family Services, he phoned each listed Bartholomew, with a question related to his or her recent adoption. Those who expressed bafflement, and who claimed not to have adopted a child, were generally stricken from his list. Now that efforts were being made to control the preeclampsia, Dr. Daines had scheduled a series of tests for the following day. He expected to recommend a cesarean section as soon as Phimie's e's blood pressure was reduced and stabilized, but he didn't want to risk this surgery before determining what complications might have resulted from her restricted diet and the compression of her abdomen. No hesitation preceded Grace's response. "That's very generous of you, Paul. And I, for one, accept. Is this the house where you lived with your Perri?" "Yes," she assured him, though her gaze had dropped from his mouth to his hand, so small, which she held in hers. of the

deceased. This memorial was modest, neither large nor complicated in design. Nevertheless, often the carvers in this line of business followed days after the morticians, because the stones to which they applied their craft demanded more labor and less urgency than the cold bodies that rested under them.. "Well," Agnes said, "thank the Lord, we don't have tornadoes here in California." Packed full of aftermath, the movie was too violent for Junior's taste. He had wanted to meet at a showing of *Doctor Dolittle* or *The Graduate*. But Google, as paranoid as a lab rat after half a lifetime of electroshock experiments, insisted on choosing the theater.. From the devil to the sacred and then beyond, Junior drove north on State Highway 160, which was proudly marked as a scenic route, although in these predawn hours, all lay bleak and black. Following the serpentine course of the Sacramento River, Highway 160 wove past a handful of small, widely separated towns.. "Take care he doesn't turn your belt on you with a spell!" said his uncle.. On second thought--no. If Seraphim had told anyone she'd been raped, the police would have been at Junior's doorstep in minutes, with a warrant for his arrest. No matter that they would have no proof. In this age of high sympathy for the previously oppressed, the word of a teenage Negro girl would have greater weight than Junior's clean record, fine reputation, and heartfelt denials.. "Now this. But even if your dad had cooperated with me, nothing would have changed. Since Phimie never revealed his name, I wouldn't have been able to go after Cain any differently or more effectively." In the passenger's seat, Barty was cushioned in his mother's arms. At times, the boy cooed or gurgled, or made a wet chording sound.. Pecan cakes, cinnamon custard pies boxed in insulated coolers, gifts wrapped with bright paper and glittery ribbons. Agnes Lampion made deliveries to those friends who were on her list of the needful, but also to friends who were blessed with plenty. The sight of each beloved face, each embrace, each kiss, each smile, each cheerfully spoken "Merry Christmas" at every stop fortified her heart for the sad task awaiting her when all gifts were given.. "No. Charming," she disagreed. "There's a meaning to it. Everything has a meaning, dear." As yet, he hadn't taken either an antiemetic or antihistamine to ward off vomiting and hives, because he wanted to medicate --against those conditions as shortly before the violence as was practical, to ensure maximum protection. He'd intended to dose himself only after he followed Celestina home from the gallery and could be reasonably certain that he had located the lair of Bartholomew.. Raising his revolver, Tom squeezed off two shots, but the gun didn't discharge.. The shakes returned, became more violent than previously--and then once more passed.. He had never associated Enoch Cain's dreaded Bartholomew with the disciple Bartholomew in Harrison White's sermon, which had been broadcast once in December '64, the month prior to Naomi's murder and again in January '65. Even now, with blood-scrawled-and-stabbed Bartholomew on the wall and with *This Momentous Day* before him in the brochure, Tom Vanadium couldn't quite make the connection. He strove to pull together the broken lengths in this chain of evidence, but they remained separated by one missing link.. He wiped the steering wheel and every surface that he might have touched during the drive from Victoria's to the detective's place, where he'd acquired the gardening gloves that he still wore. He got out of the car and, with the door open, wiped the exterior handle.. Junior's attorney--Simon Magusson--insisted upon full disclosure of maintenance records and advisories relating to the fire tower and to other forest-service structures for which the state and the county had sole or joint custodial responsibility. If a wrongful--death suit was filed, this information would have to be divulged anyway during normal disclosure procedures prior to trial, and since maintenance logs and advisories were of public record, Hisscus and Knacker and Nork agreed to provide what was requested.. In the present, long after the execution of Josef Krepp, half a block ahead, lay the Lipscomb house. Beyond it, the Lampion place.. The vending machines were designed to accept quarters, not to eject them. They didn't make change. Mechanically, this barrage wasn't possible.. No. Not exactly then. Not at the sight of the coin or the detective. He had felt this way at Vanadium's mention of the name that he, Junior, had supposedly spoken in his nightmare.. Wild exhilaration burst through him like pyrotechnics blazing in a night sky, reminiscent of the rush of excitement that followed his bold action on the fire tower. Happily, Junior had no emotional connection to Prosser, as he'd had to beloved Naomi; therefore, the purity of his. Maria arrived early, expecting to assist with final details in the kitchen. Though honored to be a guest, she wasn't able to stand by with a glass of wine while preparations remained to be made.. With a smudge of flour on one cheek, wiping her hands on a red-and-white checkered dishtowel, Agnes answered the door, saw the car in the driveway, and said, "Paul! You're not walking?!" While Junior had been hospitalized, Vanadium had searched his lace, with or without a warrant. Turnabout was satisfying.. Junior's breath smoked from him as if he contained a seething fire of his own. He felt a sheen of condensation arise on his face, cold and invigorating.. Since he knew where Celestina would be on January 12, there was no point in taking risks to find her sooner. He had plenty of time to prepare for their encounter, time to savor the sweet anticipation.. One of the most unnerving aspects of life in southern California was that earthquake weather came in so many varieties. As many days as not, you got out of bed, checked the sky and the barometer, and realized with dismay that conditions were indicative of catastrophe.. This wasn't thrill killing--which, now that he'd had time to think about it, he realized was beneath him, even if in the service of personal growth. This would be murder for good, justifiable cause.. The strange barrage of lightning, putting an end to the rain rather than initiating it, had been a clue. The rapid clearing of the sky--indicating a stiff wind at high altitudes, while stillness prevailed at ground level--a sudden plunge in the humidity, and an unseasonable warmth confirmed the coming catastrophe.. "I'm not going anywhere," she pledged. She had realized that his voice was growing heavy with sleep. "But it's time for you to go to dreamland." This claim wasn't true. His father, an unsuccessful artist and highly successful alcoholic, lived in Santa Monica, California. His mother, divorced when Junior was four, had been committed to an insane asylum twelve years ago. He rarely saw them. He hadn't told Naomi about them. Neither of his parents was a resume enhancer.. Shaking his head, his coffee cup rattling against the saucer, Edom said, "Uh, no, sir, no, I don't think we've ever met till now." Junior had walked along the big show windows, studying the two White paintings displayed to passersby, appalled by their beauty, when

suddenly the door had opened and a gallery employee had invited him to come in. No printed invitation needed, no cool test to pass, no bouncers keeping the gate. Such easy accessibility served as proof, if you needed it, that this was not real art..On the lawn, Koko, their four-year-old golden retriever, was lying on her back, all paws in the air, presenting the great gift of her furry belly for the rubbing pleasure of young Mistress Mary..Junior joined the throngs, although he had no gift list or feeling for the season. He just needed to get out of his apartment, because he was convinced that the phantom singer would soon serenade him again.. "We have reason to believe that the man who raped your sister is stalking you.. "I don't know." He was silent a moment. "That's what's going to be interesting." He warily surveyed those around him as he walked, and looked over his shoulder from time to time. On one of these backward glances, he was unnerved but not surprised to see Vanadium's specter..The deejay announced song number four for the week: the Beatles' "She's a Woman." The Fab Four filled the Studebaker with music..He couldn't see into the next aisle through the gaps between rows of books, because the shelves had solid backs..He exploded off Renee with the velocity of high-powered rifle fire. Stunned, disgusted, humiliated, he backed away from the chaise lounge, spluttering, wiping at his mouth, cursing.. "My little girl," she said, and belatedly she realized that this might not be a policeman, after all, but someone trying to determine if she and Angel were alone in the apartment..Walking was part of a fitness regimen that he took seriously. He would never be called upon to save the world, like the pulp heroes in the tales he enjoyed; however, he had solemn responsibilities he was determined to meet, and to do so, he must maintain good health..Out of respect for his mother, Barty struggled to hold fast to his eyeless second sight, living in the idea of a world where he still had vision, until she had been accorded the honors she deserved and had been laid to rest beside his father..As he'd proved to himself on his previous two visits-his first night in town and then two nights thereafter-this number was merely part of the pianist's repertoire. Nothing supernatural here.. "Because of a certain awareness you've had since childhood," Celestina said, recalling what he'd told her in San Francisco..Her shaking threatened her composure. She was Barty's mother and father, his only rock, and she must always be strong for him. She clenched her teeth and tensed her body and gradually quieted the tremors by an act of will..Not that she ever gave any indication that her brothers were other than a source of pride for her. She treated them always with respect, tenderness, and love-as if unaware of their shortcomings..Now, however, he was thinking not about what Agnes's story might mean to Reverend White, but about what the minister might be able to do to provide at least a small degree of comfort to Agnes, who spent her life comforting others..He didn't bother to press Vanadium's hand around the weapon. There wasn't going to be a wealth of evidence for the Scientific Investigation Division to sift through, anyway, when the fire was finally put out: just enough charred clues to allow them an easy conclusion..Assuming that the boy had closed his eyes and was talking to himself, somewhere between his self-told bedtime story and a dream, Agnes retreated from the room, pulling the door only half shut behind her..She could see now what she hadn't seen when running with him through the cemetery, because she was looking directly at him. Yet even seeing did not make it easy to believe.. "Maria brought that from Mexico," Barty said. "She thought it was pretty funny. So do I. It's a hoot. Mom says it isn't really blasphemous, because it wasn't meant to be by the people who made it, and because Jesus would want you to have cookies, and, besides, it reminds us to be thankful for all the good things we get.. "So these are reports of my explorations and discoveries: tales from Earthsea for those who have liked or think they might like the place, and who are willing to accept these hypotheses: things change: authors and wizards are not always to be trusted: nobody can explain a dragon..Already the fortune foretold, which she had strived to dismiss as a game with no consequences, was coming true..He yearned for a new heart mate. He was wise enough to know that no amount of yearning could transform the wrong woman into the right one. Love couldn't be demanded, planned, or manufactured. Love always came as a surprise, snuck up on you when you were least expecting it, like Anthony Perkins in a dress..Outside, he discovered that some worthless criminal wretch had broken into his Suburban during the night. The suitcase and Book-of-the-Month selections were gone. The creep even swiped the Kleenex, the chewing gum, and the breath mints from the glove, compartment..Convinced that the house was playing tricks on him, Barty went downstairs, step by measured step, to the foyer and the ground-floor hall..The gray pants of her jogging suit, speckled with rain that had blown in through the shattered windshield, were suddenly soaked. Her water had broken.. "The exquisite kind," he replied, glad that he had read so many books on the art of seduction and therefore knew precisely the right thing to say..At the next corner, instead of continuing south, Junior angled aggressively in front of oncoming pedestrians, stepped off the curb, and headed east, traversing the intersection against the advice of a Don't Walk sign. Horns blared, a city bus nearly flattened him, but he made..This device, which could automatically pick any lock with just a few pulls of its trigger, was sold strictly to police departments, and its distribution was tightly controlled. On the black market it commanded such a high price that Junior could have bought the better part of a small Sklent painting for the same bucks..Celestina turned in her seat to look back at Wally and Angel, who were waving. "I guess I am.. "In the three years since Perri's death, he had walked thousands of miles. He hadn't kept a record of the cumulative distance, because he wasn't trying to get into Guinness or to prove anything..In the name of Zedd, slow deep breaths. Focus not on the past, not on the present, but only on the future. What has happened is of no importance. All that matters is what will happen next..Licky took him down into the mines to show him the gangues, the kinds of earth the ore was likely to occur in. A few miners were working at the end of a long level..around a long time yet, but women outlive men by several years. Actuarial tables aren't wrong.. "I also wanted information on various things that had happened back then, before Ged and Tenar were born. A good deal about Earthsea, about wizards, about Roke Island, about dragons, had begun to puzzle me. In order to understand current events, I needed to do some historical research, to spend some time in the Archives of the Archipelago..a time, from the carafe on the nightstand. She spooned the ice into Junior's mouth not with the

businesslike."No," Otter said, and hesitated. He felt he owed this man an explanation. "See, it's not so much won't as can't. I thought of making plugs in the planking of that galley, near the keel-you know what I mean by plugs? They'd work out as the timbers work when she gets in a heavy sea." Hound nodded. "But I couldn't do it. I'm a shipbuilder. I can't build a ship to sink. With the men aboard her. My hands wouldn't do it. So I did what I could. I made her go her own way. Not his way." Here, four days past Christmas, after two days of torment, Agnes knew the worst, that her treasured son must go eyeless or die, must choose between blindness or cancer of the brain..As if he sensed her reluctance to return to Dr. Chan, Barty had kept her occupied with talk of the red planet as they approached the office building, had talked her off the street, along the driveway, and into a parking space, where finally she relinquished the fantasy of an endless road trip. At 5:45, long past the end of office hours, Dr. Chan's suite was quiet..Paul said, "I wanted you ... I don't know ... I just wanted you to see her. I wanted to say ... to say. . .".Suddenly she realized-Good Lord!-that someone else had a had inside her, up the very center of her, massaging her uterus in the same lazy pattern as that made by the piece of melting ice on her belly..At the farthest end of the loft from the stereo speakers, voices nevertheless had to be raised in even the most intimate exchanges. The artist who had created In the Baby 's Brain Lies the Parasite of Doom, Version 6, however, possessed a voice as deep, sharp-edged, and penetrating as his talent.

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