

A RHINO IN MY GRDEN LOVE LIFE AND THE AFRICAN BUSH

"That's just ... an old joke," she heard herself saying, as from a distance. "You didn't really walk between the drops?" He returned to the house and extinguished the three blown-glass oil lamps on the living-room coffee table. Out, as well, the silk-shade lamp. After coffee had been served, when Celestina and Wally were no longer the center of attention, he indicated the array of desserts with his fork, smiled, and said, "I just want you to know, Celie, that these are sweets enough until we're married." He was as solid as any boy. He was in the day but not in the rain. He was moving toward the back of the car. Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Le Guin, Ursula K., 1929-. "Oh? Do they rent their house out to pirates with little pirate children, clowns with little clown children?" Maria, after a single sip of Chardonnay, fled to the kitchen, ostensibly to check on the apricot flan that she'd brought, but in reality to press a cool and slightly damp dishtowel against her eyes. "Yes. More about that later, just let me make it clear that an interest in physics doesn't make me a physicist. Even if I were, I couldn't explain quantum mechanics in an hour or a year. Some say quantum theory is so weird that no one can fully understand all its implications. Some things proven in quantum experiments seem to defy common sense, and I'll lay out a few for you, just to give you the flavor. First, on the subatomic level, effect sometimes comes before cause. In other words, an event can happen before the reason for it ever occurs. Equally odd ... in an experiment with a human observer, subatomic particles behave differently from the way they behave when the experiment is unobserved while in progress and the results are examined only after the fact-which might suggest that human will, even subconsciously expressed, shapes reality." On a street a half mile from the airport in Eugene, he sat in the parked Dodge long enough to gingerly unwind the bandages and use a tissue to wipe off the pungent but useless salve he'd purchased at a pharmacy. Although he pressed the Kleenex to his face so gently that the pressure might not have broken the surface tension on a pool of water, the agony of the touch was so great that he nearly passed out. The rearview mirror revealed clusters of hideous, large, red knobs with glistening yellow heads, and at the sight of himself, he actually did pass out for a minute or two, just long enough to dream that he was a grotesque but misunderstood creature being pursued through a stormy night by crowds of angry villagers with torches and pitchforks, but then the throbbing agony revived him. In spite of major earthquakes pending, explosions of dynamite hauling trucks on the highway, tornadoes somewhere churning, the grim likelihood of a great dam bursting along the route, freak ice storms stored up in the unpredictable heavens, crashing planes and runaway trains converging on the coastal highway, and the possibility of a sudden violent shift in the earth's axis that would wipe out human civilization, they risked crossing the boundaries of Bright Beach and traveled north into the great unknown of territories strange and perilous. From the door to the sink, nervously fishing a plastic pharmacy bottle out of a coat pocket, Junior counseled himself to remain calm. Slow deep breaths. What's done is done. Live in the future. Act, don't react. Focus. Look for the bright side. NED--"CALL ME NEDDY"--Gnathic was as slim as a flute, with a flute-quantity of holes in his head from which thought could escape before the pressure of it built into an unpleasant music within I his skull. His voice was always soft and harmonious, but frequently he spoke allegro, sometimes even prestissimo, and in spite of his mellow tone, Neddy at maximum tempo was as irritating to the ear as bagpipes bleating out Bolero, if such a thing were possible. She strove to appear calm, and she must have succeeded, because neither woman seemed to realize that she was scared almost to the point of paralysis. She moved woodenly, joints stiff, muscles tense. Allowing one month for the job might be optimistic. On the other hand, he'd had a long time to perfect a strategy. Second-stage labor was supposed to last about fifty minutes in a woman bearing her first child, as little as twenty if the birth was not the first, but she sensed that Bartholomew was not going to come into the world by the book. Wonderful. Oh, perfect. So Neddy, a friend of Celestina's, knew that Junior, reputed to be a vicious sadist, had attended this reception under a false name. If Junior really was a sleazy pervert of such rococo tastes that he would be shunned even by the scum of the world, even by the deranged mutant offspring of a self-breeding hermaphrodite, then surely he was capable of murder, too. They were driven to St. Mary's by Detective Bellini in a police sedan. Tom Vanadium-a friend of her father's whom she had met a few times in Spruce Hills, but whom she didn't know well--literally rode shotgun, tensed to react, wary of the occupants of other vehicles on. "Acute nervous emesis," Junior croaked. "I've never thought of myself as a nervous person." Widening his eyes in calculated surprise, Junior said, "Are you a police officer?" "Fear?" Kathleen asked, more interested in Vanadium's words than in his prestidigitation. "You said you're offering fear to Cain ... as if that was something he would want." The Spruce Hills Police Department was far too small to have a full-blown Scientific Investigation Division. And if the tableau presented to them appeared convincing enough, they might accept the death as a freak accident and never turn to the state police for technical. Still looming over her, he snatched the pad out of her hands and examined the sketch. "Where would you have seen this?" He pointed at his feet. "Toes, toes, toes, toes, toes, toes, toes, toes, toes, toes." Tom didn't know what to make of this bit of information, so he said, "That's a lot." "You're the one who said your cold's just here. Maybe it stays in the kitchen, hoping it'll get a piece of pie." Reluctantly, Jacob finally returned the cards to the packs and admitted to himself that superstition had seized him and would not let go. Somewhere in the world was a knave, a human monster-even worse, according to Maria, a man as fearsome as the devil himself-and for reasons unknown, this beast wanted to harm little Barty, an innocent baby. By some grace that Jacob could not understand, they had been warned, through the cards, that the knave was coming. They had been warned. "The one I'm about to start is Dr Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, which is maybe pretty scary." "I'm not a burglar, Mr. Cain. No client has enough money to make me risk prison. Besides, even if you could steal their files, you would probably discover that the babies' identities are coded, and without the code, you'd still be nowhere." When the police operator answered, Junior

shrieked, "I've been shot! Jesus! Shot! Help me, an ambulance, oooohhhh shit! Hurry!" Memory of the Spartan decor of Thomas Vanadium's house lingered with Junior, and he addressed his living space with the detective's style in mind. He installed a minimum of furniture, though all new and of higher quality than the junk in Vanadium's residence: sleek, modern, Danish-pecan wood and nappy oatmeal-colored upholstery. Tom had no idea who Perri might be, but something in the way Grace asked the question and the way she regarded Paul suggested that she knew something about Perri that had won her deep respect and admiration. Aware of the mortician's new edginess, Jacob was convinced that his initial distrust of Panglo was justified. This twitchy little guy seemed to have something to hide. Jacob didn't have to be a cop to recognize nervousness born of guilt. So she reached across her body with her left hand, which Celestina gripped tightly. A car waited at the curb in front of the park. Dr. Salks two associates stood beside it and seemed to have been there awhile. His instructor, Bob Chicane-who visited twice a week for an hour-advised him to imagine a perfect fruit as the object of his meditation. An apple, a grape, an orange, whatever. Rising from his chair and rolling down his shirt-sleeves, Nolly said, "If you'll be our guest for dinner, I suspect we'll all have a fascinating evenings." For a while, Junior profited enormously from Tammy's investment advice, and the sex was great. As a thank-you for the hefty trading commissions she earned-and not incidentally for all the orgasms-Tammy gave him a Rolex. He didn't mind her four cats, didn't even care when the four grew to six, then to eight. Bartholomew was an uncommon name, however, and logic suggested that if the baby was now called Bartholomew, he'd been named for his adoptive dad. Therefore, a search of the listings might be fruitful. "Not that trains are any better. Look at the Bakersfield crash back in '60. Santa Fe Chief, out of San Francisco, smashed into an oil-tank truck. Seventeen people crushed, burned in a river of fire." He wasn't afflicted with parenthood envy. A baby was the last thing he would ever want, aside from cancer. Children were nasty little beasts. A child would be an encumbrance, a burden, not a blessing. An overflow crowd of mourners had attended the services at St. Thomas's Church, standing shoulder to shoulder at the back of the nave, through the narthex, and across the sidewalk outside, and now everyone appeared to have come to the cemetery, as well. A quick survey of the lavatory floor. The musician hadn't left anything behind, neither a popped button nor crimson petals from his boutonniere. He'd wanted to give Celestina more help than she would accept. She continued working nights as a waitress for two years, while she completed classes at the Academy of Art College, and she quit her job only when she began to sell her paintings for enough to equal her wages and gratuities. And somewhere Selma Galloway, their neighbor, was not a spinster but a married woman with grandchildren. Angel didn't want to go, maybe because the boogeyman schemed beneath the bed in some of her nightmares. Junior could neither speak nor even mewl in agony. All the saliva had been draining forward, out of his open mouth, for so long that his throat was parched and raw. He felt as though he had munched on a snack of salted razor blades that were now stuck in his pharynx. His rattling wheeze sounded like scuttling scarabs. Nor could she begin to imagine the nature of the disaster that had befallen him, leaving his face looking blasted and loose at all its hinges. She had last seen him at Phimie's funeral. A few minutes ago at her doorstep, she'd recognized him only because of his port-wine birthmark. As though Amelia Earhart, the long-lost aviatrix, had reached out of her twilight zone and snared the two bits, no tumbling coin glinted in the air above the desk. A residual tension drained out of Junior. He was somewhat surprised that he had still been concerned about the song. The stems, thorns sharp against his tongue. And then Agnes. Agnes in the yard, screaming. "I'm going to recommend that you be admitted overnight and that we lance these under hospital conditions. We'll use a sterile needle on some of them, but a number are so large they're going to require a surgical knife and possibly the removal of the carbuncle core. This is usually done with a local anesthetic, but in this instance, while I don't think general anesthesia will be required, we'll probably want to sedate you that is, put you in a twilight sleep." When Junior checked his Rolex, he realized that he didn't know how long he'd been sitting here since Ichabod had driven off in the Buick. Maybe one minute, maybe ten. "Seems like," Vanadium agreed. "So a man like Cain obsesses on one thing after another-sex, money, food, power, drugs, alcohol, anything that seems to give meaning to his days, but that requires no real self-discovery or self-sacrifice. Briefly, he feels complete. However, there's no substance to what he's filled himself with, so it soon evaporates, and then he's empty again." In the minister's house, Junior had seen no indications of a sister. No family photos, no high-school graduation portrait proudly framed. Of course, he had not been interested in their family, for he had been all-consumed by Seraphim. "I love you, Daddy," she said, and put the palms of her hands flat against his temples. Besides, being a future-focused guy who believed that the past was a burden best shed, he never made an effort to nurture memories. Sentimental wallowing in nostalgia had none of the appeal for him that it had for most people. "Each life," Barty Lampion said, "is like our oak tree in the backyard but lots bigger. One trunk to start with, and then all the branches, millions of branches, and every branch is the same life going in a new direction." Taking her silence for assent, Tom continued: "Your father is gone from here, gone forever, but he still lives in other worlds. This isn't a statement of faith alone. If Albert Einstein were still alive and standing here, he'd tell you that it's true. Your father is with you in many places, and so is Phimie. In many places, she didn't die in childbirth. In some worlds, she was never raped, her life never blighted. But there's an irony in that, isn't there? Because in those worlds, Angel doesn't exist-yet Angel is a miracle and a blessing." He looked up from the city to the woman. "So when you're lying in bed tonight, kept awake by grief, don't think just about what you've lost with your father and Phimie. Think about what you have in this world that you've never known in some others-Angel. Whether God's a Catholic, a Baptist, a Jew, a Muslim, or a quantum mechanic, He gives us compensation for our pain, compensation right here in this world, not just in those parallel to it and not just in some afterlife. Always compensation for the pain ... if we recognize it when we see it." Too quiet and too patient to be the living-dead incarnation of a murdered wife. This was a predatory silence, an animal cunning, not a supernatural hush. This was the elegant stillness of a panther

in the brush, Tom plucked the quarter off the glass, folded it into his right fist, and then at once opened his hand, which was now empty. "And, listen, if you leave too soon behind me, I've got a guy watching, and he'll put a hollow-point thirty-eight in your ass." As always in uncertainty, she asked herself what her mother would do in this situation. Grace, of infinite grace, unfailingly did precisely the needed thing, knew exactly the right words to console, to enlighten, to charm a smile out of even the miserable. Often, however, the needed thing involved no words, because in our journey we so often feel abandoned, and we need only to be reassured that we are not alone. He never passed through a phase during which he grew resistant to hugging or kissing. He was a hand-holding, cuddling boy to whom displays of affection came easily. FOR AMERICANS OF Chinese descent-and San Francisco has a large Chinese population-1965 was the Year of the Snake. For Junior Cain, it was the Year of the Gun, though it didn't start out that way. On the counter beside the bathroom sink stood an open box of BandAids in a variety of sizes, a bottle of rubbing alcohol, and a bottle of iodine. As punctilious as you might expect any good accountant to be, Bartholomew Prosser didn't delay long enough to make it necessary for Junior to ring the bell twice. The porch light came on. Ordinarily, she would have returned to the first of the candles and offered a second fragment to Saint Peter. In this case, however, she entrusted it to the least known of the apostles, because she was sure that he must have special significance in this matter. Bright though they were at all times, Barty's Tiffany eyes shone brighter now with beams of North Pole magic. "Maybe I do feel it." Finding nothing more of interest in the study, he considered searching the rest of the house. Although Zedd counsels living in the future, he recognizes the need to have full recollection of the past when absolutely needed. One of his favorite techniques for jolting memories loose when the subconsciously. Without using his flashlight, depending only on the moon, he ascended through the cemetery to the service road. Their evenings together were comfortable bliss, though usually they just watched television, or he read to her. She enjoyed being read to: mostly historical novels and occasional mysteries. on both sides of the property, the neighbors can't see, but some know, have always known, and have less interest. Behind the dog, Mary walked out of nowhere, ball in hand, and Koko whirled in surprise, and the chase was on again. Turning in circles, he tipped his head back, presenting his face to the streaming sky, laughing. Only two explanations occurred to him. First, bureaucracies slavishly follow the rules even when the rules make no sense. Second, the Ugliest Private Detective in the World, Nolly Wulfstan, was an incompetent dunce. If he was left standing on the porch, the visitor would circle the house, peering in windows where the drapes were not drawn, trying the doors in hope of finding one unlocked. Fearful that Victoria was sick or injured, that perhaps she had slipped on a pat of butter and cracked her Mad against the corner of an open oven door, he might try to force his way inside, break a window. Certainly he would go to the neighbors to call the police. This morning, as Barty stood to one side listening, his mother asked Maria for poems by Emily Dickinson. Celestina intended to capture Nella as she was now, head at rest upon the pillow of, perhaps, her deathbed, eyes closed and mouth slack, face ashen but serene. Then she would draw four more portraits, using bone structure and other physiological evidence to imagine how the woman had looked at sixty, forty, twenty, and ten. In the morning, after their first night together, without either of them suggesting what must be done, Barty and Angel went in silence into the backyard and, together, climbed the oak, to watch the sunrise from its highest bower. Three years later, on Easter Sunday in 1986, the fabled bunny brought them a gift: Angel gave birth to Mary. "It's time for a nice ordinary name in this family," she declared. The night of Barty's birth, when Joey actually lay dead in the pickup-bashed Pontiac, as a paramedic had rolled Agnes's gurney to the back door of the ambulance, she had seen her husband standing there, untouched by that rain as her son was untouched by this. But Joey-dry-in-the-storm had been a ghost or an illusion fostered by shock and loss of blood. OUR LADY OF SORROWS, quiet and welcoming in the Bright Beach night, humble in dimension, without groin vaults and grand columns and cavernous transepts, restrained in ornamentation, was as familiar to Maria Elena Gonzalez--and as comforting--as her own home. God was everywhere in the world, but here in particular. Maria felt happier the instant she stepped through the entrance door into the narthex. He didn't pause to lock the house behind them. Bright Beach, in 1965, was as free of criminals as it was untroubled by lumbering brontosaurus. He also sought a supplier of high-quality counterfeit ID. This proved easier than he anticipated. Nolly raised his martini glass in a toast. "To Kathleen Klerkle Wulfstan, dentist and associate detective." a scene out of a movie about Robin Hood: a battle with cudgels on a slippery log bridge over a river. "Yes. I ... I'm still soaked with sweat." Of the three Bartholomews that he'd turned up recently, he chose Prosser because, burdened by the name Enoch, Junior felt sympathy for any girl whose parents had cursed her with Zelda. "so she's married," Junior said, figuring that maybe Celestina wasn't his heart mate, after all. "Well, you're sweet, aren't you? And you're all bright red on the outside and milk chocolate inside," Celestina said, gently tweaking the girl's light brown nose. "Don't worry," Celestina told him, "after what we've seen this past week, we're still with you." He turned the knob. The door eased inward, but he pushed it open only a fraction of an inch. "And you give yourself far too little credit," Salk continued gently. "There's no doubt in my mind that Perri was a hero. But she was married to a hero, as well." As they savored the icy martinis, she asked about the client, and Nolly said, "He bought the story. I won't be seeing him again." The boy wasn't translucent, as his father's ghost had been on that drizzly January night almost three years ago. The same drowned light of this gray afternoon that revealed the gravestones and the dripping. A few attractive women were here alone, proof that social mores had changed dramatically in three years. Junior was aware of their hot gazes, their need, and he knew that he could have any of them. The second medic wheeled the gurney to the rear of the van, calling for one of the policemen to accompany him to the hospital. Apparently, he needed help if he was to deliver the baby and also stabilize Apes while en route. With a prayer to the Holy Mother, Maria held one third of a knave of spades to the bright flame of the first candle. When it caught fire, she dropped the fragment into the votive glass, and as it was consumed, she said aloud, "For Peter," referring to the most

prominent of the twelve apostles..At this extreme end of town, no streetlamps lit the pavement. With only moonlight to reveal him, he wasn't likely to be recognized if anyone happened to glance out a window..He rolled Neddy onto one side, but no gold watch lay underneath, so he let the musician flop onto his back again..PUDDLED ON THE pan-flat face, the port-wine birthmark. In the center of the stain, the closed eye, concealed by a purple lid, as smooth and round as a grape..Most likely, if Victoria was entertaining, the visitor's car would have been parked in the driveway..He continued until four aces of hearts and four aces of diamonds were on the table in front of him. These eight draws he had prepared, and this effect was his intention..This humble house wasn't where you expected to hear an elaborate custom doorbell-or even any doorbell at all, since knuckles on wood were the cheapest announcement of a visitor..A man came out of the stone tower. He passed them, walking hurriedly with a queer shambling gait, staring straight ahead. His chin shone and his chest was wet with spittle leaking from his lips..Move, move, like a runaway train, leaving the dead nuns--or at least one dead musician-far behind..She heard the door, and when she opened her eyes, the bay had already slid out of the car, into the downpour again. She called him back, but he kept going..Throughout the evening, Barty and Angel-sitting side by side and across the table from Paul-listened to the adults at times and occasionally joined in the larger conversation, but primarily they talked between themselves. When the kids' heads weren't together conspiratorially, Paul could hear their chatter, and depending on what else was being discussed around the table, he sometimes tuned in to it. He picked up on the word rhinoceros, tuned in, tuned out, but a couple minutes later, he dialed back in when he realized that Celestina, sitting two places farther along the table from him, had risen from her chair and was staring in amazement at the kids..Tom pointed to the nearly finished martini that stood on the table before him. Balanced on the thin rim of the glass: impossibly, precariously--the coin.. "There's a fine George and Ira Gershwin song called 'Someone to Watch Over Me.' Three equally modest rooms opened off this lounge. Two housed complete dental units, and the third provided cramped office space shared by the receptionist and the doctor..Junior wasn't concerned that the shots would attract unwanted attention. These large rural properties and a plenitude of muffling trees made it unlikely that the nearest neighbor would hear anything..Sklent came to mind, perhaps because of the strange drawing on the girl's sketch pad. Sklent at that Christmas Eve party, only a few months ago but a lifetime away. The theory of spiritual afterlife without a need for God. Prickly-bur spirits. Some hang around, haunting out of sheer mean stubbornness. Some fade away. Others reincarnate..During the past three years, he'd suffered much because of these sisters, including most recently the humiliation in the Dumpster with the dead musician, Celestina's pencil-necked friend with a propensity for postmortem licking. The memory of that horror flared so vividly--every grotesque detail condensed into one intense and devastating flash of recollection--that Junior's bladder suddenly felt swollen and full, although he had taken a long satisfying leak in an alleyway across the street from the restaurant at which the postcard-painting poseur had enjoyed a leisurely dinner with Ichabod..Maria fished another chip from the sweating carafe, rejected it, and scooped out a larger piece. She hesitated, staring at it for a moment, and then spooned it between Agnes's lips. "Water can't be broken if it will be first made into ice..They wore out a lot of cards and kept a generous supply of all types of decks on hand..Too far from Spruce Hills to be a popular make-out spot for teenagers, Quarry Lake was a turnoff for young lovers also because it had a reputation as haunted territory. Over five decades, four quarry workers had died in mining accidents. County lore included stories of ghosts roaming the depths of the excavation before it was flooded--and subsequently the shoreline, after the lake was filled..She didn't have an appetite, anyway. Joey was too much on her mind. The safe birth of a healthy child was a blessing, but it wasn't compensation for her loss. Although by nature resistant to depression, she now had a darkness in her heart that would not relent before a thousand dawns or ten thousand. If a mere nurse had insisted that she eat, Agnes would not have been persuaded, but she couldn't hold out against the insistent importuning of one special seamstress..She wouldn't answer him, but he was as convinced by her silence as he would have been by a blurted confession--or by a denial, for that matter. Her wild eyes convinced him, too, and her trembling mouth. Naomi had come back to be with him, and it could be argued that Seraphim had returned in a sense, too, for this girl was the flesh of Seraphim's flesh, born out of her death.. "Then I'll attend to everything right away," the doctor said, reaching for the privacy curtain that surrounded the ER bed..A tune clinked off the keys of a phantom piano in Junior's mind, "Someone to Watch over Me." The hawk-eyed watcher was the pianist at the elegant hotel lounge where Junior had enjoyed dinner on his first night in San Francisco, and twice since..To the growing pile of ruin, she added one of Joey's cardigan sweaters, after popping loose one bone button and almost completely detaching a sewn-on patch pocket. A pair of knockabout khaki pants: quickly clip open the seat seam; cut the corner of the wallet pocket, then rip it with both hands; snip loose some stitching and half detach the cuff on the left leg..Kathleen hadn't noticed Tom replace his glass on the table, over the quarter. When he lifted it to drain the last of the martini, two dimes and a nickel glittered on the tablecloth, where previously the quarter had been..A s?ance was what it appeared to be at first. Eight people were gathered around the dining-room table, which stood utterly bare. No food, no drinks, no centerpiece. They all exhibited that shiny-faced look of people nervously awaiting the revelations of a spirit medium: part trepidation, part soaring hope.

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