

WILD IRISES

"It's even worse," Junior rasped, convinced that he was losing some indefinable advantage if the cop left without playing out this moment as it would usually unfold in an intellectual television crime drama like Perry Mason or Peter Gunn. But when the lore-books of a wizard came into a warlord's hands he was likely to treat them with caution, locking them away to keep them harmless or giving them to a wizard in his hire to do with as he wished. In the margins of the spells and word lists and in the endpapers of these books of lore a wizard or his prentice might record a plague, a famine, a raid, a change of masters, along with the spells worked in such events and their success or unsuccess. Such random records reveal a clear moment here and there, though all between those moments is darkness. They are like glimpses of a lighted ship far out at sea, in darkness, in the rain. Junior had hoped not to be recognized by anyone at this affair. He regretted that he hadn't stuck to his original plan, maintaining surveillance of the gallery from his parked car. Someone named Bartholomew had adopted Seraphim's son and named the boy after himself Junior applied the patience learned through meditation to the task at hand, and instinctively, he soon evolved a motivating mantra that continuously cycled through his mind while he studied the telephone directories: Find the father, kill the son. In his voice, he heard a tremor that had nothing to do with the hideous deaths in Effingham more than sixteen years previous. He raised the window in the kitchen and climbed outside, onto the landing of the fire escape. Feeling like a high-roaming cousin to the Phantom of the Opera, bearing the requisite fearsome scars if not the unrequited love for a soprano, Vanadium descended through the foggy night, down two flights of the switchback iron stairs to the kitchen at Cain's apartment. Six captain's chairs encircled the big round table, one for everybody, including Agnes, but only Paul and Barty stayed seated. The young man raised his voice to be heard above the gobbling of the art turkeys. "No, sir. He just asked where the men's room was." Life was too short to waste it working if you had the means to afford lifelong leisure. That happened ten years ago, the first and last time anyone shot at Nolly. The real work of a private eye had nothing in common with the glamorous stuff depicted on television and in books. This was a low-risk profession full of dull routine, as long as you chose your cases wisely--which meant staying away from clients like Enoch Cain. Houses made settling noises all the time. That was one reason why he couldn't rely much on sound to guide him through the darkness. A noise he thought had been made by the weight of his tread might as easily have been produced by the house itself as it adjusted to the. Although she knew how, and although she knew the pointlessness of asking why, Agnes asked, "Why? Oh, Lord, why must a blind boy climb a tree?" Lipscomb shifted his gaze from the street below to the source of the rain. "Phimie was not gone long, perhaps a minute-a minute and ten seconds at most-and when she was with us again, it was clear from her condition that the cardiac arrest was most likely secondary to a massive cerebral incident. She was disoriented, paralysis on the right side ... with the distortion of the facial muscles that you saw. Her speech was slurred at first, but then something strange happened. . . ." Possible complications include cerebral hemorrhage, pulmonary edema, kidney failure, necrosis of the liver, coma-to name a few. With a sigh, Obadiah differed: "Not clever. Crude. Before my hands became these great-knuckled lumps, I could have dazzled you." After much oily commiseration, sanctimonious babble about Naomi having gone to a better place, and insincere talk of the government's desire always to ensure the public safety and to treat every citizen with compassion, Knacker or Hisscus, or Nork, finally got around to the issue of compensation. "He's a hollow man," Vanadium said. "He believes in nothing. Hollow men are vulnerable to anyone who offers them something that might fill the void and make them feel less empty. So-". "Well, sure," said Mary, "without dying first. That would be the easy way to get there. I'm a Lampion, aren't I? Do we take the easy way, if we can avoid it? Did Daddy take the easiest way up the oak tree?" He would have liked to take Industrial Woman, as well, but she weighed a quarter ton. He couldn't manage her alone, and he dared not hire a day worker, not even an illegal alien, to assist him, and thereby compromise the Pinchbeck van and identity. "He's blind, sure, but he's also a boy," Angel said, "and trees are something that boys gotta do." Too rattled to want lunch at the St. Francis Hotel or anywhere else, Junior returned to his apartment. After checking her carotid artery and detecting no pulse, Junior returned to the sofa in the living room. He fluffed the little pillow and left it precisely as he had found it. "Evidence suggests Vanadium killed a woman here, a nurse at the hospital. Lover's quarrel, perhaps. He set her house on fire with her body in it, to cover his tracks, but he must have realized they would still finger him, so he lit out." Academy of Art College and might have met Celestina White. The critiques of her paintings. At Tom Vanadium's request, the taxi dropped him one block from his new-and temporary-home shortly before ten o'clock in the evening. Angel. A less exotic synonym for her own name. Seraphim's angel. The angel of an angel. Copyright (c) 1997 by Ursula K. Le Guin. When Nolly sighed and frowned, his lumpish face seemed in danger of sliding off his skull, like oatmeal oozing off a spoon. "Mr. Cain, much as I regret it, I'm afraid I'm going to have to return half of the retainer you gave me." He kept the house, for it was a shrine to his life with Perri. He returned to it from time to time, to refresh his spirit. He couldn't work up sufficient saliva to get the rasp out of his voice: "Then you could learn to do it." Immediately at the thought of regurgitation, his abdominal muscles contracted like those of a laboratory frog zapped by an electric current, and he choked on a rising horror. Edom and Jacob came to dinner with Agnes every evening. And though the past weighed heavily on them when they were under this roof, without fail they stayed long enough to wash the dishes before fleeing back to their apartments over the garage. The bandaged man stormed up from the ruin of the living room, gauze fluttering around his lips as his hard exhalations seemed to prove that he wasn't a long-dead pharaoh reanimated to punish some heedless archaeologist who had ignored all warnings and violated his tomb. So this wasn't a Weird Tales moment. The gurney, one wheel rattling. The young orderly behind it, dressed all in white. And the nurse again..honor and family. This was life, and everyone

lived his life in the shadow of one solemn obligation or another. Mechanics have reliably steady hands, yet Jacob's hands shook as he discarded two cards and slowly turned over the ninth draw. Of firm but pliable rubber, custom-formed to his disfigured foot, a shoe insert filled the void left by his missing toe. This simple aid ensured that virtually all footwear was comfortable, and by November, Junior walked with no discernible limp. "Nicholas Deed." On her tongue, the name was as bitter as a dissolving aspirin. This thought startled Agnes, disturbed her-yet, inexplicably, it also poured a measure of warm comfort into her chilled heart. In the living room, the central and largest window framed a magnificent view, and swagged silk brocatelle draperies framed the window. An oversize hand-painted and heavily gilded chaise lounge, upholstered in an exquisite tapestry, stood against this backdrop of city and silk, and Renee pulled Junior down upon the chaise, desperate to be ravished there. To prove himself, he read a little of Dickens when she requested it, a passage from *Great Expectations*. Then a passage from Twain. With a tenderness that surprises and moves Celestina, the tall nurse closes the dead girl's eyes. She opens a fresh, clean sheet and places it over the body, from the feet up, covering the precious face last of all. By the time he went to bed Saturday night, the cards that had been only that morning were showing signs of wear. The roses filling the countersunk vases in the corners of Joey's gravestone were not Edom-grown, but they were Edom-bought. He had visited the florist himself, personally selecting each bloom from the inventory in the cooler; but he didn't have the courage to accompany Agnes and Barty to the grave. As was true of the entire house, the bedroom was immaculate. The wood floor gleamed as though polished by hand. A simple white chenille spread conformed to the bed as smoothly and tautly as the top blanket tucked around a soldier's barracks bunk. Nonetheless, the rapist's curse. Healthy, but healthy at the expense of Phimie. Friday brought Scamp again, all of Scamp, all day, every way, wall-to-wall Scamp, so on Saturday he hadn't enough energy to do more than shower. Because he kept imagining the stealthy sounds of a dead cop rising in vengeance behind him, Junior switched on the radio. He tuned in a station featuring a Top 40 countdown. "I doubted myself more than God, though Him, too. I had those boys' blood on my hands. They were mine to protect, and I failed." In the morning, at breakfast, from this calmer perspective, he looked back at his tantrum in the middle of the night and wondered if he might be in psychological trouble. He decided not. In November and December, Junior studied arcane texts on the supernatural, went through new women at a pace prodigious even for him, found three Bartholomews, and finished ten needlepoint pillows. The sight of the heavily bandaged face apparently pressed all of the compassion buttons in the reverend, because he broke out of his paralytic shock and started forward-before he registered the weapon. "I know how to build boats, how to sail boats." By Sunday evening, a combination of factors-deep commitment to the philosophy of Zedd, explosive testosterone levels, boredom, self-pity, and a desire to be a risk-taking man of action once more-motivated Junior to splash a little Hai Karate behind each ear and go courting. Shortly after sunset, with a single red rose and a bottle of Merlot, he set off for Victoria Bressler's place. Action. Just concentrate on action and ignore the disgusting aftermath. Remember the runaway train and the bus full of nuns stuck on the tracks. Stay with the train, don't go back to look at the smashed nuns, just keep moving forward, and everything will be all right. Twenty-eight pounds. Typically, seven to eight pounds of this is the fetus. The placenta and the amniotic fluid weigh three pounds. The remaining eighteen are due to water retention and fat stores. As Celestina settled on the sofa with the phone in her lap, hesitating to dial until she worked up a bit more courage, Angel said to Tom, "So what happened to your face?" 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. From time to time, he halted, leaning against the walker as if in need of rest. He took care occasionally to grimace-convincingly, not too theatrically---and to breathe harder than necessary. "Me, me," Celestina said. "In fact, fianc?es should come first." Astonished and appalled by the cop's insensitivity, Junior said, "You just drop this on me? I lost my wife and my baby. My wife and my baby." On the day that Vanadium attended the graveside service for Seraphim and subsequently stopped at Naomi's grave to needle Cain, he had suspected that Phimie didn't die in a traffic accident, as claimed, but he hadn't for a moment thought that the wife killer was in any way connected. Now, finding this gallery brochure in the nightstand drawer seemed to be one more bit of circumstantial proof of Cain's guilt. His Country Squire laden with cookies, plum cakes, homemade caramel corn with almonds, and gifts, Edom drove directly home from Obadiah Sepharad's place, which had been their final stop. He roared away as if trying to outrun tornadoes and tidal waves. Dr. Zedd's death, just last Thanksgiving, had been a blow to Junior, a loss to the nation, to the entire world. He considered it a tragedy equal to the Kennedy assassination one year previous. When the pianist eventually launched into "Someone to Watch over Me," he didn't appear to be responding to a request, considering that a few other numbers had been played since the most recent gratuity. The tune was, after all, in his nightly repertoire. Through the remainder of his dinner, he was entirely future focused, the past put safely out of mind. Until Although the Rolex was expensive, Junior cared nothing about the monetary loss. He could afford to buy an armful of Rolexes, and wear them from wrist to shoulder. Celebration of course, would lead to incarceration and perhaps to electrocution. With Vanadium, the maniac cop, likely to be found lurking under the bed or masquerading as a nurse to catch him in an unguarded moment, Junior had to recover at a pace that his physician would not find miraculous. Dr. Parkhurst expected to discharge him no sooner than the following morning. When he pushed Naomi, profit was the motive. He killed Victoria and Vanadium in self-defense. Those three deaths were necessary. On one particular street in Bright Beach, however, the most significant event of the year occurred on a pleasant afternoon in early April, when Barty, now nine years old, climbed to the top of the great oak and perched there in triumph, king of the tree and master of his blindness. You ever hear it, Enoch? I'm that someone for you, of course, in a romantic sense. The container-eye-level at the top, battered, rust-streaked, beaded with condensation-was larger than some in the alleyway, with a bifurcated lid. Both halves of the lid were already raised. Dr.

Walter Lipscomb's fingers were longer and more supple than the pianist's, and he had the presence of a great symphony conductor for whom a raised baton was superfluous, who commanded attention by the mere fact of his entry. A tower of authority and self-possession, he said to the becalmed Neddy, "I am this child's physician. She was born underweight and held in hospital to cure an ear infection. You sound as if you have an incipient case of bronchitis that will manifest in twenty-four hours, and I'm sure you wouldn't want to be responsible for this baby being endangered by viral disease." Industrial Woman, which he'd purchased for a little more than nine thousand dollars, less than eighteen months ago and at another gallery, would fetch at least thirty thousand in the current market, so rapidly had Baval Poriferan's reputation risen. As the nurse gave Junior the injection, Parkhurst said, "You're an exceptionally sensitive man, Enoch. That's a quality to be much admired in an often unfeeling world. But in your current condition, your sensitivity is your worst enemy." "There is no king in Earthsea," the young man said, stern and righteous, "In my master's service, then," Hound amended, patient. She switched off the hall light and stood at the half-open door, listening, waiting. Could any spell of magic make, "Crafty men" is what they called wizards in those days. Dining room. Two place settings at one end of the table. Wineglasses. Two ornate pewter candlesticks, candles not yet lit. Paul shook his head. "Oh, no. People look at our marriage, and they think I gave up so much, but I got back a lot more than I gave." Meanwhile, he became an accomplished meditator. Guided by Bob Chicane, Junior progressed from concentrative meditation with seed the mental image of a bowling pin-to meditation without seed. This advanced form is far more difficult, because nothing is visualized, and the purpose is to concentrate on making the mind utterly blank. "I guess so, but it's not that. I was thinking of something my little girl said." Now here was a thing, worse than the thought of a quarter in the closed hand: Neddy's eyes seemed to follow Junior as he rooted among the trash bags. yunh, "so she nodded as vigorously as she was able to do, and tightened her grip on Celestina's hand. She cupped his face in both of her hands and was barely able to lift his head, for fear of what she would see. 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, Darkrose and Diamond. For Gammoner, exactly as for Pinchbeck, Google had provided: a driver's license that was actually registered with the California Department of Motor Vehicles, and that would, therefore, stand up to any cop's inspection; a legitimate social-security card; a birth certificate actually on file with the cited courthouse; and an authentic, valid passport. He'd acted boldly, recklessly, without scoping the territory to be sure Prosser was alone. The accountant lived by himself, but a visitor might be present. The night that followed might as well have been a night in Hell, though a hell in which Satan provided an electrolytically balanced beverage. Celestina extended her left hand, which shook so badly that she nearly knocked over both their wineglasses. "I will." Earlier, he had placed an open fifth of vodka on the table, in front of Victoria. The nurse, no longer in the chair, sprawled on the floor as if she had emptied another bottle before this one. For guidance, Agnes couldn't rely entirely on any of the child rearing books in her library. Barty's unique gifts presented her with special parenting problems. Now, when he asked if he could stay up even later, to read about John Thomas Stuart and Lummox, John's pet from another world, she granted him permission. In the first drawer, he discovered an address book. Logically, Vanadium would have taken this with him, even if on the lam from a murder rap, so Junior tucked it in his jacket pocket. Another pocket. More cartridges. Trying to squeeze just two into the magazine, but his hands shaking and slippery with sweat. Apparently, he'd been drooling for a long time. Where his chin and throat were not sticky, a crust of dried saliva glazed his skin. I got Starkweather, killing all those people with no hope of personal gain. You got maniac cops and this new war in Vietnam. They were in the rain, the solid-glassy-pounding-roaring rain, every bit as much as Gene Kelly had been when he danced and sang and capered along a storm-soaked city street in that movie, but whereas the actor had been saturated by the end of the number, these two children remained dry. Tom's eyes strained to resolve this paradox, even though he knew that all miracles defied resolution. Maria was hand-repairing some of Joey's clothes, which Agnes had meticulously damaged earlier in the day. No weekend had ever passed so quickly, and no midnight had ever brought with it such dread. He had been stowed in a storeroom of one of the old palaces that Losen had appropriated. It had no window, its door was cross-grained oak barred with iron, and spells had been laid on that door that would have kept a far more experienced wizard captive. There were men of great skill and power in Losen's pay. Hound did not consider himself to be one of them. "All I have is a nose," he said. He came daily to see that Otter was recovering from his concussion and dislocated shoulder, and to talk with him. He was, as far as Otter could see, well-meaning and honest. "If you won't work for us they'll kill you," he said. "Losen can't have fellows like you on the loose. You'd better hire on while he'll take you." Evidently, her face was knotted with the effort to remember what the child had looked like, for the physician said, "Yes? What's wrong?" Halted by the unmistakable meaning of the expressions on these women's faces, Paul was grateful that Nellie was briefly stricken mute. He didn't believe he had the strength to receive the news that she had tried to deliver. The night seemed to be longer than a Martian month. Agnes dozed, fitfully, waking more than once, sweaty and shaking, from a dream in which her son was taken from her in pieces: first his eyes, then his hands, then his ears, his legs. He was unconscious, wired to a heart monitor, pierced by an intravenous-drip line. Clipped to his septum, an oxygen feed hissed faintly, and from his open mouth rose the barely audible wheeze of his breathing. Although she would have felt ridiculous phrasing this question in these words to any other three-year-old, no better way existed to ask it of her special son: "Kiddo ... do you realize you're speaking of your dad in the present tense?" In his entire life, Junior had never suffered this much pain without first having killed someone. Reluctant to depart until certain that his student was out of danger physically, emotionally, and mentally, Bob Chicane stayed until three thirty. When he left, he broke some bad news to Junior: "I can't keep you on my student list, man. I'm sorry, but you're way too intense for me. Way too intense. Everything you do. All the women

you run through, this whole art thing, whatever all those phone books are about-now even meditation. Way too intense for me, too obsessive. Sorry. Have a good life, man." After a while, when no plane crashed on top of him, Jacob got up, went into the kitchen, and mixed a batch of dough for Agnes's favorite treats. Chocolate-chip cookies with coconut and pecans. He turned over the two most recent discards. Neither was a jack of spades, and both were what he expected them to be. Settling onto the empty stool beside this beauty, Junior offered to buy her a drink, and she accepted. The ship of night floated over the city and cast down nets of darkness, gathering millions of lights like luminous fishes in its black toils. The artist, six feet four and two hundred fifty pounds, looked markedly more dangerous in person than in his scary publicity photo. Still in his twenties, he had white hair that fell limp and straight to his shoulders. Dead-white skin. His deep-set eyes, as silver-gray as rain with an albino-pink undertone, had a predatory glint as chilling as that in the eyes of a panther. Terrible scars slashed his face, and red hash marks covered his big hands, as though he'd frequently defended himself barehanded against men armed with swords.

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