

## THE THEORY OF GRAMMAR

In reality, it had been a homely device, a mere box. In memory, it seemed ominous, charged with the evil portent of a nuclear bomb..Matching his mother's whisper, taking obvious delight in their conspiracy, he said, "Our own secret society.".Copyright (c) 1999 by Ursula K. Le Guin.

"Dragonfly" first appeared in Legends..According to the brief biographic note with the picture, Celestina White was a graduate of San Francisco's Academy of Art College. She had been born and raised in Spruce Hills, Oregon, the daughter of a minister..It didn't seem to him to amount to much. It was such an easy matter to him to make a silvery light shine in a dark room, or find a lost pin by thinking about it, or true up a warped joint by running his hands over the wood and talking to it, that he couldn't see why they made a fuss over such things. But his father raged at him for his "shortcuts," even struck him once on the mouth when he was talking to the work, and insisted that he do his carpentry with tools, in silence.. "That's obvious to us, but not always to others. Apparently, this would have been some years ago." Junior was vigilant. He took note of all those who approached the piano, whether they dropped money in the fishbowl or not.. "The pepper tree had been whispering in the breeze, the roses nodding their bright heads. Now a stillness came into the cemetery, as if rising from beneath the grass, from out of that city of the lost..While you're trying to decide, hand me a knife, and I'll cut your jugular you brainless medical-school dropout..Those words, in a vertiginous spiral, spooled through the memory tapes in Junior's mind, as clear and powerfully affecting-and every bit as alarming-as the memory flash of the ordeal in the Dumpster. He couldn't recall where he'd heard them, who had spoken them, but revelation trembled tantalizingly along the rim of his mind..What didn't come as a surprise to Paul was Agnes's determination that the Whites, during their period of lying low, should stay with her and Barty..When Agnes and Paul returned from a honeymoon in Carmel, they discovered that Edom had finally cleared out Jacob's apartment. He donated his twin's extensive files and books to a university library that was building a collection to satisfy a growing professorial and student interest in apocalyptic studies and paranoid philosophy.. "Yes. The dried root of a Brazilian plant, the ipecacuanha. It induces vomiting with great effectiveness. The active ingredient is a powdered white alkaloid called emetine."..He swallowed one capsule and washed it down with water. He returned the pharmacy bottle to the nightstand..Acutely aware that someone with more need than patience might soon rap at the locked door, Junior dropped back into the men's room..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..Although he had made no effort to summon them, tears spilled from Junior's closed eyes. They weren't drawn from him by thoughts of poor Naomi. These next few days-perhaps weeks-were going to be tedious, until he could have Nurse Victoria Bressler. Under the circumstances, he had good reason to feel sorry for himself..He bought cracker sandwiches, some filled with cheese and some with peanut butter, redskin peanuts, chocolate bars, and Coca-Cola. Although this was an unhealthy meal, cheese and peanut butter and chocolate shared a virtue: they were all binding..In fact, though he strained hard to recall their conversations, he could dredge up nothing that Seraphim had said during therapy, as if he'd been stone-deaf in those days. The only things he retained were sensual impressions: the beauty of her face, the texture of her skin, the firmness of her flesh under his ministering hands..As Edom crossed the threshold, moving outside to the landing at the top of the stairs, Jacob followed, proselytizing for his faith: "Christmas Eve, 1940, St. Anselmo's Orphanage, San Francisco. Josef Krepp killed eleven boys, ages six through eleven, murdering them in their sleep and cutting a different trophy from each-an eye here, a tongue there."..Shortly after Agnes turned out the light, she said, "Kiddo, it's been one whole week since you walked where the rain wasn't, and I've been doing a lot of thinking about that."..Otter hesitated and said, "Yes."..From the bathroom, Junior gathered an electric razor and toiletries. He added these to the suitcases..In the instant that Junior had shoved Naomi into the rotted railing, he had foreseen this visit from Rudy, Sheena, and Kaitlin. He'd known he could pretend to be offended at the state's offer to put a price on his loss, could feign revulsion, could resist convincingly--until gradually, after grueling days or weeks, he reluctantly allowed the indefatigable..Paul sat by himself, at the far end of the restaurant from them. He ordered orange juice and waffles..He looked at the two cards following the four of clubs in the stack. Neither of these was a jack of spades, either, and both were what he anticipated..For just one hour, which was not too taxing, he walked in the idea of a world where he had healthy eyes, and shared the vision of other Barty's in other places, so he would be able to see his bride as she walked down the aisle and as, beside him, she took their vows with him, and as she held out her hand to receive the ring..At Thanksgiving dinner, again at the three tables set end to end, in the year of the triple zero, Mary Lampion, now fourteen years old, made an interesting announcement over the pumpkin pie. In her travels where none but she could go, after seven fascinating years of exploring a fraction of all the infinite worlds, she said she sensed beyond doubt that, as Barty's mother had told him on her deathbed, there is one special place beyond all the ways things are, one shining place..Two of her largest and best paintings were in the show windows, dramatically lighted. They were dazzling. They were dreadful. They were beautiful. They were hideous..He turned from the cowering girl and studied the boy, who stood a few steps inside the room, holding a can of soda in each hand. The artificial eyes were convincing, but they didn't possess the knowing look that so troubled him in the strange girl..Slowly rotating his raised hands before his eyes, as if he saw them young and supple-fingered, the magician described the amazing manipulations that a master card mechanic could perform. Though he spoke without flash or filigree, he made these feats of skill sound more sorcerous than hares from hats, doves from scarves, and blondes bisected by buzz saws.. "Ah, evidently you can read my mind. Scarier than heart reading any day. Maybe there's a thin line between minister's daughter and witch."..This was a relaxation technique that had

worked often before. He had teamed it from a brilliant book, *How to Have a Healthier Life through Autohypnosis*. This room didn't face the street by which Cain would approach the building, so Vanadium switched on the lights. He spent fifteen minutes examining the mundane contents of the cupboards, searching for nothing in particular, merely getting an idea of how the suspect lived-and, admittedly, hoping for an item as helpful to a conviction as a severed head in the refrigerator or at least a plastic-wrapped kilo of marijuana in the freezer. Tom himself had decided to build a new life here, as well, assisting Agnes with her ever-expanding work. He was not yet sure whether this would include the rededication to his vows and a return to the Roman collar, or whether he would spend the rest of his days in civvies. He was delaying that decision until the Cain case was resolved. "Mommy, did you know, every day on Mars is thirty-seven minutes and twenty-seven seconds longer than ours?" 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. In the brief silence between cuts on the album, he heard the clink of the wineglass against the bottle of Merlot, as the visitor evidently gathered them from the floor. After the paralytic bladder seizures had passed and Junior had drained Lake Mead, Chicane recommended plenty of caffeine and sugar to guard against an unlikely but not impossible spontaneous return to a trance state. "Anyway, after pumping alpha waves for as long as you just did, you shouldn't actually need to sleep anytime soon." "Well, anyway," she said, as though Muffins uncharacteristic viciousness had been adequately explained, "this mending ought to cover ten more lessons." 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. He threw away his necktie, because in the elevator, on the way down from Renee's-or Rene's--penthouse, and again on the walk back to his apartment, he had scrubbed his tongue with it. On further consideration, he threw away everything that he had been wearing, including his shoes. Phimie's stubbornly high blood pressure, the presence of protein in her urine, and other symptoms indicated her preeclampsia wasn't a recent development; she was at increased risk of eclampsia. Her hypertension was gradually coming under control-but only by resort to more aggressive drug therapy than the physician preferred to use. Of course, Seraphim's child would not have a telephone. He was just a baby, dangerous to Junior in a way that was not clear, but a baby nonetheless. "I was never Cary Grant, to begin with," said Vanadium, still ceaselessly rolling the quarter across his fingers, "so I had no big emotional investment in my appearance. Cosmetic surgery would have added another year of recuperation time, probably much longer, and I was anxious to get after Cain. Seemed to me this mug of mine might be just the thing to scare him into an incriminating mistake, even a confession." As beautiful as they were, none of these women satisfied him as profoundly as Naomi had satisfied him. For a while, Celestina had worried that the girl was slower to walk than other children, slower to talk, and slower to develop her vocabulary, even though Celestina read aloud to her from storybooks every day. Then, during the past six months, Angel had caught up in a rush though she traveled a road somewhat different from what the childrearing books described. Her first word was mama, which was fairly standard, but her second was blue, which for a while came out "boo." At three, an average child would be doing exceptionally well to identify four colors; Angel could name eleven, including black and white, because she was able routinely to differentiate pink from red, and purple from blue. Far from idiotic, Junior's cause was his survival and salvation, and he committed himself to it with every fiber of his body, with all of his mind and heart. 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. "One of the things I was searching for in your house was a life insurance policy on your wife. I didn't find one. Didn't find any canceled checks for the premium, either." Two staff members were at the front desk, when last he'd seen them, out of sight now and too far away to hear the crooning. Junior had been waiting at the doors when the library opened, and thus far he'd encountered no other patrons. He wondered if the hawk had descended in a constricting gyre, justice coming down, but he could not lift his head to see. "Yes, but it's a Catholic hospital, and they offer this option to all unwed mothers-doesn't matter what their religion." Junior had seen the silvery coin snapping off the cop's thumb and spinning upward. Now it was gone, as though it had vanished in midair. He was a patriotic guy, and he preferred American rock to the British brand. He had nothing against the English, no prejudices against people of any nationality. Nevertheless, he believed that the American Top 40 ought to feature American music exclusively. Junior had come to the gumshoe four days ago, with business that might have made a reputable investigator uncomfortable. He needed to discover whether Seraphim White had given birth at a San Francisco hospital earlier this month and where the baby might be found. Since he wasn't prepared to reveal any relationship to Seraphim, and since he resisted devising a cover story on the assumption that a competent private detective would at once see through it, his interest in this baby inevitably seemed sinister. She remained fixated on the card that she had just dealt, and for a while she didn't speak, as though the eyes of the paper knave held her in thrall. Finally she said, "Monster. Human monster." If she'd connected with his left side, as she intended, she might have broken his arm or cracked a few ribs. But lie saw the chair coming, and as agile as a base runner dodging a shortstop's tag, he turned away from her, taking the blow across his back. Done with dolls for now, Barty and Angel went upstairs to his room, where the book that talked waited patiently in silence. With her colored pencils and a large pad of drawing paper, she clambered onto the cushioned window seat. Barty sat up in bed and switched on the tape player that stood on the

nightstand. The Rolex. Because most of the trash in the huge bin was bagged, finding the watch would be easier than Junior had feared. For more than twenty-three years, he'd given his big toe little consideration, had taken it for granted, had treated it with shameful neglect. Now this lower digit seemed precious, a comparatively small fixture of flesh, but as important to his image of himself as his nose or either of his eyes. But first, in early July, he stopped taking French lessons. It was an impossible language. Difficult to pronounce. Ridiculous sentence constructions. Anyway, none of the good-looking women he met spoke French or cared whether he did. As nimble as a geriatric cat, crying out with pain, Junior nevertheless sprang onto the deep windowsill and shoved against the twin panes of the window. They were already partly open-but they were also stuck. Crouched on the deep sill, pushing against the parted casement panes of the tall French window, using not just muscle but the entire weight of his body, leaning into them, the maniac tried to force his way out of the bedroom. Tom Vanadium was no alarmist, and the most logical explanation came to him first. Paul had wanted to learn how to roll a quarter across his knuckles, and in spite of being dexterously challenged, he practiced hopefully from time to time. No doubt, he had sat at the table this morning--or even last evening, before bed-dropping the coin repeatedly, until he exhausted his patience. He was able to play peekaboo in his fifth month instead of his eighth, stand while holding on to something in his sixth instead of eighth. Eventually he found himself alone at the large viewing window of the neonatal-care unit. Seven newborns were in residence. Fixed to the foot of each of the seven bassinets was a placard on which was printed the name of the baby. Perplexed by their peculiar behavior, even slightly unnerved, Tom answered Maria's question. "I'm afraid there's nothing else I can do, nothing more of a fantastic nature." "Nicholas Deed." On her tongue, the name was as bitter as a dissolving aspirin. 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. "Angel," Phimie said urgently, and then, with an effort that made a blood vessel swell. When Bartholomew first said "Kay-jub," and held out one hand toward his uncle, Jacob surprised Agnes by crying with happiness. 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. "For the love of God," Junior pleaded, "can't you please give me something for the pain?" "Cancer," she whispered, and superstitiously reproached herself for speaking the word aloud, as though thereby she'd given power to the malignancy and ensured its existence. The machine, one in a bank of four, wasn't filled with ordinary newspapers, which cost only a dime, but with a raunchy tabloid aimed at heterosexual swingers. In a monotone that gave new meaning to deadpan, the detective added: "I'm the only one who was there who doesn't have a dry-cleaning bill." Agnes met them, pulling Grace and Angel to her side. Her eyes were bright with excitement. "Tom, you're a man of faith, even if you've sometimes been troubled in it. Tell me what you make of all this." From the far end of the table, Agnes said, "For starters, Tom, we all want to hear about the rhinoceros and the other you." He rolled his head back and forth on the pillow. "Nope. It's still just something you gotta feel." almost recoiled in disgust. She held the newborn so that its mother could look into. As if he'd been presented with many previous photos under these circumstances, Jonas Salk accepted the picture. "Your daughter?" More walls than not, in both rooms, were lined with bookshelves and file cabinets. Here he kept numerous case studies of accidents, man-made disasters, serial killers, spree killers: proof undeniable that humanity was a fallen species engaged in both the unintentional and calculated destruction of itself. She owned a public-relations firm specializing in artists, and over dinner she rhapsodized about the work of Jack Lientery. His current series of paintings-emaciated babies against backdrops of ripe fruit and other symbols of plenty-had critics swooning. In that instant, she knew the dreadful shape of the future, if not its fine details. It to the granite-topped secretary, and sat in front of the telephone. Previously, "I've got one of those faces so ordinary you see it everywhere," said Edom, and decided to tell the story of the Tri-State Tornado of 1925. Edom did as asked. Then he cut the deck into two approximately equal stacks when requested to do so. "If he and Agnes were your age, I'd agree. But she's got ten years on you, and he's got twenty, and no previous generations were as wild as yours." pistol that he'd purchased in late June. The city operated a program to melt confiscated and donated weapons and to remake them into plowshares or xylophones, or into the metal fittings of hookah pipes. He couldn't see into the next aisle through the gaps between rows of books, because the shelves had solid backs. "Quitting medicine?" Celestina asked, baffled by his announcement and his upbeat attitude. After a silent moment of surprise, Nork or Knacker, or Hisscus, said, "Your sentiment is understandable, Mr. Cain, but it's customary in these matters--". As he said cards, the magician turned a knowing look toward Edom, eliciting from him a responding frown of puzzlement. Unbuttoning her blouse, Celestina said, "Traditionally, puppies don't have a role in weddings." Nolly raised his martini glass in a toast. "To Kathleen Klerkle Wulfstan, dentist and associate detective." As Junior paced the hotel room, his fear made way for anger. All he wanted was peace, a chance to grow as a person, an opportunity to improve himself And now this. The unfairness, the injustice, galled him. He seethed with a sense of persecution. Why Cain, even if he was the father, should be interested in the little girl was a mystery to Tom Vanadium. This totally self-involved, spookily hollow man held nothing sacred; fatherhood would have no appeal for him, and he certainly wouldn't feel any obligation to the child that had resulted from his assault on Phimie. Junior approached the headstone from behind, circled it, and shone the flashlight on the chiseled facts: Junior thought he was alone, but just when he felt capable of summoning the energy to shift to a more comfortable position, he heard a man clear his throat. The phlegmy sound had come from beyond the. Agnes rubbed noses with him again, kissed him, and rose from the edge of the bed. During the rest of that first year, he walked to Palm Springs and back, a round trip of more than two hundred miles, and north to Santa Barbara. "I mean," said Dr. Lipscomb, "that I'm selling my practice and putting an end to my medical career. I wanted you to know." As kids-living

in a house that was run like a prison, stifled by the oppressive rule of a morose father who believed that any form of entertainment was an offense against God-they conducted secret card games as their primary act of rebellion. A deck of cards was small enough to hide quickly and to keep hidden successfully even during one of their father's painstakingly thorough room searches.

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