

The Seasons of the Ansarac by Ursula K. Le Guin

I talked for a long time once with an old Ansar. I met him at his Interplanary Hostel, which is on a large island far out in the Great Western Ocean, well away from the migratory routes of the Ansarac. It is the only place visitors from other planes are allowed, these days. Kergemmeg lived there as a native host and guide, to give visitors a little whiff of local color, for otherwise the place is like a tropical island on any of a hundred planes— sunny, breezy, lazy, beautiful, with feathery trees and golden sands and great, blue- green, white-maned waves breaking on the reef out past the lagoon. Most visitors came to sail, fish, beachcomb, and drink fermented ü, and had no interest otherwise in the plane or in the sole native of it they met. They looked at him, at first, and took photos, of course, for he was a striking figure: about seven feet tall, thin, strong, angular, a little stooped by age, with a narrow head, large, round, black-and-gold eyes, and a beak. There is an all-or-nothing quality about a beak that keeps the beaked face from being as expressive as those on which the nose and mouth are separated, but Kergemmeg's eyes and eyebrows revealed his feelings very clearly. Old he might be, but he was a passionate man. He was a little bored and lonely among the uninterested tourists, and when he found me a willing listener (surely not the first or last, but currently the only one) he took pleasure in telling me about his people, as we sat with a tall glass of iced ü in the long, soft evenings, in a purple darkness all aglow with the light of the stars, the shining of the sea-waves full of luminous creatures, and the pulsing glimmer of clouds of fireflies up in the fronds of the feather-trees. From time immemorial, he said, the Ansarac had followed a Way. Madan, he called it. The way of my people, the way things are done, the way things are, the way to go, the way that is hidden in the word always: like ours, his word held all those meanings. "Then we strayed from our Way," he said. "For a little while. Now again we do as we have always done." People are always telling you that "we have always done thus," and then you find that their "always" means a generation or two, or a century or two, at most a millennium or two. Cultural ways and habits are blips, compared to the ways and habits of the body, of the race. There really is very little that human beings on our plane have "always" done, except find food and drink, sleep, sing, talk, procreate, nurture the children, and probably band together to some extent. Indeed it can be seen as our human essence, how few behavioral imperatives we follow. How flexible we are in finding new things to do, new ways to go. How ingeniously, inventively, desperately we seek the right way, the true way, the Way we believe we lost long ago among the thickets of novelty and opportunity and choice.. The Ansarac had a somewhat different choice to make than we did, perhaps a more limited one. But it has its interest. Their world is farther from a larger sun than ours, so, though its spin and tilt are much the same as Earth's, its year lasts about twenty-four of our years. And the seasons are correspondingly large and leisurely, each of them six of our years long. On every plane and in every climate that has a spring, spring is the breeding time, when new life is born; and for creatures whose life is only a few seasons or a few years, early spring is mating time, too, when new life begins. So it is for the Ansarac, whose life span is, in their terms, three years. They inhabit two continents, one on the equator and a little north of it, one that stretches up towards the north pole; the two are joined, as the Americas are, by a narrower mountainous bridge of land, though it is all on a smaller scale. The rest of the world is ocean, with a few archipelagoes and scattered large islands, none with any human population except the one used by the Interplanary Agency. The year begins, Kergemmeg said, when, in the cities of the plains and deserts of the South, the Year Priests give the word and great crowds gather to see the sun pause at the peak of a Tower or stab through a Target with an arrow of light at dawn: the moment of solstice. Now increasing heat will parch the southern grasslands and prairies of wild grain, and in the long dry season the rivers will run low and the wells of the city will go dry. Spring follows the

sun northward, melting snow from those far hills, brightening valleys with green. . . And the Ansarac will follow the sun. "Well, I'm off," old friend says to old friend in the city street. "See you around!" And the young people, the almost- one-year-olds- to us they'd be people of twenty-one or twenty-two- drift away from their households and groups of pals, their colleges and sports clubs, and seek out, among the labyrinthine apartment-complexes and communal dwellings and hostelries of the city, one or the other of the parents from whom they parted, back in the summer. Sauntering casually in, they remark, "Hullo, Dad," or "Hullo, Mother. Seems like everybody's going back north." And the parent, careful not to insult by offering guidance over the long route they came half the young one's life ago, says, "Yes, I've been thinking about it myself. It certainly would be nice to have you with us. Your sister's in the other room, packing." And so by ones, twos, and threes, the people abandon the city. The exodus is a long process, without any order to it. Some people leave quite soon after the solstice, and others say about them, "What a hurry they're in," or "Shenenne just has to get there first so she can grab the old homesite." But some people linger in the city till it is almost empty, and still can't make up their mind to leave the hot and silent streets, the sad, shadeless, deserted squares, that were so full of crowds and music all through the long halfyear. But first and last they all set out on the roads that lead north. And once they go, they go with speed. Most carry with them only what they can carry in a backpack or load on a ruba (from Kergemmeg's description, rubac are something like small, feathered donkeys). Some of the traders who have become wealthy during the Desert Season start out with whole trains of rubac loaded with goods and treasures. Though most people travel alone or in a small family group, on the more popular roads they follow pretty close after one another. Larger groups form temporarily in places where the going is hard and the older and weaker people need help gathering and carrying food. There are no children on the road north. Kergemmeg did not know how many Ansarac there are but guessed some hundreds of thousands, perhaps a million. All of them join the migration. As they go up into the mountainous Middle Lands, they do not bunch together, but spread out onto hundreds of different tracks, some followed by many, others by only a few, some clearly marked, others so cryptic that only people who have been on them before could ever trace the turnings. "That's when it's good to have a three-year- old along," Kergemmeg said. "Somebody who's been up the way twice." They travel very light and very fast. They live off the land except in the arid heights of the mountains, where, as he said, "They lighten their packs." And up in those passes and high canyons, the hard-driven rubac of the traders' caravans begin to stumble and tremble, perishing of exhaustion and cold. If the trader still tries to drive them on, people on the road unload them and loose them and let their own pack-beast go with them. The little animals limp and scramble back down southward, back to the desert. The goods they carried end up strewn along the wayside for anyone to take; but nobody takes anything, except a little food at need. They don't want stuff to carry, to slow them down. Spring is coming, cool spring, sweet spring, to the valleys of grass and the forests, the lakes, the bright rivers of the North, and they want to be there when it comes. Listening to Kergemmeg, I imagined that if one could see the migration from above, see those people all threading along a thousand paths and trails, it would be like seeing our Northwest Coast in spring a century or two ago when every stream, from the mile-wide Columbia to the tiniest creek, turned red with the salmon run. The salmon spawn and die when they reach their goal, and some of the Ansarac are going home to die, too: those on their third migration north, the three-year-olds, whom we would see as people of seventy and over. Some of them don't make it all the way. Worn out by privation and hard going, they drop behind. If people pass an old man or woman sitting by the road, they may speak a word or two, help to put up a little shelter, leave a gift of food, but they do not urge the elder to come with them. If the elder is very weak or ill they may wait a night or two, until perhaps another migrant takes their place. If they find an old person dead by the roadside,

they bury the body. On its back, with the feet to the north: going home. There are many, many graves along the roads north, Kergemmeg said. Nobody has ever made a fourth migration. The younger people, those on their first and second migrations, hurry on, crowded together in the high passes of the mountains, then spreading out ever wider on a myriad narrow paths through the prairies as the Middle Land widens out north of the mountains. By the time they reach the Northland proper, the great rivers of people have tasseled out into thousands of rivulets, veering west and east, across the north. Coming to a pleasant hill country where the grass is already green and the trees are leafing out, one of the little groups comes to a halt. "Well, here we are," says Mother. "Here it is." There are tears in her eyes and she laughs, the soft, clacking laugh of the Ansarac. "Shuku, do you remember this place?" And the daughter who was less than a halfyear old when she left this place— eleven or so, in our years— stares around with amazement and incredulity, and laughs, and cries, "But it was bigger than this!" Then perhaps Shuku looks across those half- familiar meadows of her birthplace to the just-visible roof of the nearest neighbor and wonders if Kimimmid and his father, who caught up to them and camped with them for a few nights and then went on ahead, were there already, living there, and if so, would Kimimmid come over to say hello? For, though the people who lived so close- packed, in such sociable and ceaseless promiscuity in the Cities Under the Sun, sharing rooms, sharing beds, sharing work and play, doing everything together in groups and crowds, now have all gone apart, family from family, friend from friend, each to a small and separate house here in the meadowlands, or farther north in the rolling hills, or still farther north in the lakelands— even though they have all scattered out like sand from a broken hourglass, the bonds that unite them have not broken; only changed. Now they come together, not in groups and crowds, not in tens and hundreds and thousands, but by two and two. "Well, here you are!" says Shuku's mother, as Shuku's father opens the door of the little house at the meadow's edge. "You must have been just a few days ahead of us." "Welcome home," he says gravely. His eyes shine. The two adults take each other by the hand and slightly raise their narrow, beaked heads in a particular salute, an intimate yet formal greeting. Shuku suddenly remembers seeing them do that when she was a little girl, when they lived here, long ago. Here at the birthplace. "Kimimmid was asking about you just yesterday," Father says to Shuku, and he softly clacks a laugh. Spring is coming, spring is upon them. Now they will perform the ceremonies of the spring. Kimimmid comes across the meadow to visit, and he and Shuku talk together, and walk together in the meadows and down by the stream. Presently, after a day or a week or two, he asks her if she would like to dance. "Oh, I don't know," she says, but seeing him stand tall and straight, his head thrown back a little, in the posture that begins the dance, she too stands up; at first her head is lowered, though she stands straight, arms at her sides; but then she wants to throw her head back, back, to reach her arms out wide, wide... to dance, to dance with him... And what are Shuku's parents and Kimimmid's parents doing, in the kitchen garden or out in the old orchard, but the same thing? They face each other, they raise their proud and narrow heads, and then he leaps, arms raised above his head, a great leap and a bow, a low bow... and she bows too... And so it goes, the courtship dance. All over the northern continent, now, the people are dancing. Nobody interferes with the older couples, recourting, refashioning their marriage. But Kimimmid had better look out. A young man comes across the meadow one evening, a young man Shuku never met before; his birthplace is some miles away. He has heard of Shuku's beauty. He sits and talks with her. He tells her that he is building a new house, in a grove of trees, a pretty spot, nearer her home than his. He would like her advice on how to build the house. He would like very much to dance with her some time. Maybe this evening, just for a little, just a step or two, before he goes away? He is a wonderful dancer. Dancing with him on the grass in the late evening of early spring, Shuku feels that she is flying on a great wind, and she closes her eyes, her hands float out from her sides as if on that wind,

and meet his hands... Her parents will live together in the house by the meadow; they will have no more children, for that time is over for them, but they will make love as often as ever they did when they first were married. Shuku will choose one of her suitors, the new one, in fact. She goes to live with him and make love with him in the house they finish building together. Their building, their dancing, gardening, eating, sleeping, everything they do, turns into making love. And in due course Shuku is pregnant; and in due course she bears two babies. Each is born in a tough, white membrane or shell. Both parents tear this protective covering open with hands and beaks, freeing the tiny curled-up newborn, who lifts its infinitesimal beaklet and peeps blindly, already gaping, greedy for food, for life. The second baby is smaller, is not greedy, does not thrive. Though Shuku and her husband both feed her with tender care, and Shuku's mother comes to stay and feeds the little one from her own beak and rocks her endlessly when she cries, still she pines and weakens. One morning lying in her grandmother's arms the infant twists and gasps for breath, and then is still. The grandmother weeps bitterly, remembering Shuku's baby brother, who did not live even this long, and tries to comfort Shuku. The baby's father digs a small grave out back of the new house, among the budding trees of the long springtime, and the tears fall and fall from his eyes as he digs. But the other baby, the big girl, Kikirri, chirps and clacks and eats and thrives. About the time Kikirri is hauling herself upright and shouting "Da!" at her father and "Ma!" at her mother and grandmother and "No!" when told to stop what she is doing, Shuku has another baby. Like many second conceptions, it is a singleton. A fine boy, small, but greedy. He grows fast. And he will be the last of Shuku's children. She and her husband will make love still, whenever they please, in all the delight and ease of the time of flowering and the time of fruit, in the warm days and the mild nights, in the cool under the trees and out in the buzzing heat of the meadow in summer noontime, but it will be, as they say, luxury love; nothing will come of it but love itself. Children are born to the Ansarac only in the early Northern spring, soon after they have returned to their birthplace. Some couples bring up four children, and many three; but often, if the first two thrive, there is no second conception. "You are spared our curse of overbreeding," I said to Kergemmeg when he had told me all this. And he agreed, when I told him a little about my plane. But he did not want me to think that an Ansar has no real sexual or reproductive choice at all. Pairbonding is the rule, but but human will and contrariness change and bend and break it, and he talked about those exceptions. Many pairbonds are between two men or two women. Such couples and others who are childless are often given a baby by a couple who have three or four, or take on an orphaned child and bring it up. There are people who take no mate and people who take several mates at one time or in sequence. There is of course adultery. And there is rape. It is bad to be a girl among the last migrants coming up from the South, for the sexual drive is already strong in such stragglers, and young women are all too often gang-raped and arrive at their birthplace brutalised, mateless, and pregnant. A man who finds no mate or is dissatisfied with his wife may leave home and go off as a peddler of needles and thread or a tool-sharpener and tinker; such wanderers are welcomed for their goods but mistrusted as to their motives. When we had talked together through several of those glimmering purple evenings on the verandah in the soft sea breeze, I asked Kergemmeg about his own life. He had followed Madan, the rule, the way, in all respects but one, he said. He mated after his first migration north. His wife bore two children, both from the first conception, a girl and a boy, who of course went south with them in due time. The whole family rejoined for his second migration north, and both children had married close by, so that he knew his five grandchildren well. He and his wife had spent most of their third season in the South in different cities; she, a teacher of astronomy, had gone farther south to the Observatory, while he stayed in Terke Keter to study with a group of philosophers. She had died very suddenly of a heart attack. He had attended her funeral. Soon after that he made the trek back

north with his son and grandchildren. "I didn't miss her till I came back home," he said, factually. "But to come there to our house, to live there without her – that wasn't something I could do. I happened to hear that someone was needed to greet the strangers on this island. I had been thinking about the best way to die, and this seemed a sort of halfway point. An island in the middle of the ocean, with not another soul of my own people on it... not quite life, not quite death. The idea amused me. So I am here." He was well over three Ansar years old; getting on for eighty in our years, though only the slight stoop of his shoulders and the pure silver of his crest showed his age. The next night he told me about the southern migration, describing how a man of the Ansarac feels as the warm days of the northern summer begin to wane and shorten. All the work of harvest is done, the grain stored in airtight bins for next year, the slow-growing edible roots planted to winter through and be ready in the spring; the children are shooting up tall, active, increasingly restless and bored by life on the homeplace, more and more inclined to wander off and make friends with the neighbors' children. Life is sweet here, but the same, always the same, and luxury love has lost its urgency. One night, a cloudy night with a chill in the air, your wife in bed next to you sighs and murmurs, "You know? I miss the city." And it comes back to you in a great wave of light and warmth – the crowds, the deep streets and high houses packed with people, the Year Tower high above it all – the sports arenas blazing with sunlight, the squares at night full of lantern-lights and music where you sit at the café tables and drink ü and talk and talk till halfway to morning – the old friends, friends you haven't thought of all this time – and strangers – how long has it been since you saw a new face? How long since you heard a new idea, had a new thought? Time for the city, time to follow the sun! "Dear," the mother says, "we can't take all your rock collection south, just pick out the most special ones," and the child protests, "But I'll carry them! I promise!" Forced at last to yield, she finds a special, secret place for her rocks till she comes back, never imagining that by next year, when she comes back home, she won't care about her childish rock collection, and scarcely aware that she has begun to think constantly of the great journey and the unknown lands ahead. The city! What do you do in the city? Are there rock collections? "Yes," Father says. "In the museum. Very fine collections. They'll take you to see all the museums when you're in school." School? "You'll love it," Mother says with absolute certainty. "School is the best good time in the world," says Aunt Kekki. "I loved school so much I think I'm going to teach school, this year." The migration south is quite a different matter from the migration north. It is not a scattering but a grouping, a gathering. It is not haphazard but orderly, planned by all the families of a region for many days beforehand. They all set off together, five or ten or fifteen families, and camp together at night. They bring plenty of food with them in handcarts and barrows, cooking utensils, fuel for fires in the treeless plains, warm clothing for the mountain passes, and medicines for illness along the way. There are no old people on the southward migration – nobody over seventy or so in our years. Those who have made three migrations stay behind. They group together in farmsteads or the small towns that have grown around the farmsteads, or they live out the end of their life with their mate, or alone, in the house where they lived the springs and summers of their lives. (I think what Kergemmeg meant, when he said he had followed his people's Way in all ways but one, was that he had not stayed home, but had come to the island.) The "winter parting," as it is called, between the young going south and the old staying home is painful. It is stoical. It is as it must be. Only those who stay behind will ever see the glory of autumn in the Northern lands, the blue length of dusk, the first faint patterns of ice on the lake. Some have made paintings or left letters describing these things for the children and grandchildren they will not see again. Most die before the long, long darkness and cold of winter. None survive it. Each migrating group, as they come down towards the Middle Land, is joined by others coming from east and west, till

at night the twinkle of campfires covers all the great prairie from horizon to horizon. They sing at the campfires, and the quiet singing hovers in the darkness between the little fires and the stars. They don't hurry on the southward journey. They drift along easily, not far each day, though they keep moving. As they reach the foothills of the mountains the great masses split apart again onto many different paths, thinning out, for it's pleasanter to be few on a trail than to come after great numbers of people and trudge in the dust and litter they leave. Up in the heights and passes where there are only a few ways to go they have to come together again. They make the best of it, with cheerful greetings and offers to share food, fire, shelter. Everyone is kind to the children, the half-year-olds, who find the steep mountain paths hard going and often frightening; they slow their pace for the children. And one evening when it seems they have been struggling in the mountains forever, they come through a high, stony pass to the outlook – South Face, or the Godsbeak Rocks, or the Tor. There they stand and look out and out and down and down to the golden, sunlit levels of the South, the endless fields of wild grain, and some far, faint, purple smudges – the walls and towers of the Cities Under the Sun. On the downhill road they go faster, and eat lighter, and the dust of their going is a great cloud behind them. They come to the cities – there are nine of them; Terke Keter is the largest – standing full of sand and silence and sunlight. They pour in through the gates and doors, they fill the streets, they light the lanterns, they draw water from the brimming wells, they throw their bedding down in empty rooms, they shout from window to window and from roof to roof. Life in the cities is so different from life in the homesteads that the children can't believe it; they are disturbed and dubious; they disapprove. It is so noisy, they complain. It's hot. There isn't anywhere to be alone, they say. They weep, the first nights, from homesickness. But they go off to school as soon as the schools are organised, and there they meet everybody else their age, all of them disturbed and dubious and disapproving and shy and eager and wild with excitement. Back home, they all learned to read and write and do arithmetic, just as they learned carpentry and farming, taught by their parents; but here are advanced classes, libraries, museums, galleries of art, concerts of music, teachers of art, of literature, of mathematics, of astronomy, of architecture, of philosophy – here are sports of all kinds, games, gymnastics, and somewhere in the city every night there is a round dance – above all, here is everybody else in the world, all crowded into these yellow walls, all meeting and talking and working and thinking together in an endless ferment of mind and occupation. The parents seldom stay together in the cities. Life there is not lived by twos, but in groups. They drift apart, following friends, pursuits, professions, and see each other now and then. The children stay at first with one parent or the other, but after a while they too want to be on their own and go off to live in one of the warrens of young people, the communal houses, the dormitories of the colleges. Young men and women live together, as do grown men and women. Gender is not of much import where there is no sexuality. For they do everything under the sun in the Cities Under the Sun, except make love. They love, they hate, they learn, they make, they think hard, work hard, play; they enjoy passionately and suffer desperately, they live a full and human life, and they never give a thought to sex – unless, as Kergemmeg said with a perfect poker face, they are philosophers. Their achievements, their monuments as a people, are all in the Cities under the Sun, whose towers and public buildings, as I saw in a book of drawings Kergemmeg showed me, vary from stern purity to fervent magnificence. Their books are written there, their thought and religion took form there over the centuries. Their history, their continuity as a culture, is all there. Their continuity as living beings is what they see to in the North. Kergemmeg said that while they are in the South they do not miss their sexuality at all. I had to take him at his word, which was given, hard as it might be for us to imagine, simply as a statement of fact. And as I try to tell here what he told me, it seems wrong to describe their life in the cities as celibate or

chaste: for those words imply a forced or willed resistance to desire. Where there is no desire there is no resistance, no abstinence, but rather what one might call, in a radical sense of the word, innocence. They don't think about sex, they don't miss it, it is a non-problem. Their marital life is an empty memory to them, meaningless. If a couple stays together or meets often in the South it is because they are uncommonly good friends – because they love each other. But they love their other friends too. They never live separately from other people. There is little privacy in the great apartment houses of the cities – nobody cares about it. Life there is communal, active, sociable, gregarious, and full of pleasures. But slowly the days grow warmer; the air dryer; there is a restlessness in the air. The shadows begin to fall differently. And the crowds gather in the streets to hear the Year Priests announce the solstice and watch the sun stop, and pause, and turn south.

People leave the cities, one here, a couple there, a family there.. It has begun to stir again, that soft hormonal buzz in the blood, that first vague yearning intimation or memory, the body's knowledge of its kingdom coming. The young people follow that knowledge blindly, without knowing they know it. The married couples are drawn back together by all their wakened memories, intensely sweet. To go home, to go home and be there together! All they learned and did all those thousands of days and nights in the cities is left behind them, packed up, put away. Till they come back South again.. "That is why it was easy to turn us aside," Kergemmeg said. " Because our lives in the North and the South are so different that they seem, to you others, incoherent, incomplete. And we cannot connect them rationally. We cannot explain or justify our Madan to those who live only one kind of life. When the Bayderac came to our plane, they told us our Way was mere instinct and that we lived like animals. We were ashamed." (I later checked Kergemmeg's "Bayderac" in the Encyclopedia Planaria, where I found an entry for the Beidr, of the Unon Plane, an aggressive and enterprising people with highly advanced material technologies, who have been in trouble more than once with the Interplanary Agency for interfering on other planes. The tourist guidebook gives them the symbols that mean "of special interest to engineers, computer programmers, and systems analysts.") Kergemmeg spoke of them with a kind of pain. It changed his voice, tightened it. He had been a child when they arrived – the first visitors, as it happened, from another plane. He had thought about them the rest of his life. "They told us we should take control over our lives. We should not live two separate half- lives, but live fully all the time, all the year, as all intelligent beings did. They were a great people, full of knowledge, with high sciences and great ease and luxury of life. To them we truly were little more than animals. They told us and showed us how other people lived on other planes. We saw we were foolish to do without the pleasure of sex for half our life. We saw we were foolish to spend so much time and energy going between South and North on foot, when we could make ships, or roads and cars, or airplanes, and go back and forth a hundred times a year if we liked. We saw we could build cities in the North and make homesteads in the South. Why not? Our Madan was wasteful and irrational, a mere animal impulse controlling us. All we had to do to be free of it was take the medicines the Bayderac gave us. And our children need not take medicines, but could have their being altered by the genetic science of Bayder. Then we could be without rest from sexual desire until we got very old, like the Bayderac. And then a woman would be able to get pregnant at any time before her menopause – in the South, even. And the number of her children would not be limited.. They were eager to give us these medicines. We knew their doctors were wise. As soon as they came to us they had given us treatments for some of our illnesses, that cured people as if by a miracle. They knew so much. We saw them fly about in their airplanes, and envied them, and were ashamed. "They brought machines for us. We tried to drive the cars they gave us on our narrow, rocky roads. They sent engineers to direct us, and we began to build a huge Highway straight through the Middle Land. We blew up mountains with the explosives the Bayderac gave us so the Highway could run wide and level, south

to north and north to south. My father was a workman on the Highway. There were thousands of men working on that road, for a while. Men from the southern homesteads... Only men. Women were not asked to go and do that work. Bayder women did not do such work. It was not women's work, they told us. Women were to stay home with the children while men did the work." Kergemmeg sipped his ü thoughtfully and gazed off at the glimmering sea and the star-dusted sky. "Women went down from the homesteads and talked to the men," he said. "They said to listen to them, not only to the Bayderac... Perhaps women don't feel shame the way men do. Perhaps their shame is different, more a matter of the body than the mind. It seemed they didn't care much for the cars and airplanes and bulldozers, but cared a great deal about the medicines that would change us and the rules about who did which kind of work. After all, with us, the woman bears the child, but both parents feed it, both nurture it. Why should a child be left to the mother only? They asked that. How could a woman alone bring up four children? Or more than four children? It was inhuman. And then, in the cities, why should families stay together? The child doesn't want its parents then, the parents don't want the child, they all have other things to do... The women talked about this to us men, and with them we tried to talk about it to the Bayderac. "They said, 'All that will change. You will see. You cannot reason correctly. It is merely an effect of your hormones, your genetic programming, which we will correct. Then you will be free of your irrational and useless behavior patterns.' "But we answered, 'But will we be free of your irrational and useless behavior patterns?' "Men working on the Highway began throwing down their tools and abandoning the big machines the Bayderac had provided. They said, 'What do we need this Highway for when we have a thousand ways of our own?' And they set off southward on those old paths and trails. "You see, all this happened – fortunately, I think – near the end of a Northern Season. In the North, where we all live apart, and so much of life is spent in courting and making love and bringing up the children, we were – how shall I put it – more short-sighted, more impressionable, more vulnerable. We had just begun the drawing together, then. When we came to the South, when we were all in the Cities Under the Sun, we could gather, take counsel together, argue and listen to arguments, and consider what was best for us as a people. "After we had done that, and had talked further with the Bayderac and let them talk to us, we called for a Great Consensus, such as is spoken of in the legends and the ancient records of the Year Towers where history is kept. Every Ansar came to the Year Tower of their city and voted on this choice: Shall we follow the Bayder Way or the Manad? If we followed their Way, they were to stay among us; if we chose our own, they were to go. We chose our way." His beak clattered very softly as he laughed. "I was a halfyearling, that season. I cast my vote." I did not have to ask how he had voted, but I asked if the Bayderac had been willing to go. "Some of them argued, some of them threatened," he said. "They talked about their wars and their weapons. I am sure they could have destroyed us utterly. But they did not. Maybe they despised us so much they didn't want to bother. Or their wars called them away. By then we had been visited by people from the Interplanary Agency, and most likely it was their doing that the Bayderac left us in peace. Enough of us had been alarmed that we agreed then, in another voting, that we wanted no more visitors. So now the Agency sees to it that they come only to this island. I am not sure we made the right choice, there. Sometimes I think we did, sometimes I wonder. Why are we afraid of other peoples, other Ways? They can't all be like the Bayderac." "I think you made the right choice," I said. "But I say it against my will. I'd like so much to meet an Ansar woman, to meet your children, to see the Cities Under the Sun! I'd like so much to see your dancing!" "Oh, well, that you can see," he said, and stood up. Maybe we had had a little more ü than usual, that night. He stood very tall there in the glimmering darkness on the verandah over the beach. He straightened his shoulders, and his head went back. The crest on his head slowly rose into a stiff plume, silver in the starlight. He lifted his arms above his head. It was the pose of the antique Spanish dancer,



fiercely elegant, tense, and masculine. He did not leap, he was after all a man of eighty, but he gave somehow the impression of a leap, then a deep graceful bow. His beak clicked out a quick double rhythm, he stamped twice, and his feet seemed to flicker in a complex set of steps while his upper body remained taut and straight. Then his arms came out in a great embracing gesture, towards me, as I sat almost terrified by the beauty and intensity of his dance. And then he stopped, and laughed. He was out of breath. He sat down and passed his hand over his forehead and his crest, panting a little. "After all," he said, "it isn't courting season." To the Ospreys of McKenzie Bridge, whose lifestyle inspired this story — Ursula K. Le Guin

# About this Title

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