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MUD AND BLUEBELLS

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A Thesis  
Presented to  
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Morehead State University

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts

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by  
Rebecca L. Bailey  
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Rose Orlich

Director of Thesis

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## MUD AND BLUEBELLS

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Morehead State University, 1986

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Mud and Bluebells is a creative writing thesis, more specifically, a structural novel. The chapters of the novel are grouped according to the biological process known as Mitosis: Interphase, Prophase, Metaphase, Anaphase, and Telophase. Instead of splitting and reproducing as a cell would do, each of these phases represents a stage in the life of Charlie Blistre, as we follow him from his middle-aged rut through the various severings and regroupings in his life and in himself until he is reformed into a finally unified, stronger whole. Chapter 1 constitutes Interphase; Chapter 2 is Prophase; Chapters 3 and 4 are Metaphase; Chapters 5, 6, and 7 are Anaphase, and Chapter 8 is Telophase.

Charlie Blistre is a Doctor of Zoology, Professor of

Invertebrate Zoology and Entomology. Unhappily married to an equally unhappy woman named Brigatta, he has for years resented her demands and those of their three children on the time and energies he would prefer to be spending at research. The inevitable break happens, and he moves into his office at the university.

The major portion of the novel revolves around life as it happens to Charlie Blistre while living in his office. He meets a graduate student with whom he develops a deep friendship, and thus more questions, and more pain, arise.

Throughout his tribulations, Charlie Blistre is a man who has always been and who still is guided by deep-seated moral principles, who has a definite sense of right and wrong and confronts it daily. Whether in his relationship with his girlfriend or his wife, or dealing with his children or his students, he is continually warring with himself as to how to have the life which will fulfill his needs and wants, and how to be a good person as well. Whether he reconciles with his wife or breaks away to live a life alone, it will be the decision which will prove to be the right one for the finally fused together Charlie Blistre.

The basic premise of this book is that people can still have interesting and exciting lives even though they

try to be good. Charlie Blistre wants to do what is right by his family and friends, his students, himself, and the Earth and her inhabitants. Secondary issues deal with animal rights, vivisection, and ecology.

Accepted by: Ross Orlich, Chairman  
Eugene O. Young  
Marc Hassel

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## Chapter One

Charlie Blistre was not accustomed to getting his way.

His wife Brigatta begrudged the time he spent at work, and considered him in the way when he was at home.

His teenage daughter Wanda Lee (who erroneously thought she was God's gift to men) spoke to him with disdain and sarcasm, if at all.

His son Rodney said he didn't have an artistic soul, and abhorred the family name his father had bequeathed him.

His four-year-old daughter Alexandra adored her daddy. She was the light of her father's life and the recipient of all the love he was not able to give anyone else.

"If anything happened to Alexandra," he once told a friend, "I would kill Brigatta and Wanda Lee and Rodney and hope to contract a wasting disease before the law executed me."

Every weekday morning, Charlie Blistre got up at 5:30 and stumbled into the bathroom to wash his face in cold water, because his grandmother, God rest her soul, had told him when he was a boy that it would keep him from

getting pneumonia. He had never had pneumonia, so he guessed it worked. Then, after urinating sleepily, he wandered to the kitchen and put on a pot of coffee.

While the coffee was just beginning to boil and the house was still and dark, he would tiptoe quietly into baby Alexandra's room to watch her as she slept. The sight of her tiny body lying trustingly in her low little bed filled him with a sweet melancholy that he loved to savor. He loved her so much. He wanted to pick her up and squeeze her tightly and kiss her and kiss her and kiss her. Instead he just looked at her sleeping angel face with its long dark eyelashes, tenderly touching the toasty warmth of her cheek. "Darling," he whispered softly. Some days he would wipe a tear from his eye as he crept noiselessly back to the kitchen.

Then he sat down at the dinette table with its hard red plastic trying to imitate marble, in a red plastic chair, and drank his coffee with a sense of reverence. He put both hands around the warm, brown mug and took his first careful sip with his eyes closed. So good. Warm all the way down. The nervy house dog, Buffy, got up with him, lying sleepily on his lap. He weaved his fingers in and out of her long black hair.

Charlie Blistre sat in rare and welcome solitude, thinking and drinking coffee. Sometimes he would plan



his day or think about something Brigatta or one of the children had said, but mainly he would daydream. "It's all that ever kept me sane," he later thought. "If I couldn't have sat all alone for a few minutes each early morning, utterly alone, without my ignorant but well-meaning wife butting in or my obnoxious but well-meaning offspring trying to tell me how to live, I think I would have done something definitely drastic long, long ago."

Around 6:30 bleary-eyed Brigatta stumbled into the kitchen, wrapped in a shapeless, sexless robe. Her brown hair was ruffled and she was excessively grumpy, but the lines on her face were softened. She sat down at the table, saying glumly, "Why am I always tired when I get up?" When she said this, as she did every morning, she never looked at Charlie Blistre, but at one of the buttons on her housecoat. She'd twiddle it round and round. This was the only time of day that he was fond of his wife. He could slyly stare at her, without her barking, "And what are you gawking at?" Looking at her and studying her, he wondered what had become of the woman who had enchanted him so all those years ago, and usually decided that it was he who had driven her away. It made him sad, but there were very few things that didn't.

By seven the kids began drifting in for breakfast,

which Brigatta made after communing with her button. Rodney was the only one who woke up human, and he didn't consider it at all unartistic to wolf down a huge breakfast. Buffy greedily gobbled her fake hamburger dog food. She threw up a few minutes later, then asked Rodney to share his pancakes. Wanda Lee, perpetually on a diet, usually didn't have much but orange juice. It didn't keep her from having saddlebags on her thighs. She'd inherited those from Charlie's mother Petunia, who always wore dresses that she filled out amply in the hips. Her husband Derrick used to pinch her wide bottom or give her a slap and say with a wink to the kids, "God, what a woman!" Petunia would blush and say something vulgar, which-sounded silly in her little voice, causing him to give her a hug and a big wet kiss. The kids (and there were plenty) either got embarrassed or giggled, depending on their ages. His parents had really loved each other. When Derrick died, he had heard Petunia say to his sister Nancy, "I don't think I can handle having no sex life." She laughed when she said it, but he knew she meant it. Charlie Blistre wondered where he had gone wrong.

Skipping breakfast, he showered while the kids were eating. That was a good part of the day, too. He liked just to stand there in the hot, hot water, letting it

beat against him, making his skin all red and tingly. It was as if the water was making love to him. At times he didn't even wash, just stood there in the stinging caresses. But not for long. Wanda Lee knocked and said loudly, "Dad, are you gonna stay in there all day?" So he'd get out and let Wanda Lee in to get beautiful.

By a quarter to eight they were all ready. Rodney and Wanda Lee argued all the way to school, blissfully ignoring him. He dropped them off at the high school and went on to his own school, the college where he was a biology professor.

Dr. Charlie Blistre loved school. It was the only thing he really loved besides Alexandra and his dog.

He cherished his small office crammed full of books, his tidy desk, and badly upholstered chairs, the old coffee pot and hot plate, and the odds and ends hanging on the wall and separating the books. One was a fine drawing of a Japanese Beetle (Popilla japonica), framed, that one of his students had drawn and given to him. He had an asymmetrical grouping of local butterflies in Riker mounts, various seashells, Smoky Bear posters with birds and wildflowers, a stuffed homemade frog (another gift from a student), and an overcrowded bulletin board full of clippings and photographs, both old and new. Plus the trivia he'd collect and bring in, along with

that of colleagues and students, a conglomeration of all kinds of weird things--it was a wonderful room and it was home to Charlie Blistre.

At forty-seven, he'd been on the faculty a little over twenty years. He had taken his doctorate in aquatic entomology after he began teaching, in spite of Brigatta's disgust at having a perpetual student for a husband. His dissertation was on the relationship between pH and the larval development of Green Lacewings. It occupied a special place on his bookshelf.

His was a small university (between 7,000 - 8,000 students), so his teaching load was heavy. Since he was an entomologist, it was assumed that he also knew all there was to know about any type of invertebrate that man has been fortunate enough to classify. He didn't much care for his Invertebrate Zoology classes because the material was so basic as to be quite boring to him. It also covered a lot of territory which he knew only superficially.

Some of the stuff he'd gone over so many times he was sure he could repeat it backwards if he were suspended upside-down over a vat full of burbling goo.

When Charlie Blistre taught mitosis, it was difficult for him because he'd heard it all so many times before.

"Interphase, prophase, metaphase, anaphase,

telophase," he wrote across the length of the blackboard.

"Today the topic for discussion is mitosis," he said, facing the freshman crop at nine o'clock. "Can anyone give me a definition of mitosis?"

Dr. Blistre leaned against the blackboard with his hands in the pockets of his lab coat. The students immediately broke eye contact. A couple began leafing through their texts, a few looked in their notes, some wiggled--but none answered. Typical, he thought. No one says anything at the beginning of class.

"That was in your reading assignment for today." He looked at unrepentant faces. "Okay. You have exactly five minutes to study the diagrams in the chapter for today. Starting now."

"What page is that on?" one girl asked.

"I don't know. Look on your syllabus."

Another said, "Are we gonna have a quiz?"

Charlie Blistre replied, "Wait and see."

When the time was up, he walked slowly to where he had written "Interphase" on the board. Above that, he wrote, "Mitosis."

"Now who can define mitosis?" He looked around. "Mr. Smith. Write the definition on the board." He held the chalk towards the student, who picked up his text.

"No," he said, "off the top of your head."

Mr. Smith shuffled to the board, and managed a mangled definition. They were able to correct it without much problem to read basically, "Cell division."

He reclaimed the chalk and drew a picture of the cell as it would look in Interphase. He defined it for them as he sketched: not really a stage of mitosis, because the cell wasn't doing anything visible, yet it was the key to everything, for DNA replication was taking place.

He then passed the chalk to Miss Dunn, inviting her to do the same with Prophase. When she finished, he told her to give the chalk to which ever student she wished to illustrate Metaphase. And so on until they finished. This was fun now. Then the chalk was passed around again for corrections and fine-tuning. And Prophase finally emerged with the chromosomes beginning to shorten and thicken, centrioles forming, and poles and spindle fibers becoming apparent. In Metaphase the pairs of chromosomes lined up in the middle of the cell, and then the pairs separated. Anaphase showed the separated pairs of chromosomes moving towards opposite sides of the cell. Telophase saw the formation of a cleavage furrow and then two daughter cells, identical to the original cell, and the chromosomes reorganized into nuclei. All this was

correct.

Charlie Blistre was quite pleased. It was hard to get enthusiastic about mitosis, but they'd done well.

He had three sections of Invertebrate Zoology each semester and four lab sessions, which made up most of his teaching load. Yet no matter how busy he was, he always had time for Entomology.

Ah, Entomology! Lovely, rewarding Entomology! It was Charlie Blistre's vocation and avocation. Generally he taught two sections, one regular and one graduate. Not only was it a fascinating subject, but some of the words were so intriguing to say. Bibionidae (a family of flies). Imago. Gossamer-winged Butterflies. Neopterous Exopterygota (having folded wings and gradual metamorphosis). He was attracted to the ugliest of insects--Mole Crickets, Toad Bugs.

Both his classes were field classes, necessitating a great deal of time spent outdoors. In early spring they'd put on waders, hunting the rivers and streams for mayfly larvae. Later on he'd take them into the woods and roll over fallen logs to catch Carabids and Wood Roaches and smaller beetles in decaying tree trunks. One time a girl was poking around mindlessly in a rotting log and found a Unicorn Beetle, with its huge frontal horn. She screamed and screamed. Charlie Blistre almost

died laughing. He didn't really like collecting moths or butterflies. They were too pretty to kill. He had a large collection, but most of them he had found after they'd already died. In his undergraduate days he'd gone on a week-long field trip to Mississippi. His bugologist professor was along and caught a Luna Moth one night and gave it to him for his collection. Its thick white fuzzy body bore large shapely green wings, a pale ephemeral green. He put it in his kill jar and figured by morning it would be dead. It wasn't. His chloroform must have evaporated, for the poor thing was still alive after two days. He felt so sorry for it that his professor injected it with formalin to finally finish it off. That pretty much took care of soft-hearted Charlie's aspirations to collect Lepidopterans (one had to be British to carry it off suitably anyway). Besides, if one of the lovely things was caught in the net, it had to be pinched on the thorax to keep it from flapping and destroying its wings. Sometimes their bodies squished messily, and it made Charlie Blistre want to throw up.

Someone once called him a bleeding-heart ecologist. He felt rather proud of the title. He had had a terrible time in some field classes in his undergraduate days because of collecting. Like salamanders and frogs. They weren't made to float around in cloudy formaldehyde with



their eyes bugged out scaring girls. He didn't feel so bad about killing insects because their nervous systems weren't highly advanced, and there were so many of them. Butterflies were the only seriously endangered insect species, which he never killed anyway. He secretly apologized to most insects before he killed them, but not roaches and flies. They lent themselves to such good gross-out stories, though. Such as roaches and flies regurgitating on foodstuff to soften it before they ate it. Charlie Blistre loved bugs, and he believed that most of the students loved his classes. One night a bunch studying for a lab exam brought in pizza and cokes and made a party out of it. That was the way to learn.

He usually got to his office around a quarter after eight, and immediately put on a pot of coffee to brew. About the time it was finished making itself, his buddy from across the hall, Joel Hampton, would wander in to ask, "Got any coffee?"

"Help yourself," Charlie Blistre always replied, eyeing the empty mug he brought in. This ritual had been carried on without fail every morning, five days a week, for as long as either of them cared to remember. Hampton was a botanist.

"Damn awful coffee," he sputtered after taking a tentative sip.

"I don't see you making any," he'd retort. The awfulness of Charlie Blistre's coffee was almost legendary. It was always strong, exceedingly black, and invariably tasted used. If some miracle of God had made it possible for Charlie Blistre to brew good coffee, Hampton and several other professors as well as a few questionably privileged students would have felt slighted and insulted to the nth degree. This fetid morning coffee was a given.

They would talk of supremely important and interesting things for about five minutes; lately they had taken to complaining about the recent departmental ruling requiring them to wear ties. Then Hampton, in his male model style, ambled back to his own office, leaving him to look over his notes for class.

Around nine he would go to his lecture room and talk for an hour on some aspect of invertebrate zoology. He wasn't a fascinating lecturer who entertained and beguiled. He was solid and sturdy and dry as dust and ever so careful. He never bored by babbling or baffled with brilliance. Charlie Blistre presented the facts accurately and interestedly, and a minimum of students fell asleep. .

He usually didn't mind lecturing. Even if a student was persnickety and asked difficult questions, trying to

make him look foolish, he could usually B.S. his way out of it. Charlie Blistre thought that that was the most wonderful thing about biology. Exceptions to every rule, which weren't really rules because they were broken so frequently. Not that he wasn't conscientious. For he was. But he was human.

Charlie Blistre was very human.

Labs were gross. The smell was death. Things floated in nasty-colored liquids, peering around with eerily alive eyes no matter which way you turned them. And it reeked of the delayed death decay and the agents that prevented decomposition. The bouquet of formaldehyde, preservative par excellence. Murder weapons--chloroform, formalin, alcohol, ether. You have to smell a biology lab to appreciate all the nuances. This was no place for anyone with a weak stomach.

Charlie Blistre had to suppress a gag every time he walked into the room. It was a morgue, with all the cadavers in used and reused buckets just waiting to be examined. Here's a starfish for you and you. Don't forget to look for the statocyst in your crayfish. Be very careful with the jellyfish, their membranes tear so easily.

The weird thing was that the students usually loved dissecting, jumping in with enthusiasm. He was of the

opinion that this exercise ought to be approached seriously and rather reverently. After all, it was dessication. But God's creatures lay mangled and mutilated in the dissecting trays, with little flat-headed pins holding them open. He sometimes got lost during labs, wandering around the tables in his little white professor coat, inspecting trays and specimens, resisting the usually strong impulse to shout, "No! Treat them with respect! The same kind of life that flows through you once blessed and animated them. Think about what you're doing, you morons."

Despite all this, he loved his job, and needed it. Not just for money. Not much mattered to Charlie Blistre, and he clung tenaciously to those few things that did.

For lunch he usually walked across the street to the cafeteria. He kept on his little white professor coat, and nodded absent-mindedly to students. The walk was short and so familiar that he knew every crack in the sidewalk, but to Charlie Blistre this was not a symbol of his festering life. It was always changing, always varied, yet comfortable and homey. His office was on the third floor, with all the other biological offices and classrooms. At 12:45 he turned out the lights and quietly closed his door, which he very seldom locked. It was a symptom of Charlie Blistre's paranoia that he hated locks.

Locks were so finite, so cold, so barren. They concealed whatever was hidden behind them, good or bad, always proof that humanity is trustless. An open lock was as bad as a broken clock. Once Brigatta had dashed a wind-up alarm clock to the floor in a gust of anger at him. Charlie Blistre just stood there, looking down at the mangled, mocking machinery, looking at and staring at and being that clock, diffusing into that obscenely still amalgam where the springs wiggled out gracefully to make shadows on the floor. Charlie Blistre left the room and the clock and Brigatta to stand in the shower in a blistering hot stream of water that couldn't quite convince him that he wasn't a clock inside.

"Everybody has phobias," the Minstral would comment. "My sister Genevieve has this thing about finding dead people in public bathrooms. They've always been murdered and propped up on the toilet so that no feet can be seen from under the stall. It's not really a fear, she says, just something she invariably thinks about whenever she goes into a foreign bathroom. Locks and clocks ain't nothing."

Depending on which day of the week it was, he spent part of the afternoon either teaching more invertebrate labs or happying his way through entomology. "I could talk about bugs all day," he'd say with a grin. Then

after class he stayed in his office doing tedious work--grading or making tests, giving his student assistants something to do, reading and revising his lecture notes. Charlie Blistre usually left between 5:00 and 5:30. He was one of the last to leave.

He piddled around a long time at his office because he hated to go home. He had read a poem by Robert Frost one time, "The Death of the Hired Man," and somewhere in it, it said something like, "Home is where they have to take you in when you haven't got anyplace else to go." He didn't hate the house he lived in, and he didn't love it; it was just there.

Some evenings, especially in the spring, he would drive out to the little park that was on the outskirts of town. It was too early for baseball practice and too late for schoolkids to be out, so Charlie Blistre had it all to himself. He would pretend to be annoyed by his shivering. He liked to walk out the little path that led to Bluebell Island. It was a hunk of mud that sat in the middle of the river, but in the spring it was covered with Wild Bluebells and Trout Lilies and Dwarf Irises. One time he very stealthily pulled up a few bluebells by the roots and took them home and planted them. Brigatta was all over him for getting his coat pockets full of mud, but he ignored her and set them out under a tree in his

backyard. They were lovely.

"That was one of the few things that I ever did that I was proud of," he told a friend. "Over the years they grew and they spread under that whole damn tree. Even Wanda Lee and Rodney liked them. That's when Rodney told me I would probably like paintings by Monet--he was simply amazed that I had any aesthetic sensibilities whatsoever. And Wanda Lee, by the time she was in high school they were at their peak, and she'd wear them in her hair to proms and dances and stuff. I'd take Alexandra out there and she'd laugh and roll and pick huge bouquets in her chubby little hands, and throw them all over me and her. Everyone liked them except Brigatta. She always cut them down with the lawnmower. Oh, they'd grow awhile because everybody screamed at her if she bothered them. But they would get mutilated eventually. I guess it was the year that Wanda Lee was about thirteen and figured that she was adult enough to swear in front of us when she called her mother a cat turd, and Brigatta came squalling to me. Poor Wanda Lee looked defiant and almost sorry, and I looked at her and said, 'You were wrong to call her that. She's a bigger crapload than that. How about a bear turd? Or maybe a pile where a dinosaur had the runs.' Me and Wanda Lee laughed and laughed, and Rodney looked at us and said, 'God.' " Charlie Blistre smiled. "But I always

knew what Brigatta was doing when she cut those flowers down. She couldn't stand it because I'd done something good for once. I never said it and she never said it, but I knew it was really me she was castrating and spitting out of that lawnmower."

Then on other days he would stop at the library and read journals (he was really quite a conscientious scientist and educator) or go to a mall and just walk around and look at things. It was about 6:30 when he finally got home.

"Daddy! Daddy!" Alexandra would cry exultantly and run tottering into his open arms. He would swing her high into the air with a mammoth grin. She'd shriek excitedly and throw back her exquisite head, her dark hair flying. Then he'd bring her down and give her a great big bear hug, smash his cheek into hers, and say, "Daddy loves Alexandra."

"I love Daddy," she'd whisper, and Charlie Blistre thought that he would be dead were it not for the grace of Alexandra.

Meanwhile, spastic Buffy was cavorting and barking shrilly in her attempt to welcome him home. He put down his daughter and picked up the dog, saying, "Eeeh-oh, Foon!" She had a tongue that unerringly sought the mouth, but was contented with anything, and became ecstatic if



she happened to hit a nose hole or a tongue (rapture).

She was called Foon due to the unending degradation of the word Buffy (Buffy - Buffoon - Foon). The name fit her, for she was a bundle of neurotic dog energy. Wanda Lee kept saying that she ought to be taken to a dog psychologist (Buffy, that is, not Wanda Lee). Rodney, who sometimes pretended to know about such things, said that she must have an extra y-chromosome because she never went in heat and had an inordinate interest in the private parts of female canids. Brigatta pretended not to like her, but it was pretty obvious that she didn't buy dog biscuits because she liked to gnaw on them herself. Only Wanda Lee wasn't stupid over her; "God," she said, "I think that dog runs this house."

Dinner was always nice. Brigatta was a good cook, and an accomplished force-feeder. Plop! "Would you care for more mashed potatoes?" Glurk! "Need some more milk?" She always reminded Charlie Blistre of his sainted mother Petunia, for she was just the opposite. "I cook it," she'd say, "and from then on it's up to you. I ain't gonna eat it for you."

Of the many rules Brigatta made concerning the behavior of the children, one of the few that was kept was the one that required everyone to be home for dinner.

It sounded like fifty people were trying to eat at

the little table rather than five. Buffy hovered around everyone's feet until she decided who was going to be the soft touch for the evening, then stuck by him faithfully. Usually it was Rodney, who claimed her as his dog.

This was about the only time of day that Charlie Blistre saw his elder children. They generally had things to do in the evenings and were away, or they kept to themselves in their rooms, studying or whatever it was that they did when they were alone. He wondered if he would like them more or less if he knew them better. He loved them, sure--they were his kids. He was astounded by Rodney, who was exceptionally bright and sensitive. His father felt stupid around him. He had skipped a grade, and was in the same year--junior--as Wanda Lee, a never-ending source of frustration to her. He played piano for the school chorus and the flute in the band ("He could make those instruments sound so ephemeral and delicate," Charlie told the Minstral. "I could never imagine him playing something that boomed or blared or screeched. Someone asked him to play in a rock band once, and he refused. Said he loved to listen to it, but he didn't want to make sounds like that."). Wanda Lee was so normal, not overly bright or stupid or pretty or ugly. Sometimes Rodney said of Buffy, "She has no original thoughts," because she had to go to the bathroom where

the outside dog did. Charlie Blistre often thought that of Wanda Lee.

So Rodney baffled him and Wanda Lee bored him. Once the Minstral had said to him, "You don't like your two oldest kids too much, do you?" Charlie Blistre had been properly outraged, but the Minstral had seen through him.

"Guess what I did today, Daddy?" Dimpled Alexandra asked her daily question once they were all together.

"You caught a unicorn?"

She laughed delightedly, and said, "No!"

"You kissed a handsome prince and turned him into a frog," said Rodney.

She gleefully yelled, "No!" again, and said, "I decorated my bedroom with crayons. I marked all over my walls!" she said triumphantly.

"What did you draw?" asked Charlie Blistre and Rodney, and Wanda Lee said, "You bad girl!" and Brigatta said, "You should have seen the awful mess she made."

"Wasn't awful," said Alexandra, her mouth full.

"Don't talk with your mouth full, doll," cautioned Charlie Blistre. "Your mamma doesn't like it."

"And," said Alexandra, making it a point to swallow very noticeably, "I drew beautiful things. I drew clouds and horses and a princess with a rainbow coming out of her head. And when Mommy found it, she spanked me." She made

a face. "And then she made me wash it all off."

"God, Mom, don't stifle her creative spirit," said Rodney. "I think it's great that she feels moved to do something like that."

Alexandra smiled and started to say something, but Brigatta said, "You wouldn't think it so lovely if you had to clean up after her all the time."

"You didn't clean up after me, I cleaned up after me!" she shouted, hitting her spoon on the table.

Charlie Blistre motioned to her to put her spoon back in her plate and quit flinging sauce everywhere.

"Besides," Rodney continued, "there is nothing she could possibly conceive of in her little mind, much less draw on her walls, that could equal in degenerate bad taste that thing Wanda Lee drools over. It's like that stupid poster is an icon or something."

"You're just jealous because you don't look like that," snapped Wanda Lee, picking at her food.

"I wouldn't look like that if you paid me."

"You mean you couldn't."

"Maybe I couldn't, but why would I ever want to?"

"What are you talking about?" asked Charlie Blistre.

"Arnold Schwarzenegger," said Brigatta.

"That weird-looking man on Wanda Lee's wall," added Alexandra.

"She's in love with him," said Rodney.

"I am not!"

"You want his body," said Alexandra, and collapsed into giggles. Rodney gave her an approving little pinch and smiled.

Brigatta said, "Alexandra! Honestly."

"God," said Wanda Lee, starting to get angry. "It's only a damn poster."

"Don't swear, honey," said Brigatta. "Eat up."

"I'm so fat, Mama," she said quietly. Rodney rolled his eyes.

"You're not fat, honey," said Brigatta. "You're just solid around the edges. Your Grandma Petunia, that's fat."

"Grandma Petunia!" said Alexandra. "When can we go visit Grandma Petunia?"

"We'll go real soon," said Charlie Blistre. "Maybe we'll go this weekend."

"Oh, no," said Wanda Lee. "We can't go this weekend. We can't. Oh, Daddy, don't you remember anything?" she wailed. "There's a dance this weekend at school. It's a formal and everything, and I even got a new dress."

"I made it," said Brigatta.

"And it's the most beautiful dress I ever had. I just gotta go."

"Bathroom's down the hall," said Rodney.

"Wanna tell me about your date, Wanda Lee?" her father said, looking at his plate.

"Why? Are you going to forbid me to go?" she spat.

"No. I just want to know if he's a nice guy."

"He is. He's beautiful. He looks like Sylvester Stallone."

"Another icon," groaned Rodney. "Is he a jock?"

"He's an athlete, if that's what you mean," she said coolly.

"You just have a good time," said Charlie Blistre guiltily, remembering other episodes when he had not been terribly understanding.

"You mean we can't go to Grandma Petunia's?" yelled Alexandra.

"You're going to have to quit yelling, and start talking like a regular person," said Brigatta.

"Leave her alone," said Charlie Blistre.

"What do you want her to be regular for?" said Rodney.

"God," said Brigatta.

"God," said Wanda Lee.

No original thoughts, thought Charlie Blistre.

"I wanna see Grandma soon," she said. "Real soon."

"Maybe we'll go, just you and me. Would you like that, princess?"

Alexandra squealed, and Brigatta said, "You'll have to

take her now. She'll never let you out of it. She's got you twisted around her finger, anyway," she said with spite. Most of the time she felt that Charlie Blistre should stay out of raising the kids. After all, they were hers.

"So I'll take her," he said evenly. "It's been much too long since I visited with Mother, anyway. Alexandra and I can have a nice time."

"Ha!" said Wanda Lee. "She's a little demon. You won't have a single second to talk to Grandma. She'll be outside trying to eat weeds or something."

"More spaghetti, son?" she asked, raking the rest onto his plate.

"Mom, I wanted some more worms," said Alexandra loudly. "Why did you give them all to Rodney?"

"He's a garbage disposal," said Wanda Lee.

"At least I dispose and not adipose," he said, and kicked her under the table. He gave some worms to Alexandra, who started eating them with her hands.

"Yum," she sang.

Wanda Lee said to Rodney, "Shut up, fag."

Brigatta said, "Don't eat with your fingers, you wicked child."

"What did you do today, dear?" asked Charlie Blistre.

"You mean me?" asked Brigatta, wiping off Alexandra's

hands.

"Mmm." His mouth was full.

"She watched TV and warshed things and wouldn't let me do stuff," said Alexandra.

"I asked your mother," said Charlie Blistre, wagging his head indulgently at her.

"Oh, just the usual things," she said vaguely. It was what she always said, but she expected to be asked. "And you?" she said politely. He thought, What have I done now?

"FOON!" blared Rodney, and he dropped some spaghetti into her mouth. She ate it and scratched his leg, her black marble eyes expectant.

Charlie Blistre thought, She's mad at me for taking Alexandra to Mother's. Aloud he said to her, "Would you like to go to Mom's with us?"

"No!" roared Alexandra. "No! Just me and Daddy! Me and Daddy!" She hit the table.

"Alexandra Blistre!" admonished Charlie, thrilled out of his mind. "That's an awful thing to say to your mother! You apologize now!"

"No," she said, crossing her little arms and shaking her head stubbornly.

He said, "Alexandra," again, drawing out the word.

"Oh, it doesn't matter," said Brigatta. "I'd like



some time alone, I think."

"But you're alone a lot, Mom," said Rodney.

"She means in bed, stupid," said Wanda Lee, and was immediately kicked hard by Rodney as he gave her an ugly look. Charlie Blistre smiled shyly and thought, Do they all know how much she hates me?

"Me and Lester sleep together," said Alexandra. "Can I take Lester to Grandma Petunia's?"

"Of course, sweetheart," he said, wishing he was next to her so he could hug her. Darling Alexandra.

"Tasty dinner, hon," said Charlie, kicking back his chair and he got up. Alexandra waved her arms in the air. He picked her up and started into the living room.

"Hold it, Blistre. She's got to help with dishes," said Brigatta. Wanda Lee had gone to get ready for a date.

"No, she doesn't," he replied.

"All you ever do is spoil that child!" shouted his wife, slamming her chair back under the table.

"And I shall continue to do so," he said. He was thinking, One day she'll be grown up all of a sudden and won't tag after her daddy anymore. And I hope to God she doesn't have a lard butt or a nagging tongue. But today she's still my baby, and I'd die without her. So up yours, Brigatta.

Charlie Blistre said, "Just let the damn dishes

drain." As he would later tell the Minstral, things spoiled between him and his wife when she decided that sparkling dishes and whiter sheets were more important than taking the time to savor. "Gemutlichkeit became more and more important to me," he explained, "while she got more into sterility."

"Or better yet, Mom," said Rodney, although he knew he was going to get yelled at for what he was about to say, "why don't you just throw them all away? We'll start eating out of paper plates."

Brigatta gave a loud martyred sigh and started cleaning up the table, while Charlie Blistre gave his son a rare hug, thinking, I don't know what planet you're from, but it must be a lot more civilized than this one.

They went into the living room and played with Buffy, squealing as the dog got them all with her wonderfully nimble and searching tongue. By eight Charlie Blistre was in his study, where he read or wrote or thought until ten-thirty or eleven.

Charlie Blistre could remember when going to bed was his favorite time of the day. It used to be the most beautiful thing in the world to climb into the warm bed he shared with Brigatta and snuggle up together with her. They'd put their arms around each other and just lie there, sometimes not saying a word. Lying there those

nights with Brigatta he felt the warmest feelings he'd ever known. He felt so protected, so secure and so tranquil, and so loved. He felt as if he could protect her from anything, from burglars or fire-breathing dragons or loneliness or pain or sadness. He could protect and shield her from everything. Except indifference.

He could never figure out what went wrong, or what it was that over the years turned that warmth, the Gemutlichkeit, into a studied neutrality that was worse than cold. "Sometimes I wished she would scream at me," he explained to the Minstral. "Anything would have been better than nothing. It was like I grew smaller and smaller and gradually became another wrinkle in the sheet."

For years he had wished to find the elusive, synergistic something they had lost. For years he had wished for separate beds so he could forget about it. But Charlie Blistre did not like to make waves.

Charlie Blistre was not accustomed to getting his way. And he was tired of it.

## Chapter Two

So Charlie Blistre and Alexandra went to visit Grandma Petunia.

Burnished, burgundy October was a fine time for visiting and driving around the countryside. Alexandra sat in the car talking gravely with her father, her legs always moving--kicking and bouncing, up in the seat and underneath her. Occasionally her pants leg would slip up, revealing a plump little limb that Charlie Blistre loved to look at. His own legs were hideous hairless glow-in-the-dark Anglo Saxon man things that looked as if someone had hacked them out of lard with an axe.

Alexandra brushed back her hair from her mouth and her eyes with an imperiously grown-up gesture that made Charlie Blistre glad to be alive. He was blessed by having her all to himself, grinning delightedly when he thought about how she was half him. It made him feel as though he weren't such a worthless creature after all.

Brigatta had been very nice about the whole thing, packing for both of them, and making a sackful of things to eat. She had also provided a pillow, quilt, and toy assortment for Alexandra's use when she got restless, as she invariably would on this long trip.

As they were getting ready to leave, he felt moved to say something to Brigatta. His mouth opened but nothing came out. He wanted to tell her he was sorry for all the pain and all the loneliness he had caused. She quickly said, "Don't say anything." Now it was too late.

"Don't worry," she had said. "It will be all right."  
It will be all right.

He didn't know what she meant, but he knew that it had been the right thing to say, and he was comforted by it in an unsettling sort of way.

He had called Grandma Petunia the night before so she would be expecting them. He always called her Grandma Petunia now when he spoke of her, never Mom.

Alexandra came stumbling into her parents' room at 3:30 a.m. to see if it was time to get up yet. It wasn't, but Charlie Blistre got up anyway--an earlier start wouldn't hurt anything.

Alexandra was excited and effervescent, tightly clutching Lester by his plaid neck. She dragged him in, too, when they stopped at a truckstop about an hour later to have breakfast. The sleepy-eyed people looked at them and smiled.

Charlie Blistre hadn't made his usual coffee that morning so he ordered a whole pot, along with blueberry pancakes. Alexandra wanted eggs and toast and 7-UP, but

instead she got V8 ("She'll never notice," he thought. It's all letters and numbers"). She behaved herself nicely and Charlie Blistre didn't make any big messes, either-- he had a tendency to disgrace himself with food in public. Alexandra was beginning to get sleepy, and he figured he could belt her into the car so that when the time came for him to release the remains of the coffee, he could just stop at the side of the road. Charlie Blistre wondered sometimes why he didn't take his coffee and pour it right into the toilet.

The baby did go to sleep, snuggled up in the traveling quilt and pillow her mother had thoughtfully provided (it would not have occurred to Charlie Blistre to do such a thing). The miles sped by and Charlie Blistre once emitted a mammoth belch and excused himself to the car, then rolled his eyes backwards in disgust.

Petunia still lived near the area where they had moved when Charlie Blistre was sixteen. He was plunged from upper middle class suburbia into a lower class ramshackle farming community. It was Mr. Blistre's one foray into an alternate lifestyle, and he gave it up after three years.

The house had no plumbing, and lacked seemingly everything else besides some old weather-worn boards, dirty windows (some broken), and a fireplace which made a

laughingstock of the little group of people naive enough to think they could heat a dilapidated, two-story house with it.

Charlie and Petunia once watched it snow through the cracks where the chimney stones and the house didn't fit together properly. When the snow began coming in around the windows, Petunia had cried. That had terrified Charlie Blistre. His sister Nancy had hurriedly stuffed rags around the windows to keep the wind from blowing in.

From this experience, Charlie Blistre gained a painful sympathy for people who were frostbitten or frozen, and a healthy hatred for people silly enough to complain about hot, humid weather.

The Minstral liked cool weather and found it quite invigorating. "You idiot, you dunce," Charlie Blistre would rant when the Minstral deeply inhaled the frigid November air, pounded his chest, and said, "Aaah!" (he did this partly to annoy Charlie Blistre), "how can you like something so evil?" Like Dante, Charlie Blistre was of the opinion that hell was cold.

"You can always put on more clothes; you can't always take more off."

"Oh, yeah?" was Charlie Blistre's brilliant reply. "You ever wore three pairs of pants at once? You ever had so many quilts and blankets on your bed that you could

hardly turn over? You ever had water freeze in your house at night? You ever had diarrhea in an outhouse in a blizzard?"

And the Minstral would wrinkle his nose wickedly at Charlie Blistre, light a foul-smelling cigar, and blow smoke rings.

If home was cold and cold was hell, then home was hell to Charlie Blistre. But if school was warm and warm was heaven, then school was heaven.

From the first time that Charlie Blistre saw the campus, he was enchanted by its feeling of goodness and rightness. That Grassy Creek Academy was there to be a blessing to its little community and its privileged students was proof positive that the Divine did indeed concern himself in the affairs of men.

A private boarding school rich in tradition and devotion to the welfare of its students was a mind-opening experience. A product of the public school system, Charlie Blistre had often thought private schools sissy and affected. Having an egocentric view of the world, he figured that if a public school education was good enough for him, it was certainly good enough for any other slob. He liked it. But he found that he loved Grassy Creek Academy.

It took him about two weeks to get used to living in



a dormitory. Sometimes he'd cry after the bell rang for lights out at ten, but very quietly so his roommate wouldn't hear him.

But Charlie Blistre was loving it by the time Petunia came to get him to live in the farmhouse, saying that Mr. Blistre had declared it fit for human habitation.

This experience was the beginning of the great friendship between himself and Nancy, transcending their sibling differences and finally opening their eyes to each other as human beings, rather than crosses for each other to bear. During those first few weeks at GCA they spent so much time together that people often asked one or the other if they were going steady.

"Oh, then you're twins!" was the almost inevitable remark (they'd always looked alike). Charlie Blistre thought that was highly amusing. Since Nancy was "only" a freshman, that meant that either she was very stupid or Charlie extremely bright. For some reason that didn't make Nancy laugh.

They were the only two of the large Blistre brood there. Three older siblings had graduated and had lives of their own. Glenda, a senior, had stayed back home, living with a friend (Charlie Blistre hated her and his parents for a long time over this). The twins, Viola and Vincent, were in grade school, which was public; baby

Bradley was still at home.

Charlie and Nancy Blistre would discuss moving and say, "Yuck." They would discuss their pitiful wreck of a house and say, "Yuck." They faced a new menu at home with no meat (vegetarianism was a part of the new alternate lifestyle, and would years later be wholeheartedly embraced by Nancy, who was also a bleeding-heart liberal ecologist), and say, "Yuck. Dried beans. Yuck." They said, "Yuck," and squeezed out a few tears as well because their friends from back home were so slow in writing.

They were, however, united in the praise of one thing: their school. They hadn't made any close friends yet (Charlie Blistre being a social cretin), but they loved the school. It was their salvation after they moved to the farmhouse. He really felt very sorry for his mom during that first winter. He and Nancy could get on the bus and get warm at school, leaving that particular nightmare behind. Mr. Blistre was working as a janitor in the public elementary school, but Petunia just sat in front of the fireplace drinking coffee until it was warm enough for her to make a futile effort at cleaning up the house.

The only thing Charlie Blistre didn't like about school was the great gaping hole in his heart made void by the absence of his dear friend Walter Seton. They had met in the fourth grade when Charlie Blistre wandered in while

Walter was attempting to clog up the urinal with red construction paper he'd ripped off a bulletin board. In all the years they had known each other, he had never once made fun of Charlie Blistre's embarrassingly queer name.

What can you say about friends? They have a supreme belief in you, yet are your worst revilers. They complete and complement you, yet sometimes you wonder if you wouldn't be stronger without them. A friend is as needed as coffee in the morning, yet such a pleasurable frivolity as a sprig of mint in your tea. A friend is from the same mold as you, but with a genetic difference. Friendship is pure loyalty and unselfishness, especially between those sharing a similarity of gender, till death do us part, amen.

All this and more was Walter Seton to Charlie Blistre.

Letters passed back and forth weekly. They wrote pages and pages about school, friends, philosophy, and plans for the future. Walter had found a new independence (he had been very much a follower of Charlie Blistre), but that did not compensate for the absence of his friend.

Academically Charlie Blistre soared. Emotionally he grew and matured. He waited for the day when he and Walter would be together at college. Life was bearable. And then Charlie Blistre fell in love.

Janine Hynde.

Janine Hynde was a young lovely and well aware of the fact. Charlie Blistre met her the day she moved in, the first day of his senior year.

Charlie Blistre had graciously volunteered his services on moving-in day. He remembered what a wreck he had been one year ago and how queer and backwards it all had looked. He thought perhaps he might be able to utter some wise words to some poor agonizing soul to help ease the transition.

He carried luggage and sat on one of the benches by the water fountain when there wasn't much to do except try to look sophisticated. He was sitting there with the social studies teacher when a car drove up.

"Oh," said Miss Brinson when the man got out of the car. "Surely he doesn't have yet another offspring for us? So far they've had three kids come here in their junior year--a family tradition. I wonder. . . "

Then Janine got out of the car, lugging a guitar case with difficulty. Charlie Blistre rushed to her aid, and was rewarded with a shy smile and a fluttering of dainty eyelids. She was in obvious awe of his exquisitely chivalrous manhood.

"Thank you," she breathed in a soft voice, and Charlie Blistre's heart pounded in his ears.

"My name is Charles," he said kindly. "I hope you enjoy Grassy Creek Academy." He smiled foolishly.

"My pleasure," she said in a near whisper. Her eyes traveled up and down and up Charlie Blistre, coming to rest on his eyes. He felt himself blushing, and totally afraid to look anywhere at her except at the white spot on her temple that moved when she spoke.

"I'm Janine. And I'm sure I'll be quite happy as long as you are here."

The eyelids fluttered again. Charlie Blistre was smitten.

Janine belonged to "Charles" for exactly a week.

Later in the evening, he gave her a guided tour of the campus: the gymnasium, the administration building, the weaving room, the library, the boys'dorm.

"Do you live there?" Janine asked in her helplessly breathless way. It was really beginning to get dark now, and when they passed through the shadow of a building or a tree she would shyly clutch at Charlie Blistre's arm, then self-consciously pull her hand away again--to Charlie Blistre it was like being branded, and he hoped she couldn't feel him flinch; when he replied that he was only staying there for the night, she pouted prettily, so he felt moved to explain to her about moving and about his ugly house:

he will be forgiven, I am sure, for making himself out a hero. He took her to Swampside Stadium, and steadied her as she gamely walked the water pipe that served as a bridge over the shallow creek.

"It's pretty here," she said, straightening her dress. She bent down to remove a twig that had wedged itself into her sandal. Charlie Blistre admired her long black hair (he would always admire dark-haired women)--it looked so soft, he longed to touch it--and the graceful, feminine way she aligned herself.

Janine looked at him mischievously, and said, "I'll bet you bring lots of girls out here. You must be quite a ladies' man."

He reddened and felt stupid. She stepped up closer to him, her eyes bolder now, and he felt his breath come heavy.

"Charles," she said, "you won't let me get lonely while I'm here, will you?"

He wanted to take her into his arms and hug her until she screamed. Instead, he said, "I'll always be your friend, Janine."

"You comfort me, Charles. I feel so alone. I don't know a soul here except you." She looked uneasily at the dark shadows cast by the trees and crept a little closer. "Don't the trees frighten you, the dark?"

Her eyes were close enough that he could look into them, and they reflected only sincerity and innocence. He held his arms stiffly to his sides and shook his head.

"You must be terribly brave," she whispered, inching ever so slightly towards him.

Slowly he put his hands onto her tiny waist.

"And will you be my friend, Janine?" he asked, his voice quavering. Charlie Blistre died a little bit inside. Her brown eyes looked steadily into his.

For an answer, she kissed him. On the lips.

Charlie Blistre really couldn't look at Janine Hynde objectively until he was free of her spell and watching her ensnare yet another of his peers by her seeming innocence and purity of manner. Throughout the seven days that she was his girl, he lived in dreaded fear that this angel would discover what a supreme clod he really was and leave him with his heart in shreds. He had greatly risen in his own estimation (and everyone else's as well, he was positive) since the obviously sought-after young lovely had condescended to be his and his alone. Charlie Blistre thought that perhaps she was vulnerable to the demeaning world of changing schools and that by his kindness and warmth he had opened a place in her affections that had never been touched by anyone else.

He should have known better.

If nothing else, the physical side of their relationship should have told him. The rough and intense way she kissed him, abusing and bruising his poor inexperienced mouth, belied the innocence and purity he saw in her eyes.

Charlie Blistre didn't like it. It scared him.

They were accustomed to walking to the baseball field on their evening rambles, pretty much following the route of their first walk. They paused while still in the woods, and Janine kissed him very chastely and said, in a near whisper, "Will you make love to me?"

"That was the one time I really wished the earth could have opened up and swallowed me whole. I felt like running," he told the Minstral, the only person to whom he ever brought himself to relate this impossible and ludicrous scene. Charlie Blistre really didn't know why he was telling him. Sometimes he looked upon the Minstral in a cleansing and spiritual way--he was so quiet and well-read (though Charlie Blistre had never seen him reading anything) and philosophical in his outlook on life. He was Charlie Blistre's Confessor. To him he gave the very minor sins of his past, and the Minstral was the Scapegoat that carried the sins away from the city. But the Minstral wasn't weighted down by them. He simply considered them and forgot them, so that they were



dissolved into that nothingness to which they should have been condemned long ago. "Here I was, all knees and stomach, with the loveliest being gracing the earth offering to me her exquisite body. And I was afraid. I was pretty backwards and naive in so many ways and this was just another one. I wouldn't have known how to pleasure her if I'd wanted to. And I didn't. I didn't want to at all.

"If you had known me back then and asked me what my favorite book was, I would have said, 'The Bible.' I read it something like eight times while I was at Grassy Creek. I had very definite ideas of right and wrong. I looked at the girl I had nearly worshipped for those seven whole days, and suddenly I saw Evil personified standing before me.

"I stammered something incoherently, and she said, 'Charles, don't you want me?' and placed one of my hands on her breast. I gasped and pulled my hand away as though she'd stuck it in a bagful of cockroaches. Then her face became very hard and experienced and knowing, and she spoke to me with a sneer in her voice. She told me that any other guy would die for this opportunity, and she proceeded to describe in very gross, detailed language all sorts of things I wouldn't have thought she would have known about. Such a transformation--she was

now so hideous and repugnant to me. I started to leave but reaching out, she caught me by the arm and said, 'I'm not finished yet.' 'Leave me alone!' I shouted hysterically. As I climbed one of the trees, she laughed, scornfully and said something that I didn't catch. I was glad when she was gone. I sat there till long after dark, watching the moon rise in the little duck pond. For a long time I was afraid she would tell someone about what had happened. But I needn't have worried. To tell anyone would be to admit her own failure. I was in all probability the first--and only--guy she wasn't able to seduce."

The Minstral felt the wistfulness in Charlie Blistre's voice. "Are you sorry she didn't succeed?"

"The only thing I'm sorry about," said Charlie Blistre, touching the White Pine needles on the tree nearest him and unconsciously rejoicing in their special smoothness, "is that she made me feel like an inarticulate jerk."

He relaxed and enjoyed driving in the semi-dawn. He would remember this drive later, when life had been irrevocably changed for Charlie Blistre.

"I read this book by Kurt Vonnegut called Cat's Cradle. You ever read that?" he asked the Minstral.

They had gone on an all day hike, presumably to collect insects, yet doing little bug-collecting but much wool-gathering. Sitting in a big sunny meadow, they had just eaten lunch and worked on field notes. Charlie Blistre lay on his back, his eyes closed, his eyelids glowing red on the inside from the sunshine. The Minstral was sitting cross-legged, a bony knee sticking out of the hole in his jeans, trying to figure out how to make a daisy chain out of Queen Anne's Lace (Daucus carota). Sometimes he'd hum "Dear Prudence" as though seeking inspiration. He wasn't smoking his stupid cigar today, which pleased Charlie Blistre. He was always afraid the Minstral would catch the woods on fire.

"You bet," he said. "You know, I hope this isn't Poison Hemlock--Conium maculatum, I believe," he said, referring to his plants, "since I've been holding them in my mouth."

"Does the flower cluster have a purple spot in the center? Does it smell like a carrot? You're such a dope sometimes," Charlie Blistre said placidly.

"I'd be dead already if it were hemlock," said the Minstral cheerfully.

"But I felt like I was in that book in the car that day. Well, I didn't feel it that day but in looking back on it. There was all this foma and karass floating

around, and there I was plunked down in the middle of it all."

"An innocent."

"Yeah, an innocent. I thought I was going to my mother's, and it turned out that I was heading somewhere else all along."

"You remember what any of those words mean?"

"No."

The Minstral held out in his hands the mangled blooms he'd been working with. He grinned a gap-toothed grin and said, "See the cat? See the cradle?"

Charlie Blistre threw a stick at him.

"And things were never the same after that, huh?" said the Minstral.

"No," he said, "nothing was ever the same."

"Things were never the same," he mimicked. "I get so sick of hearing people say that. Nothing is ever the same again. No matter what you're doing, it all changes. You weren't happy in that rut."

"No, but--"

"Isn't getting out of a bad situation worth the price of changing? You adopt that mournful tone of voice and get all dog-eyed, but you're just crying over spilled milk. I think that in the back of your heart and the back of your head you were glad to get out of that mess,

and you think it's just not socially acceptable to say so. When change comes, you ought to say, 'What can I lose? Here comes something better.' "

Sitting on the porch swing when they crept up the long driveway, Grandma Petunia's hands and eyes worked on a patchwork quilt top. She stopped and looked up with a smile when she heard the tall grasses at the edge of the driveway slapping her son's car.

Alexandra wanted to be awake when they got there, so he had roused her about a half an hour earlier, at the last rest stop. Charlie Blistre had taken her into the men's restroom instead of letting her go into the women's by herself (he was afraid someone would steal her), and she had adamantly refused for a long time.

"No," she said, clutching pink plaid Lester by his legs, "that's for men. Mommy says men are bad."

"Daddy's a man. Is Daddy bad?"

"No." The mouth was beginning to lose some of its pout. "But Mommy--"

"Forget Mommy. It's just me and you, remember?"

Her face brightened. "Just me and Daddy. We fought with Mommy."

"Don't think about bad things. We're having an adventure. Besides, nobody will be in there besides me and you."

When he told the Minstral about this, he said, "You really pick some weird things to elaborate upon."

"Don't you see? It was just another dream about to burst--just me and Alexandra. Just us two. But it wasn't, not really. It was just me. Just dumb old me."

She saw Grandma Petunia before Charlie Blistre did. "We're here! We're here!" she yelled, straining against the seat belt. By the time he parked the car, Petunia was halfway across the yard. When he released her, Alexandra flew into her grandmother's arms.

"Grandma Petunia! Grandma Petunia! We're here! Me and Daddy! We're here!" She picked up the child and squeezed her, then put her down. She immediately took off after the chickens which had waddled behind Petunia through the yard. As they scattered, he remembered Wanda Lee's warning.

"So how's it going, son?" she asked, her round apple-red cheeks contrasting with the leanness of her boy.

"I'm okay, Mom." He squeezed her hand, and they walked slowly back to the porch. She brought him a cup of coffee, and they drank it as they sat--she in the swing, he on the steps--and talked, while Petunia's hands flew over the needlework.

Long, long ago, Charlie Blistre had sat on the stone front porch steps on an early morning that couldn't

decide whether to be late summer or early fall. The air had been soft, breezy, cool on his face; he thought then it would be nice to have long hair to be blown about by it. His glasses weren't exactly clean, making things shine funny, so that he could see the sun's rays; when he squinted his eyes to look at the treetops, he could see, too, his skin reflecting into his glasses, revealing crepe-like eyewrinkles. Morning Glory vines wound up the porch post, their blooming days nearly past, but the heavenly blue of the remaining blossoms was only enhanced by the yellowing foliage and brown seed pods, making them more surreal and unearthly. The petals of a light pink Touch-Me-Not shimmered and glimmered and glistened. A dog lay on the porch, curled up, but eyes open. It had tried to get in Charlie Blistre's lap. He had a cup of freshly ground coffee on the steps beside his feet. On the top stone step was a big hole that even now he liked to stir dirt and water into with a stick. Everything was peaceful and the sounds were subtle, almost silent, but the whole scene pulsed with life. He remembered thinking that he would always remember this day, and it burned into his mind's eye. The landscape had reflected the way Charlie Blistre felt, as he'd sat on the porch of his father's rotting dream house.

That afternoon Charlie Blistre had gone off to

college.

How far away it all seemed--someone else's life. He thought of how nice it would be to regress. It seemed as if he spent all his time wishing now.

They sat there all morning, drowsing in the sun. Petunia told him all about her latest quilt, what she was making it of and who it was for, but he only listened with half an ear. He was bored by quilting talk, but he liked snuggling beneath the finished product. Alexandra wrestled with Joe-Pye Weed bigger than herself, trying to pick the huge flowers, and finally abandoning the endeavor. They ate a big lunch, then went to visit his brother Vincent who lived nearby. It was late when they got back home. Alexandra gleefully announced, "Oooh, chicken poop!" and exhibited her defiled shoe. Grandma Petunia bathed her and put her to bed with a story.

"What is this thing called Lester?" she asked her son, as she eased herself into a chair at the kitchen table.

They were drinking coffee again. Charlie Blistre once read a poem where a man said he could measure his life by coffee spoons. He had been deeply touched by that, convinced that the poet had him figured out. Poetry was important to him, though he often couldn't remember who wrote it or exactly what it said. But he



kept the feeling.

"Lester is a frog," he said, putting sugar in his Mom's coffee. "Wanda Lee made him in home ec class when she was a freshman and named him after some teacher she had a crush on." Charlie Blistre wondered why none of his students ever had a crush on him. Maybe they were too old by that time.

He had the feeling that Petunia wanted to talk to him about something, and he dreaded it. He already knew what it was going to be.

Finally she said it.

"So where's your wife?"

She said it innocuously enough. Maybe it was an innocent question. But why wait until Alexandra had gone to bed?

He shrugged. "Just didn't feel like coming. She's been pretty tired lately, and this long ride tends to wear her out." Taking a long sip, he hoped she would buy it.

"Could a been a little vacation for you two," she said. "You could a left the baby at home with the big kids."

"Are you kidding? They don't--"

"They don't know the first thing about taking care of a kid, right? You'd be amazed at what them kids know."

He remembered the remarks of Rodney and Wanda Lee at

dinner a few nights ago. Mom just wanted some time alone. In bed. They knew.

"And it'd be good for you two to have some time alone." Time alone echoed in his brain. "You all get so busy making a living that you forget to live. You could a rediscovered each other. Been like a second honeymoon."

Charlie Blistre disgraced himself to himself by thinking, "Yuck." He would rather have been tied up like those Indians who put skewers in their skin and mangled themselves in their religious fervor--yes, he would rather do that than spend any time alone with Brigatta. Even under the benign eye of his mother.

"The baby wears her out more than you imagine," he explained. "This way we're both out of her hair, and the kids are always out with their friends, so she's having a vacation at home."

"That's stupid," Petunia said, looking at her son, who had been talking at his knees, "you take a vacation with your family, not away from them."

She took a big drink, sloshing it around in her mouth before swallowing. She looked at him, seeing the short brown hairs on his neck, and the slim, pallid fingers that grasped the coffee mug so tightly that the knuckles were white with red rings around them.

The refrigerator hummed and the clock ticked.

"You're not gonna tell me, are you?" She spoke softly, not seeing him but the pattern on the fabric of his shirt. She loved Charlie Blistre.

"Tell you what?"

One of the cats meowed at the back door, and Petunia let it in.

"The real reason you left Brigatta at home." She sat back down.

Sighing, he looked at her, then back at the floor. His feet. He was wearing high-top basketball shoes. The Minstral wore shoes like that.

"One evening at dinner, Alexandra mentioned that we hadn't been here in a long time. I said something to the effect that I'd take her soon, and mentioned this weekend. She got all wound up, you know, like kids do, and Brigatta said something about the trip--I don't remember what--and Alexandra started yelling, 'No, just me and Daddy! Not you, just me and Daddy!' So after that there was nothing I could say to her to make her change her mind. Can you imagine how bad that must've made her feel?"

Night had fallen, and the only light in the little room was the bright moon filling the space in the window between the curtains. They sat in silence, sleepy silence for Charlie Blistre. He shivered as the clock

struck ten.

"Oh, Charlie," she said. "To think the time would come when you wouldn't talk to your own mother."

Having forgotten what they were talking about, he wondered what brought on her martyred mother comment.

"Mom--" he began.

"Don't 'Mom' me," she retorted. Then she sighed and looked away. "If only you would tell me, then maybe I could help you."

"Tell you what, Mother?" He hoped his exasperation didn't show.

"Tell me why you left Brigatta at home." Before he could open his mouth, she cautioned him not to tell the Alexandra story again. "That ain't the real reason."

"God, Mom, what's the big deal?" It came out much rougher than he intended. He felt her wince.

"The big deal is that you're ignoring me and you're ignoring your marriage. Don't you care anymore?"

Oh, gee, he thought, she's on Brigatta's side already.

"Of course I care. But can't you see I'm not ignoring anything? I told you why she didn't come. That's the only reason there is."

"You'll have to face it one of these days, son. You can't pretend it ain't here."

"Please, Mom, I'm tired." And suddenly he was--bone tired.

"Yep, you're tired all right, tired of your wife and kids and making a fool outa yourself over that baby. What's wrong with you? You always been such a good boy."

Don't trot out the cliches, he thought. If you tell me that she's the mother of my children and deserves better from me, I'll scream.

"You know what I'm really tired of? You know what I'm sick of?" Looking up, he put his coffee cup in the sink and gushed water into it. He looked his sainted mother in the eye and said,

"I'm sick and tired of being a good boy."

"Then after I said that, I turned around and went to church with her the next morning," he told the smoky Minstral. It was raining (it was forever raining in Charlie Blistre's little town) on a boring Sunday evening. The Minstral had invited him out for an early dinner. They were in an Americanized Chinese restaurant that had no windows and was lit only by candles. The Minstral listened intently to Charlie Blistre without seeming to listen at all, puffing madly at his cigar, and, as he talked, Charlie Blistre kept one ear open for the smoke alarm which he was sure would sound at any given time.

"What a hypocrite," he said.

Going to church was really rather nice. Petunia attended a white country church of no particular denomination, and Charlie Blistre and his family had accompanied her there on other occasions. It reminded him of where he used to go to church when he was in high school. Charlie Blistre liked the idea of church, and the idea of attending with similarly attuned people for the spiritual benefit of all. So he'd go a couple of times in a row, then get to thinking how it was more of a social event than a meaningful ceremony, or the minister/preacher said something Biblically incorrect in his sermon (like "The last person to be crucified, historically speaking, was Christ"--what about poor old Saint Peter who was crucified upside-down?), and he would think, "And you presume to teach me?" His good intentions then fell by the wayside, and Sabbath mornings were back to being spent in their usual fashion, with the edifying Sunday paper.

The Minstral found Charlie Blistre's dabblings in organized religion quite amusing. He refused to attend church at all (even when invited by his friend), saying he was working on founding a religion of his own, called the Reformed Druid Church, where devotions would consist of the worshippers hugged a tree and a reading of John Donne's "The Crosse." Charlie Blistre thought he was

halfway serious about all of this.

But he was as interested in this incarnation of Charlie Blistre as he was in all his other facets, and always listened (the Minstral was a very good listener) with curiosity and compassion. The Minstral loved Charlie Blistre, too.

The sermon had been particularly fine, he said. The minister talked to and reasoned with his congregation, rather than trying to bully them into heaven. Charlie Blistre basked in it and soaked it up, revelling in the goodness, inspiration, and faith.

"I felt like I really needed to hear that. I had told my Mother that I was tired of being good, but that wasn't true. I was trying to be good, and failing. That's what I was tired of. Listening to that Man of God made me realize that I hadn't been trying nearly as hard as I thought I'd been. He made me feel like I could straighten out all the messes in my life and make things come out right for everyone. I made one resolution, just one: to try and see my family as real, genuine people, worthy in themselves, and worthy to be loved by me. All the other things in my life seemed only useless clutter. I realized I was tired of simply bumping into the bodies that happened to live in the same house as me. Suddenly I wanted to discover the people inside them."

Usually he didn't like thinking about how he had met Brigatta. He couldn't believe that he met her on the very first day at college. The very first day. He soon found that he exchanged his only hours-old freedom for a bondage and banality which would be both his nemesis and his salvation.

Walter Seton and Charlie Blistre wanted it all. And to have it all, one must experience it all. So said Walter. Charlie Blistre wasn't so sure. Walter had changed somewhat, eager to meet new people and do new things. It rather hurt Charlie Blistre; all he wanted was to study and be with his friend. He knew what he wanted and was rather hurt that Walter wanted more than one friendship. However, this was the first time they'd seen each other in over two years. Perhaps uneasiness was making Walter behave so uncharacteristically. But he was able to convince Charlie Blistre that they should go to an on-campus church to see a film.

He couldn't remember the name of the organization now. He figured it was probably gone (he hoped it was gone), because the first thing they did was clap for Jesus.

"It's great to be here, isn't it?" said the now faceless creature who presided. "Let's all stand up and clap



for Jesus."

So they all stood up, and, looking around to be sure everyone else was going to do this weird thing, too, they clapped for Jesus.

Charlie Blistre couldn't decide if this was blasphemy or not. So he did it. He found himself laughing and applauding enthusiastically like all the other guys with fresh haircuts and the girls with their new clothes.

When they finally sat down, the young man asked if anyone wanted to share a testimony. Charlie Blistre knew about testifying. They did it in the Holiness churches back home. He hated the spectacle of men who wanted to impress some female with their piety or women who needed to cry. Charlie Blistre had tried it once and felt lowered to the level of the other people in the church. He was freshly shaven and knew that everyone was looking at the new growth of red pimples sprouting from his newly plowed skin. Nancy testified a couple of times, crying and croaking, "Oh, Lord, help me," and then nearly died of laughter when they had some privacy again. He wondered what she was doing now. He felt rather smug about his escape from the hovel, yet envied her two more years at the Academy. He wondered what she'd had for supper, as he felt his hamburgers weighing heavily on his stomach. He couldn't wait to consume a portion of a dead animal

and was appalled when it tasted of blood.

But this was unexciting testimony. Folks were glad to be back another year, happy to see their friends. It was tame stuff. Then one girl got up, and said that she was wondering if she was going to find a friend when she had met someone who invited her here this evening, where she could worship God and make some friends, too. Walter poked him in the side and grinned, going out of his way to talk to her afterwards. He made a date with her.

He smirked as he and Charlie Blistre walked back to their dorm. It was dark, and Charlie Blistre's dad had admonished him to always be home before dark, that that was when bad things happened (Charlie Blistre thought that was a weird thing to say to a guy). He was disobeying on his first night out. He felt like a naughty child. It was a good feeling.

But he didn't like the feeling that his friend seemed to have developed about females. He gazed with unconcealed interest at every specimen that walked by. Charlie Blistre hadn't thought much about women since Janine Hynde. He was disturbed by Walter's preoccupation. He hadn't developed any ideas about women, and certainly at this point harbored no ideals of feminism, yet he felt that Walter was only looking for an orifice, then blushed rosily in the darkness for thinking such a thing. Lust

was not yet and would never be a driving force to Charlie Blistre--it was wrong outside of marriage and he wasn't married, but he did sometimes wonder what it would be like to be married. The Minstral found this view intriguing, and was impressed when Charlie Blistre said that even though one might admire and want to have something material one didn't steal to get it. One just said, "Oh, well," and shrugged. Women were the same.

He was astounded when Walter said, "I'll bet she's easy."

Charlie Blistre never told Brigatta what he'd said about her, and that was what first made him take an interest in her. It was a desire to protect her from his friend's rapacious callousness.

He didn't really know how it came about, but before long she was going out with him instead of Walter. She was open and simple and had no idea why she was in school other than that her parents were paying for it. She had apple-red cheeks and little dimples on either side of her knees.

They were married seven months later, each madly in love with the other, yet having no inkling at all as to the driving force behind the person with whom each vowed to spend the rest of eternity.

Very quickly, it became easy for him to blame her

for his scholastic shortcomings. Charlie Blistre was in for a rude awakening when he received a "C" in his first biology class, Invertebrate Zoology.

"A C!" he would rant and sputter to himself. "My chosen field of study, what I now teach, and I begin by distinguishing myself with a C!" The failure (if it was not an A, nothing worthwhile had been accomplished) still hurt and haunted Charlie Blistre.

He would never admit, even to himself, that this was one of the reasons he was always prepared to be disgusted with the nitwit freshmen he taught. But the Minstral, that sly, crafty old devil, picked up on it right away, and confronted him with it.

"You see yourself in your students," he'd said. "You see an awkward bumbler unfamiliar with lab routine, one who may, if delicacy permits me, gag at the unique aroma of preserved putrefaction, and you are looking at yourself. Then you see a competent student in a spotless lab coat--" ("Freshmen don't wear lab coats," he butted in. The Minstral waved his hand)--"nonchalantly opening specimens and finding organs with ease and aplomb, not mangling the poor violated creature. There you see the one you would have liked to be, and in the secret recesses of your being you admire him. But more than admiration you feel envy of his proficiency, and hatred for

yourself because, as you look at him, it is more difficult to believe in your rose-colored fantasy, that it was a highly developed respect for life which kept you from distinguishing yourself early. You were unprepared, Blistre."

"That's true to a certain extent. I was unprepared for the endlessness of dissecting. And I was appalled by the waste of animal life. You have no idea--"

"Yes, I do. I took your class, remember?"

"And what did you think?"

"I found it preposterous that you proposed to teach me about life by showing me only death."

"Exactly. You didn't like it either."

"I was repulsed. It's a vulgar way to learn about something."

"Then we're talking about the same thing."

"No, we're not. You're justifying your experience taking the class, and I'm talking about your attitude with your students. Just because you screwed up, you try to screw everyone else up, too. Nobody better than Blistre." Then the Minstral brought out his dopey grin and clapped Charlie Blistre on the back, the buddies-forever routine.

"You're an old fart," said Charlie Blistre.

"I know," said the Minstral.

Charlie Blistre had hoarded every one of his letters from Walter Seton. He kept them in a big box in the bottom of his bookshelf, underneath some old photograph albums. He pulled them out and reread them one boring summer day. He was alone and it was hot, so he took the box and some lemonade outside to the porch swing.

"In ten years' time," Charlie Blistre read the words that Walter Seton had written all those decades ago, "I want to be proficient in French, German, Hebrew, and Russian; I want to be proficient in Latin and Greek, and to have been exposed to Chinese and Swedish, as well. I plan to seriously study theology--no one studies theology these days--and philosophy. I want to have absorbed classical history and all the literature I can gobble up. I aspire for Scholarliness, as opposed to being merely Educated. I see myself as one of the learners of long ago who lived in absolute poverty, spending. . . "

Charlie Blistre's smile was tinged with melancholia as he looked away from the page, old enough now to smell funny. He was smothered in nostalgia. Where had all the enthusiasm and earnestness gone? He knew he had written in the same vein, back in those days when the world was theirs to master. He had aspired to learn Welsh and Celtic, and all the forms of Old English, to read Chaucer in the original, and more than anything in

the world he wanted a Vulgate Bible. He was going to discover lots of things in the world scientific, and thought of all the books he would amass, as if by having them and holding them close he would somehow be imbued with their knowledge. What had happened?

He suppressed a strong urge to kiss the letter and weep over it. What had happened to the time when they lived for books and loved to learn?

"I am gradually learning," wrote Walter in another letter, much later, "that, much to my surprise, there is indeed life after school." Charlie Blistre still didn't know if that was true. Walter had been brought down by the same thing that brought Charlie Blistre down but in a very different way.

Women.

"Life was easier when we always felt the same," he had written to his friend. He remembered because he found it a particularly good line, and he wrote it after Brigatta had entered his life and made him schizophrenic.

She split him right in two. Part of him (he didn't even know if it was half of him) longed to be with her, ached to touch her, felt less than whole without her. The other part of him (and there was no common ground) wanted never to see her again, felt his love for her purely a weakness, and put his own mind on a pedestal.

The first part won. The second, most important part of Charlie Blistre, was still trying to make up for lost time.

When he headed home with Alexandra after a big lunch at Grandma Petunia's, Charlie Blistre was looking forward to going home. He hugged his mother soundly, hoping she could understand from this that he was a changed man. He was realizing that perhaps his life wasn't mixed up. His family had to be more important than his career. Why had he never realized that before?

Alexandra was overjoyed to see her family again, and jumped up and down and screamed and hugged everyone. Charlie Blistre grinned and wished he could let himself do that, too.

But that evening, after Alexandra was in bed and Rodney and Wanda Lee had gone to the theater, Brigatta said,

"Blistre, we need to talk."



## Chapter Three

"We may as well be civilized about this," she said. "Let's go sit in the kitchen. The baby won't hear us that way."

"What's wrong?" asked Charlie Blistre.

He was sitting in a low chair in the living room, looking at the pictures in a book on Tutankhamen. When Brigatta came into the room from the back of the house where she'd been putting Alexandra to bed, he said, "Where did this book come from?"

"One of the kids brought it home from school to work on a paper."

"Must've been Rodney." He placed the book neatly on the end table, then rose from the chair with a smile.

"So we're going to speak civilly in the kitchen?" Charlie Blistre still felt good, was still full of admirable resolutions. He was happy, had enjoyed the simple evening meal with the wife and kids, had dutifully admired the new dress Wanda Lee had made for herself, had listened as Rodney fervently attempted to explain The Bolero, had scarfed down Brigatta's sinful peach streusel, had listened delightedly to Alexandra's bubbly blabbering about her weekend with Grandma Petunia. He wondered later

why Wanda Lee had been so quiet, her usually acerbic tongue more subdued than he could ever remember. She'd kept looking at her mother, to smile in a backwards sort of way which Charlie Blistre found amusing. He figured she'd upset Brigatta somehow and was still in the doghouse. Later he wondered if she knew what was going to happen. At the time, however, the entire meal and its surrounding behaviors and conversations were perfect to him. It boded a good start for his resolutions.

Brigatta wanted to talk. That was fine by Charlie Blistre. There were some things he wanted to say, too. But somehow her tone sounded wrong--all wrong.

Charlie Blistre sat down in the ugly red plastic kitchen chair with a steaming cup for the last time. He'd made Brigatta a cup, too; she had no desire for it and wanted to give him a verbal lashing for taking time out to grab his particular security blanket, this porcelain appendage containing the black brew to which he steadfastly denied his addiction. But she held her tongue, knowing that this was minor in comparison to what was coming.

Brigatta was nervous, and as she raised the cup to drink the coffee she neither wanted nor needed, her hand shook. Charlie Blistre noticed when a little slopped over the side onto the red tabletop.

"What's wrong, honey?" Charlie Blistre asked again.

The "honey" grated on her. Why was he being nice now? Why couldn't he be his usual absent-minded self who would never have noticed?

"Just nerves, I guess."

"Can I help with something? What's bothering you?" he asked obsequiously, leaning over his side of the table toward her.

"Be quiet, Charlie Blistre, and stop making this harder on me than it already is."

Surprised, he looked at her. And blinked.

With a deep breath, she said softly, "I don't know how to tell you this."

He resisted the urge to say, "Tell me what?" when he understood that she was serious.

She looked at him, and he met her eyes with a silly smile. Abruptly, she moved from the table. He sat there, sort of scared now, watching the steam rise from his wife's abandoned cup.

"How long have we been married, Charlie?" she asked, looking out into the darkness across the kitchen sink.

He had to think, and he knew she would recognize the pause for what it was. "Twenty-seven years," he answered with some surprise. "Gee."

"How long has it been since we were happily married?"

He didn't answer. Twenty-six years, he thought, but

if he'd answered, it would have sounded flippant.

The silence was long.

Buffy wandered into the room. He picked her up, and she wadded herself into a ball, settling peacefully in his lap.

At last she said, "That's not so easy to count on your fingers, is it?"

She turned to face him. "Why have we been faking it all this time? Decades." To his silence, she said, "That's not a rhetorical question, Charlie. Answer me."

He was surprised that the word "rhetorical" was in her vocabulary. "Because we always hope that things will get better?" he guessed, feeling like a kid at a pop quiz. But he knew it was vitally important to give the correct answer.

"Maybe. But maybe because we've always been afraid to do anything else."

He brightened. "You know, I've been doing a lot of thinking this weekend."

"So have I."

"I told you that I went to church with Mom. I began, for some reason, to realize that I've not been a terribly good husband and father."

Brigatta started to speak, but he stopped her. "I want to try and change all that. I want to give my family

a higher priority. Higher than anything else in my life. I want to try and redeem myself as a family man."

"That's very nice. Maybe at one time it would have worked, but not now. It's too late."

"Too late?" he said, getting up from the table and going over to her. "For a quarter of a century"--he winced mentally--"we've floundered around, and all of a sudden it's too late? Why?"

"Can you look me in the eye, Charlie Blistre, and honestly tell me that you love me?"

He met her gaze. Yet he knew, without even trying, that he couldn't. He shook his head.

"That's why it's too late." Her voice was the quietest he'd ever heard it.

"So what is it you're trying to tell me?" Trying not to tell me, he thought.

Brigatta moved away from him, to sit back down in her chair.

"I want you to leave." Her voice was quiet, firm.

"You want me to leave?" he shouted, hurt that she wasn't falling all over herself at his repentance.

"That's not going to solve anything!"

"Hush, you'll wake the baby," she said hurriedly.

"Keep your voice down."

"Keep your head down before I knock it off," he said

angrily. I've blown it now, he thought. He had.

"I should have known better than to try and have a reasonable discussion with you," she fumed in frustration. "There's nothing reasonable about you. There never has been. You've always been wrapped up in some imaginary world where everything you ever do is right, and nobody else has the right to think anything different from you."

"That's not true, and you know it. I don't think I ever do anything right."

"Oh, yes, you do. It's right for you to piddle half your life away, getting in debt to go to school. It's right for you to sit in your lab and run meaningless experiments when your children are crying out for your love and affection. It's right for you to ignore me so you can woo your mistress at the university."

"I don't have a mistress."

"Fool. All your life all you have ever loved is knowledge. You don't love me, you don't love your own kids. All you've ever loved is a bunch of damn books."

"That's not true--"

"Don't try to justify anything to me. You don't love me. You proved it just now."

"I'd die for those children."

"You'd die for the baby, I'll grant you that. You'd think about it for Rodney. You wouldn't lift a finger

for poor Wanda Lee."

"That's not true!"

"Don't lie to me, Charlie Blistre. Not now. I'm tired of your lying and your indifference. I won't stand for it anymore."

He picked up Buffy, who was scratching his leg, and held her close. She put her little head over his shoulder to go to sleep. He rubbed her.

He couldn't think of anything to say.

"Do you think this is easy for me?" Yes, thought Charlie Blistre, I do. "It hurts me just as much as it hurts you."

"Don't throw clichés at me. So you think it's going to prove something if I let you kick me out?"

"The days are gone when you 'let' or don't let me do anything. And I'm not trying to 'prove' anything. I'm telling you what I've decided. I've decided that you should leave."

"And if I won't?"

She sighed loudly. "You're so childish. You bully around, posing and swaggering. You're just bluster, and no substance. Why won't you talk to me instead of just threatening me?" She smiled meanly. "Can your male ego take living with a woman who doesn't want you in any way imaginable?"

"I haven't wanted you in any way imaginable for longer than I care to remember. You're so stupid and fat." Charlie Blistre felt stupid and skinny.

"My, aren't we eloquent? And that's just like you. You always look at what's on the outside. You've never tried to research me. I could be a new species for all you know."

"Oh, stop it," he spat in disgust. "I've tried and tried to get through to you. I've done everything and said everything I could think of, and nothing works."

"All you've ever tried to do is make me into another you. You wanted a mirror image of yourself, not a woman to love and share your life with."

"And I suppose that you think you've been a perfect spouse? Well, having kids and cooking meals isn't all there is to it, my dear. You have never, ever supported me in anything I wanted to do."

"Because you wanted to do such stupid things."

"See? You could never realize that things other than you could be important to me. You could never understand that I need more out of life than to just sit around and adore you. I have a mind, Brigatta--"

"And are you saying that I don't? I know you've always thought that I was too dumb to live. You act like you think you've martyred yourself or something by taking



on the burden of me. And I'll tell you why you don't like Wanda Lee. It's not anything the poor girl ever did. It's because she's like me."

"Why are you so convinced that she means nothing to me? I love that girl."

"I told you not to lie to me!" She was shouting now, too.

"You're doing an awful lot of telling all of a sudden."

"It's my turn to get what I want, Charlie Blistre. It's my turn now."

"Well, why, after all these years, do you suddenly want me gone?"

"I'm sick of stagnating. I'm sick of doing the same old thing, day after day. I'm tired of being maid and mommy to you. I'm tired of you caring nothing about me or the kids--"

"Shut up about the kids!"

"Mainly, I'm sick and tired of you," she finished. "And I want you gone."

"Goodbye, then, dammit." He paused at the kitchen door to look back at her. Brigatta was looking at his empty place at the table.

She was smiling.

## Chapter Four

He looked mournfully at the meager collection of possessions lying on the bed.

"So all it boils down to is this," he said.

It was extremely unthoughtful of Brigatta to do this to him on a Sunday night. Where would he go? "You can sleep in your study tonight," she said condescendingly. To be in the amount of torment and pain she professed, Charlie Blistre thought she was doing an awful lot of smiling. Surreptitiously, of course. But when he sneaked a look at her, she wore the same smirk as did the Grinch when he shoved the Christmas tree up the chimney.

Tossing a pair of socks into the suitcase, he thought about calling the Minstral but decided against it. He couldn't figure what the weird creature might do. If he puffed on his cigar and looked smug, Charlie Blistre thought he might kill him. But he wouldn't do that; in actuality, he'd probably cry. The Minstral was such a softie, for all his posturing. He would feel the hurt as keenly as if it were his own. Charlie Blistre never realized that now he thought of the Minstral in the same way he used to think of Walter Seton.

In the end, he decided to spend the night in a hotel,

mainly because he had classes the next day. He didn't want to go to school; he didn't want to see any of the people there ever again. What would he tell them? He couldn't endure the thought of their hypocritical smirks of commiseration when they were talking to him, when he knew they would talk about him until their lips fell off as soon as he was out of earshot. Charlie Blistre didn't like them; he didn't like anyone right now and would never like another soul again. Except Alexandra. He would always love Alexandra. His eyes flooded when he thought of her. With difficulty he choked down the lump in his throat that felt the size of a walnut, its big green hull still on the outside. I will not think of her right now, his mind mumbled.

Buffy scratched on the door, and he opened it for her. She jumped on the bed, chasing her tail; then she caught it and fell over like a lunatic. He let her wash his face with her little lunchmeat tongue, not even minding the gut-churning stench of her breath. It smelled like an obscene-looking red stinkhorn mushroom he had once found on a field trip. Then having done her duty, she left as quickly as she had come.

Sweet little Yo-Yo Foon, he thought. God, what a jerk, came to him immediately. Your wife kicks you out, and you get bleary-eyed over the dog. Yet the separation

from the dog was something he could bear to think about.

When he had packed his things, he simply picked them up and walked out the door. Rodney and Wanda Lee were still out--he was glad--and he didn't want to see Brigatta again. If he kissed his sleeping angel before leaving, he knew he would kidnap her. And Charlie Blistre, at heart, was old-fashioned enough to believe that a child belonged with its mother. At least, as opposed to living in a hotel room.

"Dumb old pictures," was the way Charlie Blistre greeted his room. Its sterility both aggravated and comforted him. Nagging at him was a feeling of similarity with the room--empty, banal, barren. He liked, however, the hope that he could make it into anything he wanted--he was masterful, omnipotent, in charge. He threw his suitcase on the bed, watching it bounce. Then he took the pictures off the wall and placed them face down in one of the empty dresser drawers. They were of bluebells, and bluebells, he thought, should not be profaned in that way.

After kicking off his shoes, he climbed with his smelly socks into bed.

One of the things he'd grabbed in his mindless rush from the den of Brigatta was an old high school yearbook, an ancient one predating Grassy Creek Academy. It fell open easily to a page he looked at often. He couldn't

help smiling. There they were, Charlie Blistre, Walter Seton, Lucie Margaret McAlpin, and Rosalind Kelly, in a fake pose at the geometry teacher's desk. Rosalind Kelly.

That geometry teacher, Mr. Benge, often left Charlie Blistre in charge when his coaching duties caused him to be away. He presided from Benge's little desk chair that was equipped with wheels, wrinkled his brow omnisciently, and pretended (but only to himself) that he was striking awe into the depths of all the sophomore hearts. He never said anything but was insulted that none of the students paid him any attention. Most of the time, Charlie Blistre ignored the common rabble and genuinely studied, between dreams of megalomaniac scholarliness. But not today.

Today Charlie Blistre wanted attention.

Lucie Margaret McAlpin sat discussing Mormonism with Rosalind Kelly and Jenny Pepper. He was madly in love with Rosalind, an earnest brown-haired girl with glasses. Rosalind was sucking up every one of Lucie Margaret's words. Charlie Blistre's scholarly ego screamed, "Look earnestly at me, me, me!"

He saw Lucie Margaret in her clean black wool coat, black as the chalkboard behind him. Without thinking, he grabbed an eraser and knocked her squarely on the back. He laughed like a maniac. All that white eraser crud was

all over Lucie Margaret's stupid coat. And Rosalind laughed--Rosalind laughed! Charlie Blistre scooped up another eraser and pelted a bunch of boys (men) talking undoubtedly about manstuff. Such a free-for-all ensued, one of the purely fun times Charlie Blistre ever experienced. He laughed until he hurt. And threw erasers and chairs and spit on people and his ego soared. Rosalind laughed!

Dear Rosalind was so beautiful when she laughed. Her dark brown hair was thick, so thick, with its chestnut curls that rippled over her chair, cascading with a splash onto the desk behind her. When she laughed, she threw back her head with abandon. Lucie Margaret generally sat behind her, and her pencils were often the victims of Rosalind's rampaging hair. Lucie Margaret would yell, smack her on the shoulder, or yank her hair, which just made Rosalind laugh all the more. Charlie Blistre wanted oh so badly to touch that hair.

She helped him study in Latin class, as they were allowed to translate in groups. He always sat behind her, hoping to sneak a touch. He was always careful to whisper, "Rosalind!" when he wanted her, rather than giving her a tap on the shoulder. He couldn't touch her; he just couldn't. Leaning towards her, he hoped that when she spun around her hair might fly out and brush him.

"Rosalind! What's this word mean?" Charlie Blistre knew perfectly well what it meant, but he would rather she think him an idiot than for her to sit there quietly not paying attention to him.

She turned around, saying, "Which one?" The questioning look that he adored was imprinted on her face, her glasses hung on the tip of her nose, and her hair flowed over the back of the seat. Some of it touched Charlie Blistre's desk! He thought he was going to pass out.

He managed to show her the word in question.

"Booty," she said. "Although perhaps, in this instance, spoils or maybe even plunder might suit better." She worked assiduously for just the right nuance of meaning, while the smitten Charlie Blistre heard nothing because he was sliding down the sparkling waterfall of her hair.

"Does that seem reasonable to you?" she finished, looking at him with glinting emerald eyes.

"Combat boots, you say?" he blathered, pulling himself up just in time to keep from drowning in the red and gold and black that danced within her deep brown hair.

Even the muffled laugh that escaped her caused her to toss back her exquisite head. A whole wad of hair landed on Charlie Blistre's hand. It sat there for twenty supreme seconds before she gathered it up and pulled it

over her shoulder.

That was one of Charlie Blistre's most precious memories. He held it carefully in his heart, a treasured emerald of his own, the emerald green of her laughing eyes.

Rosalind never seemed to notice Charlie Blistre's puppy-dog love, never noticed the snide remarks of their cohorts or Charlie Blistre's blushing cheeks. But she liked him as a friend, and that was enough.

She walked out of Charlie Blistre's life as quickly and as gracefully as she had walked in. Her father was a missionary to Brazil, and they returned there the next year. He never saw her again, but he found it hard to put her behind him. She was Charlie Blistre's first love, a pure ideal that was never sullied. She first instilled in Charlie Blistre a love of learning for learning's sake, and the idea that it was all right to go a little slower and do a little better than to finish first (but she was smart enough that she could take her time and still beat everyone else). She could spit through her teeth, too, and could hit a baseball further than he could. She once wore pants on a field trip, when girls never wore pants except at home on days when they weren't expecting company. She had a note sent home with her, but Rosalind just laughed.



Charlie Blistre always saw that year, his sophomore year, through rose-colored glasses, with a warm, globby feeling around his heart. That year with Rosalind was sacred.

She's a work of art, thought Charlie Blistre, still gazing at her mug shot years later.

I'll bet she wouldn't mind my studies.

His wake-up call came at five the next morning. Washing his face in the tiny bathroom sink, he thought, God, I look like a wreck, and made monster faces.

Out by 5:30, he stuffed his things hurriedly into the trunk of his car before anyone could see him. He wanted to waltz into his office in his slept-in clothes and announce to a startled world, "Here's the new me! I metamorphosed las night! I shed my old skin of a fat old wife!" He didn't do it, of course. He knew he wouldn't even as he planned it. Once the Minstral had been in a psychology class (it seemed he'd taken every course ever offered), and they were asked the question, "What is the one event that would push any given human being over the edge into incurable madness?" Charlie Blistre had known the answer right off the bat: to have more than one of your daydreams come true. The Minstral had, for once, been silenced into a proper respect.

He drove the block and a half to his favorite little dive and enshrined himself behind a newspaper and a pot of coffee. He was surprised that there was no headline reading, "So-Smart Dr. Blistre Rejected by Kith and Kin," revealing his minute, miniscule manhood for all the world to titter at.

What do I need them for? he asked of himself suddenly and defiantly. They don't like me. They don't appreciate me. I've given my prime to those ingrates. The knowledge I could have gained, the research I could have done, the books I could have written. . . But no. I had to go and assume a burden that I never wanted, a burden I couldn't simply carry to the top of the hill, then loosen and watch roll back downward, falling into the mire from which I'd pulled it. That would have been a purifying, noble sort of undertaking. That would have been okay. But no. Instead I got to the top of the hill, only to have to go back down again, then back up and down, up and down. . . So why am I crying now? My burden has fallen off and is rolling miraculously away. And I can run. . .

Charlie Blistre felt his limbs glide effortlessly, flowing in slow-motion at blinding speed as the wind softly fingered his long hair. . . his bare feet moved surely and painlessly over the grassy turf, through flowers growing up to his nose, with equally big butterflies and

lacewings and ladybugs hovering benevolently nearby. . . and he discovered that he looked like the Minstral; and that was okay, too.

He tried to pour more coffee out of the empty pot, and, failing, decided to go to the office. Feeling an unexpected relief at walking inside, he looked happily at his Smoky Bear posters and butterflies on the wall. I'm gonna live here, he thought. Right here. He smiled and thought that it wouldn't matter what obstacles he had to overcome as long as he could live in his small, scholarly sanctum.

He sat down in his chair to think. The door was open, and he had an irrational urge to shut it quickly and lock himself in. He could turn the lights out, take his phone off the hook. No one would ever know he was there. Nights he could sneak out, stocking up on food like soup and ramen noodles to warm on his hot plate. He could live a hidden man. No one need ever discover Charlie Blistre's failure.

For years he had felt Brigatta's growing indifference, the schism that crept wider and wider still into their lives. He had known it and regretted it, yet in a perverse way he welcomed it, for it lessened considerably the feelings of guilt which haunted him on the occasions when he researched at the library, devoted extra time to

field or lab work, or walked in the park. Ruefully he considered his loss of the popularly-labelled quality time with the kids. Here Rodney was, a grown man already, and they hadn't done the father-son things, like shagging flies and going fishing (which Rodney would not have been caught dead doing anyway). He didn't love Wanda Lee like he should, he knew, and sometimes it nearly killed him. What kind of an ass am I, he lamented, when I can't really love my firstborn? When he was young, he used to wonder about certain other kids he knew who were ugly or thick-witted, having the personality of oatmeal, and think, How can their parents love them? I'll never have kids. What would I do if I had something like that, another needless tax upon the Earth? He was disgusted with himself for being disgusted with Wanda Lee. Her only crime was her rampant normalcy. Sometimes Charlie Blistre wished she were retarded or born with three arms so she could be special. But then he'd think, What kind of an unnatural parent am I?

Suddenly he realized the time and jumped up from the desk. A quarter to eight. With a guilty start, he looked for his telltale bags and then remembered that he'd left them in the trunk of the car. Good. Everything must seem as usual. At all costs, he must maintain normality. He

dumped out the old grounds from Friday's coffee (sometimes he put a little extra coffee on top of the old grounds and recycled them, but not after a weekend and not on a special day like today) and went through the comfortable ritual of setting up the brew. Sometimes Charlie Blistre basked in ritual and his musings on the essential comfort it brings. But today was a new day. Everything was different. I am a changed man, he thought, gloating over the tin pot and the hot plate. Even making coffee was exciting.

Charlie Blistre was thinking about where he was going to put his stuff and just sliding an arm through the sleeve of his lab coat when Joel Hampton waltzed in.

I'll bet he can't even tell, Charlie Blistre thought smugly.

He placed a white, slightly greasy bag on the desk and filled his black jasper Wedgwood mug from the still blurping pot.

"I don't think that's ready yet," cautioned Charlie Blistre, peeking into the doughnut bag and thinking that no one but Hampton would drink out of designer china.

"Well, then, it won't taste any worse than it always does," he chortled, sitting down in the upholstered chair on the opposite side of the desk, and extracting a flawless éclair from the waxy bag.

"That's a mighty atrocious tie you're wearing."

What's it to you? he thought.

Charlie Blistre figured that if Hampton could drink the coffee, he might as well, too, so he filled his tacky, stained mug, turned the heat down to simmer, and, propping his feet on top of the desk, began eating his croissant.

Between bites, he said, "Nobody said they have to be sophisticated. Just said to wear one."

Ever since the new department head had sent down the dictum that all personnel were now required to wear ties, the faculty had been agog. The incensed male members (the females, of course, were unfairly exempt) were irate.

Hampton was the only one who didn't mind, but he habitually wore one of the nooses anyway. But Charlie Blistre, along with the quorum, found them impractical and a bother. Scientists, especially field people, were traditionally a scraggly-looking bunch, reputedly never changed their underwear, and subsisted solely on peanut butter and beer. They particularly resented the fact that they were being forced to abandon their hard-earned, proudly-worn uniform by a lowly scum of a mathematician (as the new department head was).

When he'd packed, he'd taken only one tie from home, thinking, I'll show him. I'll wear the same damn tie every day. And now he had a new idea. . .

Watching Hampton consume his sweet, he wondered what prompted this exhibition of camaraderie. It wasn't the norm for Hampton to take root and prissily break his fast in full view of anyone. Usually he just gagged on the coffee and said something stupid. Charlie Blistre didn't mind. It didn't matter if he talked himself blue in the face or sat there in stony silence all day. He could roll with the flow, take what life handed him, and come up smiling.

Hampton quirked his little finger and cleaned himself daintily with a napkin. Fop, thought Charlie Blistre.

Folding his napkin neatly before throwing it away, he said, "Did you ever get a graduate assistant?"

Charlie Blistre was somewhat surprised. So this visit had a point after all.

"No. Mine graduated last semester. Of the new crop coming in, there were no entomologists, and my needs were not pressing. But I have a couple of workstudy students."

"Are they adequate?"

He shrugged. "They do all right, but, as you know, it's not the same."

"Somehow I managed to get two GAs. One has suggested a thesis topic involving the relationship between a plant and a particular insect. I thought maybe if you needed someone, I could loan her out to you, so she could pick

up some more bugology."

"Has she had any of my classes?" he asked, trying to place her.

"No. She did her undergraduate work at another university. She's had a field course, but that's all. She is very bright."

"Who is she?" He wet his finger and swabbed the little crumbs from the desk.

"Amelia Guthrie." To Charlie Blistre's vacant look, he said, "Oh, I know you've seen her around. Short light brown hair, long fingernails always well groomed, small girl."

He frowned and shook his head.

"Oh, well. She'll probably be in to talk with you sometime this week. I haven't mentioned all this to her yet. Thought I'd check it out with you and make sure it was okay first."

"Yeah. Fine. I'll be glad to do whatever I can. You know, I could really use someone to teach one of those invertebrate labs."

"No way, Blistre. I've got her in plant science now, and she's boning up on plant anatomy for spring. Just take her out in the field and let her help you put bugs in your kill jar."

Charlie Blistre smiled and said, "Fine," again. His



companion slurped the dregs out of his cup (brave man) and sloshed in a refill. As he sauntered out, he said with a wink, "She's a hot dish."

Dr. Blistre shook his head indulgently. He put more water in the pot and boiled it again, preparing for the next contingent. Those cabinet doors in the bookcase, he thought. The spare microscopes in there can go in the lab. I can have plenty of room for clothes and towels. The books and papers I brought I can just slop in anywhere. I can sit here at night, and read and work. . .

Gleefully wound up, he was still immersed in his thoughts when his workstudy student came in, recalling the day to a kind of perverted normalcy.

He was pleased that he got through everything without arousing suspicions. At 5:30 he wanted dinner and was overtaken by sudden sadness as he thought of Alexandra sitting down to the table and chirping, "Where's Daddy?" and maybe even crying. He could see her little mouth quiver. He wondered what Brigatta would tell her.

As a reflex, he reached for the phone and dialed a familiar number. Oh, please let that ignorant dear boy be there, he pleaded to the air. It rang and rang and Charlie Blistre muttered, "What in the world can he be doing?"

"Telephone," the laughing voice said.

"You dope," said Charlie Blistre. "Are you busy?"

"No. Is something wrong?"

"Go to my house and tell Brigatta to give you my sleeping bag and see what the baby is doing. Then come here."

"Are you at the office?"

"Yeah. We're gonna eat--"

"Good. I'm hungry."

"--then take a long walk. Hurry."

"What do you want a sleeping bag for? Hey, are you all right?" The voice was now insistent with concern.

"Yeah, but come on. I need you."

Charlie Blistre had never in his life said that to anyone.

The Minstral blew through the door, and, unceremoniously dropping the sleeping bag, hugged Charlie Blistre tightly.

"Good God, Blistre, what's going on? You sounded like death warmed over on a Sunday." Charlie Blistre clung to the Minstral and thought, Why couldn't I have a son like this? then realized that Rodney could be this wonderful, but it would be a side of him that his father would never see.

"Are you okay?" The Minstral pulled away, placing

each hand on either of the professor's shoulders. Charlie Blistre blinked stupidly, and the boy laughingly squeezed his shoulders, and said, "You are all right."

"Had you going there for a minute, didn't I?" asked Charlie Blistre. He laughed, too, somewhat sheepishly, embarrassed now by his intimacy with his friend.

The Minstral was still grinning, standing there in his old blue jeans and baggy chambray shirt with the sleeves rolled up to the elbow. There was a rose stitched on the pocket. "So there it is." He pointed to the sleeping bag.

"Thanks," said Charlie Blistre, who began stuffing it into the now empty cabinet space.

"What's it for?"

"I'm gonna sleep in it."

"Am I invited along for the camping trip? Kinda cool for it." He looked Charlie Blistre straight in the eyes, to make sure he told the truth.

"I'm gonna spread it on the floor and camp right here," he said, closing the cabinet door with a sense of accomplishment.

"In this office?" The Minstral's voice was incredulous. "Why?"

Smiling wanly, he said, "Because Brigatta kicked me out."

A distant, unbelieving, "God bless. . ." came from the Minstral's lips as he sank into the chair in which Joel Hampton had enthroned himself earlier that morning. He looked stricken.

"I knew things weren't the best between you two, but I had no idea. . ."

"Me, either. Look here, don't get bent out of shape over it. It's all right. It really is. It feels pretty good."

"You didn't sound so good when you called. You sounded like somebody had let the air out of your tires." He looked up at him quizzically, a field of little furrows worming across his forehead.

"I miss my kid," he stated abruptly, with a rueful smile.

"You mean your kids."

"Don't start on me. You know perfectly well what I mean," He paused. "Let's go eat."

"Where to?" said the Minstral, jumping up, with his lopsided, gap-toothed grin beginning to creep out. He put his hands in his pockets, and wryly suggested, "Grill?"

"Not on your life. I want a real meal," Charlie Blistre said expansively, peeling off the chalky lab coat and hanging it in a heap on the peg.

"You know you can come stay with me," offered the

Minstral as they took the steps. "I've got adequate space. I've even got an extra bed. I'm living alone anyway, and, as solitude breeds only disgust with oneself, would welcome the opportunity to profit from your company."

Charlie Blistre thought of the Minstral's house and said, "No, thanks. You don't need me in your hair."

"What you mean is that you don't want me in your hair. Look, you can't live in your office."

"Why not?"

"Oh, come on, get real. Where are you gonna take a shower? You gonna get in one of those black sinks in the lab and let the water trickle down on your head? I can just see you splashing around in there now, flopping like a fish, when in comes the security guard. There's not even a place for a towel."

"I'll be all right. It's an adventure."

"Adventure. You've got about as much sense as I have," said the Minstral, implying a total lack thereof. "Come stay with me." He winked. "We'll have swinging bachelor parties."

"You'd cramp my style."

"Hard-headed baboon. But if you change your mind, the offer's always open." He gave an expansive swing of his arms. Charlie Blistre thought the Minstral looked like a badly constructed windmill.

October's evening air was snappy, an omen of what was to come. It was dusky, and Charlie Blistre was glad of his jacket. The Minstral hunched along, with his hands crammed into the pockets of his jeans. He was glad to have hair over his ears and wondered how Charlie Blistre's kept from falling off in the cold. Charlie Blistre wondered why the Minstral didn't wear a pair of shoes that weren't worn through at the toes, while the Minstral wondered how Charlie Blistre was going to live in his office without a stereo.

"So do you want a scouting report, boss man?" asked the Minstral mischievously. "Can I be your full-time spy now?"

"Just what I've always wanted--a snivelling secret agent. Okay. Spill your guts, boy."

He laughed, and, looking sideways at Charlie Blistre, said, "What exactly do you want to know?"

"Oh, just. . .things," said Charlie Blistre lucidly.

"You want play by play or just the highlights? How about I start, and you keep me on track by subtle comments and questions?"

"Either shut up or talk sense."

The Minstral grinned, thinking, Back to normal.

"Well, Mrs. wasn't expecting me to be behind the door when she opened it. She just stood there with her mouth open,

holding that disgusting dog in her arms. I could hear a racket in the kitchen. Wanda Lee was whining. 'God, Rodney, you are too dumb to live.' " Charlie Blistre laughed at the simpering imitation. "And Rodney made some sort of reply--I couldn't hear much but a rumbling murmur.

"We just stood there, speechlessly staring at one another. Finally Mrs. said, 'He's not here.' I said, 'I know--he called me from the office.' I really didn't know what to think or do, being totally in the dark," he remarked pointedly. "So I said that you wanted her to give me your sleeping bag.

" 'What's he up to?' she muttered, and left me on the porch. She had dumped the dog on me, and the spastic creature kept trying to wash my face. I was tempted to throw her into the bushes. Mrs. had shut the door and I couldn't see anything, although, as a valuable spy, I should have made an opportunity to collect an insect from off the window or something. After about five minutes she came back and foisted the sleeping bag upon me. She said, 'Is he all right?' and I said, 'Yeah, he's having the time of his life.' "

"What did you say something like that for?"

"I didn't know. And my silver tongue does fail me once in a while, believe it or not."

"That's all?" They don't miss me, they don't need

me, what about the baby? he thought.

"Yep. That's all. So I waddled up here as fast as my little legs could carry me, fearing to find you in a formalin-induced stupor with dissecting pins stuck in the webby skin between your fingers."

"Did you see Alexandra?"

"No, but I heard her. She was singing the kiddie song about the three jovial huntsmen."

Charlie Blistre smiled a sweet, sad smile as he pulled open the restaurant door.

They sat down in the too-cool room, studying the laminated menu. The shiny food tried to beguile them into ordering a sad facsimile thereof. They chose something, and the Minstral said,

"Are you going to get a divorce?"

"It's too soon to say," replied Charlie Blistre, twiddling around the sweaty water glass and leaving puckers on the paper place mat. "I have no idea at all."

"A toast," said the Minstral unexpectedly, lifting his glass. "To adversity overcome." Charlie Blistre smiled, their glasses clinked, and they drank. He felt better.

"You know, it's so weird. Alexandra and I had gone to Mom's for the weekend. I'd had some time to think, and was considering what a heel I am sometimes--"



"All the time."

"I had actually resolved to try and do better by my family. So I waltz into the house and Brigatta hands me this."

"So much for resolutions."

"Yeah. What she said was totally unexpected. Life had been lukewarm between us for so long. I never expected it to change. I thought it would go on forever like that. And then after the baby was asleep last night, she said, 'Blistre, we need to talk.' Blistre--she called me Blistre! It sounded like something Wanda Lee would say. You know, I wouldn't doubt but what Wanda Lee put her up to this whole thing. 'Just imagine how fine life would be if that clod were gone all the time. Why don't you show him the door?' She doesn't like me," he explained.

"So what happened?"

"I moved into my office, that's what happened." Charlie Blistre had envisioned unburdening himself to the Minstral, going over each and every sentence of the confrontation. All the little things tamped down inside for so many years voided out of Brigatta's heart when, finally, no more pain or injustice, real or imaginary, could be squeezed in. What really got Charlie Blistre was that most of the things she said were true. He was tired of her, he wasn't a good father, he didn't love her

(she was family, so he loved her, but sometimes you don't like your family)--he liked the dog better than her. She was stagnating--had been for years. He was rather shocked when she said that--he thought it was his word. She wanted change--even a change for the worse might turn into something better.

Blah blah blah.

But what about the kids? he'd said. What about 'em? was her rejoinder. They don't need you. You don't like them. You don't know how it feels to be a mother. You don't know anything at all, thought Charlie Blistre. You've never known me or even had the slightest inkling as to who I really am, and you don't care. I don't need you. Go be a deadweight on somebody else.

This hurts me as much as it hurts you. she'd said. Liar. She was enjoying the scene, revelling in the excitement, in control for once. It was her show now. And that sneaky, secret smiling. . .

They stayed out quite late. After a leisurely dinner, they walked the small town's dark streets. They talked and laughed and insulted each other, and it was good. He walked the Minstral home, and crept back to his office.

The huge building was as deserted and ominous as a ruined abbey, and Charlie Blistre was aware of the beating of his heart as his feet sounded hollowly in the

corridor. Stealthily, he worked his key into the lock, opened it, then shut it gratefully behind him, locking it back. Everything was just as he had left it. No one was hiding under the desk or inside the cabinet; he checked to make sure. An involuntary sigh of relief escaped him as he looked around.

I feel dirty, he thought. Too bad. I can't brave the lab sinks tonight, or even the bathroom sinks.

He looked out his window at the sprinkling of lights, then pulled the shade. Papers lay in a disorderly heap on his desk. It made him feel good, for his excuse was there should anyone ask. Oh, I'm working late tonight. Trying to finish a paper, on the wing venation patterns in green lacewings.

It was strange knowing that his sleeping bag was inside his cabinet and that before too long he would spread it out and climb in. The idea bothered him. Maybe he would simply kick back in his desk chair and try sleeping like that. Experimentally, he tried it out, putting his hands behind his head. He felt like a business executive. It was late, but he was thinking and dreaming and planning, so he wasn't sleepy. Maybe he would pull an all-nighter. He hadn't done that since Chemistry 102, studying for a test back in the long ago. He'd only made a 76 and decided not to do that anymore. But he could

handle it now, and it might even feel good. Yes--the perfect excuse for being here all night. I got terribly involved in my paper, he could say if anyone were crass enough to ask, fascinating stuff. Charlie Blistre knew he wouldn't touch his research tonight. He might doodle his name all over a piece of paper, but he didn't care about his lacewings in the slightest.

He wondered what the Minstral was doing and wished he were still with him. They could turn out all the lights and lie on the floor, philosophizing. They had done that once, at the Minstral's house, when he'd gone over for dinner. It had been hilarious. "I've dressed for the occasion," he had announced grandly. He was wearing a black ratty velveteen blazer that had once belonged to his mother, and he had pinned a sprig of Erigeron philadelphicus to his lapel. He had been surprised, and a little hurt, that Charlie Blistre knew what kasha was and had even eaten it, but this was early on in their relationship before he'd told him all about Nancy and her vegetarianism. "And I thought this would be an education," he lamented. The Minstral was a good cook. He did most things well. Then late in the evening, after they'd drunk a bit too much lager, they lay on throw rugs in the living room and the Minstral had told him all about the Egyptian Book of the Dead. Charlie Blistre hadn't really paid

attention because he had been mesmerized by the array of paintings the Minstral had done on the ceiling. Giant eyeballs, no two a pair, bored into him. There were stars in some of the eyes; some were bloodshot. Charlie Blistre found it hard not to giggle. His own ceiling now looked very dull. He imagined it done up in insect eyes with all the facets. Especially fly eyes, Musca.

Charlie Blistre thought it would be nice to read some poetry, but he didn't have any with him. Wordworth's daffodil poem or Frost's milkweed poem. Maybe even John Donne, "A Valediction Forbidding Mourning." But he had nothing in his office save bug and biology books, and that wouldn't suit at all.

Maybe Brigatta's got a boyfriend, he thought all of a sudden. That would account for her suddenly wanting to be rid of me and for all that damned smiling when she didn't think I was looking. I wonder who it could be? I could sneak over to the house and peep in the window. Or maybe I could just call and catch him there. Then he gave a cruel chortle, deciding that any affair that Brigatta might have would be one-sided only, for who could possibly want her? He had forgotten that he had at one point.

That sleeping bag was haunting him.

He went to the cabinet door and slung it open, as if trying to catch it doing something naughty. The rusty-

colored nylon lay in neat and complacent folds. He gazed at it suspiciously, then pulled it onto the floor. He stood looking at the neat little roll for a long time, stroking his chin. Then, before spreading the sleeping bag out on the carpet, he double-checked the door to make sure it was locked, wishing for a deadbolt so he could latch it from the inside. A wild, perverted janitor might be out terrorizing the halls at night.

Charlie Blistre felt like an emotional hillbilly as he tenderly unrolled his bed. Mentally he made fun of himself for being such a cowardly baby. Even Alexandra, who was sleeping now, would be braver in this situation. Perhaps in a few days, he thought foolishly, she can stay with me here. It'll be like camping out. I can bring my Sterno stove from the house, and we can cook cream of chicken soup and minute rice. They could imagine the scenery through which they walked and rode their bikes during the day. Or perhaps they would be lost in a snowy mountain wilderness, groping blindly in the choking snow for hours until Charlie Blistre climbed a tree with a last desperate burst of energy and sighted this cabin. Stumbling inside, he would build a hot, lapping fire in the stove and then make cocoa. Warm and drowsy, he would pull Alexandra into his lap and moving back and forth gently rock them both to sleep.

He realized too late that he had no pillow and no alarm clock. After turning out the lights, he slunk into the cocoon-like bag and furtively pulled off his clothes. He curled into a fetal position and pulled the cool bag tightly around him.

"Good night," he whispered, and the room reacted with silence.

The glow from the campus lights was muted by the thin slats of the window shades. As night shadows reshaped themselves into morning song birds, Charlie Blistre slept peacefully, not realizing that, although he was out of his rut, he was still not getting his way.

## Chapter Five

So Charlie Blistre created a new normalcy. His habit of getting up early continued, as he popped rather excitedly out of the sleeping bag, putting it away in a rush. (He sent the obliging Minstral to the house for the alarm clock, or anything else he might want; he never went back.) Then he'd slither down the hall to his lab, and, locking the door behind him, take a bird bath in the ugly black sink. He visited the Minstral more often now and spent long sessions in his bathtub. But on usual days, the sink sufficed. It was hard to shave without a mirror so he propped one between the two faucets, letting it lean on the swan-necked spigot. After his morning ablutions, he'd sneak out of the building to have breakfast in the cafeteria ("Yuck," the Minstral would say), while breaking in his new habit of reading the morning paper. He liked the desertedness of the awakening campus, quiet except for the shrill tenacious chatter of the early morning birds. His special tree friends Liriodendron tulipifera and Cercis canadensis were striking in their gnarled, vulnerable nudity as they reached up to the gaunt, gray sky. The Earth was sleeping now, waiting for its wakening call. Charlie Blistre sometimes felt himself, too, in an active



hibernation, anticipating the Spring that would finally come into his life.

Charlie Blistre never confessed his living arrangements to any of his colleagues. Some knew and kept quiet. A couple of students knew, and they kept quiet, too. The Minstral, to whom he was closer than ever, wandered into his office several times a day now, and often greeted him with a loud, "Hey, where's the towel this time?" Charlie Blistre would hurriedly ssh! him, but he needn't have worried. His lopsided, raggedy cohort wasn't as brash as he let on--he always made sure they were alone first. It was the early morning crew who stumbled bleary-eyed into Charlie Blistre's office for their dubious coffee who were privy to his secret. Sometimes a towel would be up, or a stray sock or undershirt would be wadded mindlessly in a corner, or a fold of the sleeping bag would peek out from its hiding place. They said a few words to one another about it, sure, but no one gossiped to the outside world.

"Don't you realize how lucky you are?" the Minstral had quarrelled at him when he was complaining about Joel Hampton's prissiness. "Don't you have any idea of the friendship that man has for you? He knows you live here, and anyone who knows can certainly guess why. But have you ever heard a nosy question from him? A snide comment? Have you ever stumbled into a room where people were

talking only to have them look guilty when they saw you? I can guarantee you haven't. And it's because he holds his tongue. And since you're attempting to hide this chapter in your life from the entire world, an impossibility, I might add, you ought to get down on your knees and express your gratitude to that man."

"Oh, shut up," he'd responded sourly, but he hadn't complained anymore about the botanist, at least not aloud.

By and large, Charlie Blistre liked his new life. In a way, he echoed what Brigatta had said. The old life was so predictable that sometimes one even desired a change for the worse, to do something different. He was on his own for the first time since he had been a freshman getting sick in invertebrate lab, and he didn't like to consider how long ago that had been.

And even his routine invertebrate labs were getting better. Like everything else, they were taking on a new excitement. An excitement in his own life had been reawakened that had in turn aroused a new interest in his labs. And now, nearing the end of the semester, the students were investigating Phylum Arthropoda, in the Order Crustacea, dissecting their crayfish, and probing for the beady, pearl-like balance organ called a statocyst. Next on the biological ladder were his favorites, the Insects. Charlie Blistre loved talking about bugs.

Already he was studying for his classes for next semester. He would be teaching his graduate entomology class and he knew it all by heart; even so, he reread his texts and notes, making sure everything was exactly right, tucked into the precise drawer of his brain where he could pull it out and use its contents as the occasion demanded. At last he decided that since he was straightening out his life in other ways, he would finally straighten out meiosis. It differed little from mitosis, yet the making of egg and sperm cells embarrassed him, so he'd shied away from it. He liked how the chromosomes hung on the spindle fibers like spiders on a web, moving, all the while moving, being pulled apart by forces beyond their control to opposite sides of the cell. Then they finally stopped moving. This was the part that intrigued Charlie Blistre. He thought that if he were a chromosome he wouldn't have enough sense to stop but would keep trying to migrate and just bounce and bounce in continual frustration against the cell wall. Either that, or he would never be able to reach his destination--he would be continually stuck in Anaphase. Never would he reach that state where all that was old was sloughed off and only the newly separate, yet genetically identical cells remained. It was like giving birth to one's own self.

One evening as he sat at his desk grading exams a

knock came on his locked door. The Minstral, he thought. He opened the door and it was Rodney.

"Hi, Dad," he said.

"Rodney!" he exclaimed. "Come in, come in!"

Rodney walked in and seated himself comfortably.

Charlie Blistre was glad that he hadn't pulled the sleeping bag out yet, despite the late hour.

"So how's it going?" Rodney asked. Charlie Blistre thought he looked so young.

"Okay," he said, nodding his head and seating himself behind the desk. "It's taken some getting used to, but I'm doing pretty well."

"Where do you live?"

Charlie Blistre smiled, and his son thought he could see the Minstral in that smile. "I live right here."

Rodney laughed, and, smiling broadly, said, "That sounds like fun. Tell me all about it." So he did.

Then he asked Rodney what he'd been up to lately, and Rodney told him about band and chorus and school, and about his friends and the dog.

"Foon," said Charlie Blistre. "And how's. . . everyone else?"

Rodney told him that Brigatta was doing well, that Wanda Lee was the same, and that Alexandra was her usual angelic self, "Depending on how you define 'angel,' " he

laughed, and that, when Brigatta started her new job after Christmas, Alexandra would be going to day care.

He winced and said, "Yuck." He guessed it couldn't be helped. But the thought nearly killed him--someone else with Alexandra when he couldn't have her.

Rodney stayed for a long time, and they talked and talked. It was right. It made Charlie Blistre feel good that his son had come to see him. Maybe he wasn't a total washout as a father after all.

When he got up to leave, they shook hands and Rodney said, "I miss you, Dad." Then the father hugged the son, the son hugged the father, and they promised to see each other again soon.

He felt that Rodney wouldn't tell Brigatta or Wanda Lee that he'd been here. He knew he wouldn't tell Alexandra, either, but he sensed that sometime when they were alone Rodney would give her a very special hug from her daddy. And Charlie Blistre took her smiling picture from his desk drawer and kissed it tenderly.

Amelia Guthrie, Charlie Blistre thought, did not exactly fit Joel Hampton's sparse description of her. She was small with light brown hair and long fingernails, as he'd said, but she was much more.

The first time Charlie Blistre saw her he felt posi-

tive that he'd known her somewhere once before. High school, was his immediate thought, and in the same instant realized how foolish that was. She was only twenty-six and Charlie Blistre wasn't telling his age, but he was old enough to be her father. He kept trying to remember, teasing his memory with faces he hadn't recalled in years. She resembled no one, or rather, her small green eyes and nondescript hair were so common that she was everywhere. He eventually stopped worrying about it.

Even though it was rather late in the season to be good for insect collecting, he took her out one Sunday afternoon, mainly to give her a taste of what it was like in the field and to demonstrate the procedures used. The Minstral came along, as Charlie Blistre hadn't known Amelia long enough to feel at ease alone with her for an entire outing.

"Chicken," he had said. "Where's that scientific detachment? Is this a field trip or a society picnic?" But he had been glad to go along.

"Why are you called that?" she asked when the Minstral was introduced to her. He regarded her from eyes perched atop the crooked nose and smirked omnisciently.

"What's his real name?" she appealed to Charlie Blistre, when the Minstral only stood there as dumb as a doorpost.

"He's not telling," said the Minstral.

"I'm not telling," said Charlie Blistre.

"You know, don't you?" she continued, immediately at ease with both of them.

"Yes, I know. He was in one of my classes once, and my grade sheet had his real live genuine name on it." He paused. "You know, I don't believe I remember. What is your real name?"

At this the Minstral slapped his knees and laughed uproariously. Charlie Blistre eyed the gap between his teeth and manfully resisted the urge to try and wedge a pencil into it. When he laughed, he tossed his head, allowing the wind the liberty of blowing wisps of hair into his mouth. It was an infectious laugh, and the others felt it being pulled out of them, too.

"Bernard," said the Minstral, which brought a full-fledged hoot from Charlie Blistre.

"Percival," he responded.

"I think you look like a Raymond," said Amelia. The Minstral gagged.

"Well, if you won't tell me your name, then at least tell me how you got your nickname." Her eyes sparkled.

"Nickname?" quoth the Minstral in horror. "Nickname? This is my true name, only my parents chose another without consulting me first. If I ever have a child--"

"Why are you called that?" Charlie Blistre wondered aloud. "He won't tell me," he said to her.

"Some dumb girl probably called him that in a moment of passion," Amelia offered wryly.

"That's an idea," said the Minstral, his eyes widening in approval. "A quite good one. I like it."

"Bullfeathers," said Charlie Blistre. "You big dope. I'll make you tell me some day."

"But first we must share a moment of passion," said the Minstral coyly, fluttering his eyelids and putting his arm around Charlie Blistre, who appreciatively poked him in the stomach with his kill jar.

They met at the City Park. One of the things Charlie Blistre was eager to show Amelia was Bluebell Island, even though in fall and winter it was just a hunk of mud plopped into the creek. Amelia was working on this plant for her thesis, Mertensia virginica, and its parasite, root-knot nematodes.

A dyed-in-the-wool botanist, Amelia carried her plastic bag for storing plant material should she find any likely-looking specimens for collecting. The Minstral immediately confronted her.

"Don't you read the front of your field manuals?" he said. "Plant material should not be destroyed."

"I'm not destroying, I'm collecting."



"Same thing. Natural wildflowers shouldn't be picked. The beauty taken today will be missed tomorrow."

"What about that weapon slung over your shoulder? That's not just for looks, I take it?" She referred to the insect net the Minstral carried. He had snorted good-naturedly when Charlie Blistre had given it to him back at the office, remarking that the only use it might possibly have in November would be to snatch stray leaves as they fell.

At her remark, Charlie Blistre looked guilty, remembering the sickening feel of the moth thorax he had pinched many, many years ago to keep it from destroying its wings in the net. It always made him feel sick.

"The sole function to which this monstrosity is put is to act as a mood-setter for entomological expeditions. What would an outing be without one? We don't actually catch beautiful things--"

"Depends on your definition of beauty. . . ." And Charlie Blistre turned them off. He'd heard all this stuff so many times before. Their bickering reminded him of Rodney and Wanda Lee, making him morose. The Minstral was all wound up, ready to make a fool of himself, which he could do well, with dignity and grace.

They didn't find any bugs or plants worth collecting, just some sad-looking grape ferns. They mucked around

Bluebell Island, finding only mud which would later drop from their shoes in chunks. Charlie Blistre could hardly convince himself, much less anyone else, of the beauties lying dormant there. It was hard to see past the damp brown-black leaves and the stiff skeletons of the golden-rod to envision the melody beyond. How can human beings ever have any hope? he wondered.

Charlie Blistre slunk back to his office, feeling rather defeated. It wasn't the field trip--that had gone well enough. He hadn't expected to find anything this late in the season. It was mainly an excuse to get outside, and a way to get to know Amelia. He liked the way she sparred with the Minstral. He overpowered a lot of people. She recognized plants that were unfamiliar to them, explaining each with the same eagerness with which she listened to Dr. Blistre explain the flies they found. The defeat had come when the Minstral had mentioned its being November, because Charlie Blistre had thought, Thanksgiving.

He had never been wild about celebrating holidays, although he welcomed the vacations and enjoyed Christmas when the kids were small. If one needs a family at no other time, he mused, they are essential on holidays. What ever can one do with all that empty space? Thanksgiving meant four and a half days of no school, which

frightened him. Already weekends were becoming pretty long to get through. One can only read, write, study, and walk for so long. The end of the enjoyable walking days was in sight; perhaps today was the last.

In reality, holidays had always been rather boring at home, too. His vision of Thanksgiving was numbed with a false glowing Gemutlichkeit. He could see Brigatta, rosy and maternal, placing a steaming hot, golden turkey in front of him. Seated at the place of honor at the head of the table, he would carve the succulent beast, placing each piece with a tender blessing on the plates of his precious children. Their apple-red cheeks beamed with freshly scrubbed wholesomeness. He closed his eyes and let out a deep breath that wasn't quite a sigh.

Charlie Blistre would never learn that life is not a Norman Rockwell painting.

A tap came on his door early the next morning.

"I smelled your coffee. May I borrow a cup?" Amelia smiled brightly, holding up a white porcelain mug labelled Veronica teocrium and illustrated with that flower.

"Help yourself." He returned her smile. "You've even beaten Hampton over this morning."

She took a tentative sip and said, "Jesus." But each morning after that she came back, and he liked to see her presiding over the pot.

Early one morning, as he sat at his desk nursing his first cup and listening to her aimless chatter and laughter, he realized with a surprised jolt that Hampton was right. She was lovely.

## Chapter Six

Charlie Blistre lived through Thanksgiving; it wasn't easy, but he made it. Christmas was much rougher.

During Thanksgiving break the weather was fine, so he took many long walks. The campus was practically deserted, and he enjoyed hearing his lone footfalls on the sidewalk as he wandered and lingered among the buildings. Charlie Blistre lost himself in aimless movements; he was at peace and he rested.

On the big day, in the early afternoon, he went to Joel Hampton's to watch football. Football! his mind had shrieked when Hampton proffered the invitation. You like football? He'd never been to Hampton's home before--he figured it would be kind of faggy and gaudy. But the apartment was done in homespun country style, with lots of wood, oil lamps, and decorated grapevine wreaths. There was, as befitted a botanist, a riot of plants. Charlie Blistre was impressed. The small gathering assembled in front of the TV consisted of three other faculty bachelors and a couple of local students, including the Minstral and Hampton's brother. "No ties allowed," was the only admonition. They ate salty crunchies and drank beer while the Minstral provided a mindless running commentary.

"Thy mouth runneth over," he told him at one point, only to feel the past creep up on him, because that was what he used to tell Walter Seton in high school.

Hampton beguiled him into staying for dinner. Everyone else left except the Minstral, and Charlie Blistre suddenly felt that they had cooked this up to purposefully provide him with a Thanksgiving celebration. Turkey appeared in hot club sandwiches, along with lots of fresh fruit and vegetables, with cheese and crackers for dessert. Charlie Blistre saw through the obvious ploy with deeply touched eyes.

But Christmas. . . the thought of all those days with nothing scheduled in them was a horror to contemplate. Those Thanksgiving days were needed, but this vacation, like so many other things about Christmas, was a bit too much.

On the Wednesday of finals week, Amelia cooked dinner for him at her apartment. "Your Christmas present," she had said. Why is she doing a dumb thing like that? he thought guiltily. I don't have her anything. She feels sorry for me. I know she knows. . .

And Amelia did know. She had suspected for a long time that Dr. Blistre was living in his office. One night when working at an ungodly hour at the herbarium, she heard one of the office doors open. Peering curiously

and quietly through her own now barely-opened door, she saw him wandering down the hall in his aqua pajama bottoms with a faded yellow towel draped across one shoulder. Quietly she had pulled the door to and had collapsed in a muffled fit of giggles against the drying oven, laughing until she cried, but then felt so sorry for poor Dr. Blistre that she locked the place up and went home.

But, to her credit, she did not invite him over solely because she felt sorry for him--although she did pity him and often tried to imagine what it would be like to live in one's office. Amelia was genuinely fond of Dr. Blistre, with his wire-rimmed glasses and shy but ready smile. She was trying to say a lot of things with that dinner, like, "I'm sorry your life is confused," and, "I really like you," and "Thank you so much for helping with my thesis." But she told him it was because he was helping her with her studies.

Charlie Blistre's shy smile was tinged with sadness at that. He was touched and pleased, to be sure, but the message he had needed to hear was, "I like you."

The Minstral was going to be gone part of the time, too. Irrationally, Charlie Blistre was deeply hurt, even though the Minstral was apologetic.

"Family obligations," he had said. "And you know what a pain families are."

It was difficult for him to accept his new dependency on his friend. Even from the time when he had first met him--when he had given him a jellyfish to dissect, and the Minstral had replied with a challenging, "This is stupid;" Charlie Blistre had whispered back, "I know,"--he had felt totally at ease with him and enjoyed the comments that filtered through to him from the Minstral's odd perspective on life. He felt their friendship to be mutually beneficial, for the Minstral, with all his glibness and look-at-me demeanor, was essentially a loner. Charlie Blistre didn't think he had any other close friends.

"I tried to get out of it. I didn't want to leave you alone at a time like this."

"Oh, spare me," Charlie Blistre retorted. "I don't need your pity."

"Pity, you big ass," the Minstral had responded. "Don't pretend with me. You need me," he had said, accentuating every word. "Don't you realize what that means to me? You need this dopey, wretched, pointless excuse for a human being. No one has ever needed me before. And that is something that I need."

Charlie Blistre hadn't known what to say or where to look, so he had swallowed hugely and stood there looking as stupid as he felt.

"It's okay," the Minstral had then said softly.



"There's nothing wrong with us caring for each other."  
He walked to the wall, and absently straightened the sketch of Popilla japonica.

The Minstral's parents were sex therapists in Boston, which was a never-ending source of amusement to Charlie Blistre.

"Do your family honors." He thought of that phrase often, like a song one didn't know but which kept running its nagging course through the mind. It wasn't as if he hadn't thought about his family or wondered what to do. But what would he do?

He'd bought presents for everyone. For Alexandra he bought kid things, like crayons (Charlie Blistre loved to smell just-opened boxes of new crayons) and coloring books, an art kit much too sophisticated for her, some Matchbox cars, a stuffed unicorn, and a darling royal blue velvet dress with lots of frills and lace. He got clothes for Rodney and Wanda Lee, which he figured they would both hate. Since Brigatta liked sewing, he bought her two dozen skeins of yarn, Aida cloth, and a bag of lace. He even remembered the dog--he had bought Buffy a box of dog bones and wrapped them up for her to have under the tree; he had done this each year she had been a member of their family--this made Foon's eighth Christmas. He bought the Minstral a couple of books: William Goldman's The Princess

Bride and some poetry by Wordsworth.

His mother Petunia asked him to come home for the holidays. "I know what happened," she wrote. "Brigatta had the decency to tell me even if you didn't." He thought about going over with Alexandra, but he wrote back in a Christmas card, "No. I need to be here." He hadn't seen her or talked with her since his visit with Alexandra.

"Can I come over?" he asked Brigatta over the phone.

For a few seconds she was still, then said, "No. I'll come over there," and hung up.

I meant for Christmas, you dope, he thought sullenly.

He had to unlock the building for her. The powers that be were beginning to frown upon Dr. Blistre's being continually in his office. He didn't care if they liked it or not. Waiting concealed in the lobby, he made her peck at the door a couple of times and peer into the building before he unlatched the door with an inimicable smile.

She half-smiled at the floor as she stepped through the door. Looking around, her eyes ran over the painting perched on the wall of the eminence after whom the building was named. With a start, Charlie Blistre realized that she'd never been here before.

That made him feel bad, so he said, "You got here quickly."

They silently walked up one flight of stairs. and

started the second. He noticed she was huffing while he felt no strain at all. Again he felt superior. He thought proudly that here he was at home, the home team with the home advantage, and he knew that this would be one game of the series that he would win. He felt almost giddy.

At the top of the stairs, she paused to look into the window of the tiny biological museum. In a display case open to the hall were several glass gallon jars with human fetuses in varying stages of development. She looked pityingly at him, and said, "You told me about this."

"You wanna go in?" he asked, indicating the museum door. "There are a lot of nice things in there. All my exotic insects, the Coleopterans--the beetles-- from Africa--"

"No. I didn't come here for that," she said softly, crushing his enthusiasm. He'd have liked to have shown her how pretty they all were, how huge the scarabs, how grotesque the fiddler beetles, and how mysterious the wings of butterflies which he would have unveiled with the gossamer touch of a magician, revealing the colors which could have been nobly worn by iridescent blossoms. But she just looked at the dead babies for another couple of seconds before proceeding down the hall.

That's how it's always been, thought Charlie Blistre.

I've always been willing to share my joy of knowledge with you, to teach you and help you learn, but your mind was always closed. What wonder can you be holding inside your head that is so precious and so complete that there isn't even room to consider anything else before you turn it away? I don't understand you at all.

Brigatta was thinking, Here I am walking in your precious laboratory, and all you can show me are babies, dead babies in jars. Everything in here is dead. But I'm alive and your children are alive. Our marriage is dead. But you'd rather be here in this vulgar, unChristian tomb. I don't understand you at all.

The office showed no signs of its continual occupation. Charlie Blistre had hurriedly but efficiently stowed everything away. It was essential that Brigatta remain unaware of how necessary this room was to him. It would be to defile his sanctum should she see his big towel and slimy bar of soap drying on the window sill. He knew, too, that that sight would lessen him in her eyes. He didn't want her condescending pity or the look that said, "I guess this is all a man can do." And, indeed, he saw her eyes roving, darting into all corners and looking at the drawers to see if there were any soggy corners hanging out.

He seated himself in the position of authority behind

his desk, and Brigatta, putting her big purse in the soft chair, began a slow review of everything on the walls, trying to get her bearings.

"The butterflies are pretty," she said, surveying a Mourning Cloak.

"That's a Nymphalis antiopa," he said, more eagerly than he wished. "You know, it's one of the first butterflies to hatch in the spring, frequently emerging from hibernation before the snow has melted. It's quite rare in England, and called the Camberwell Beauty. It's a member of the family Nymphalidae, or the Brush Footed Butterflies, and it feeds on elm, willow, roses--"

"Not anymore it doesn't. It's dead, Charlie Blistre, can't you see that? And can't you stop playing professor for a few minutes?" She didn't try to mask her disgust, yet calmly went on to the next specimen.

"You've got the thickest mind of anyone I have ever met, Brigatta," he said disdainfully. "Don't you want to learn anything?" He looked at her, wide-eyed, remembering how different it had been when Amelia looked at all his things.

She turned round to him, defiantly, and he felt as if her two sturdy legs were boring into the floor as they caused her little feet to assume a firm battle stance. As firm as her resolution. And she said,

"And what good has all your learning been to you, Doctor Blistre?" She paused for only an instant. "It hasn't ever been one damn bit of good to me. All my life, it seems like, I worked dumb hack jobs to get you through school. And here you are, creeping up on fifty, and still in school!"

"It's not the same." He sighed and shook his head.

"It's not the same. There's still books and papers and classes and grades. It's all the same, and it makes me miserable."

"You're jealous. You always did begrudge the time I spent on my studies."

"Time you're still spending. You're still floundering around in school, won't ever get out of school."

"Brigatta," he said with mock-patience. "I'm not a student anymore. I'm a professor. It's my job."

"It's a damn stupid piddly job. You've never had a real job. You've never had a job where you had to work and sweat; you've never done a man's work. You just sit in here, playing school all day."

"And what would you have me do?" The voice was icy and cool.

"You remember that job offer you got from that pesticide company when you finished your PhD? You could have been making a fine living, and doing something worthwhile,

too."

"But I don't want to make my living killing things!" He reached to loosen his tie, then realized he didn't have one on.

"You do anyway." She gave a broad sweep of her arm, encompassing everything on his walls and in his books. Then she turned on him. "What about that?" she said in triumph.

"I can't explain it to you. I could never explain anything to you. You don't listen. You don't care. You have a brain like a clogged-up sink. I can talk and talk and explain and explain and not one thing gets through. And I'm tired of trying."

"Well, maybe I'm tired of trying, too." Her voice was a thud. "I'm tired of everything having to do with you. I'm going home." In a fluster she picked up her purse and hunched her shoulders to straighten the coat she hadn't taken off. "Here's your mail," she said, taking a rubber-banded stack out of her purse and slamming it onto his desk.

"I want to see the kids," he said.

"You stay away from those kids. They're mine. I don't want you around them."

"Too bad. I want to see them. And if I have to kill you to do it, then I will." God, how melodramatic, he

thought, and with difficulty suppressed giggling.

"I won't let you in that house, so don't even bother coming over." She opened the door. He could see the slam coming.

"Then tell them to come over here. You tell them!" he shouted as the door crashed shut. The sound echoed in the empty building, and Brigatta's retreating feet made a dull thump in the hall.

The door stopped vibrating, and he went to the window. Brigatta marched righteously to the car and intended to fling the door open furiously, but she had forgotten she'd locked it. The force gave her a spastic jolt, and Charlie Blistre stood in his sanctum and laughed.

"Like a maniac, no doubt," remarked the Minstral dryly when he was told about what happened. "True to form."

"You always pick on me," complained Charlie Blistre. Aimlessly, they were wandering around a lake--artificial, of course; the day was still, frigid, and brown. He was pretending he was in Scotland. He felt he should quarrel at the Minstral, more out of habit than anything else. He really didn't mind the jibing. To tell the truth, he liked the attention.

"No more than you deserve."

Then he went on to tell about when the kids visited



him.

On Christmas Eve, Charlie Blistre had propped his pillows against the wall, and was sitting against them with the sleeping bag unzipped and cuddled over him like a blanket. He was reading The Hotel New Hampshire. Trying hard not to be blue, he was succeeding admirably.

Then came a spatter of stones against the window. He assumed it was some young vandals and ignored it. As the pebbling became more insistent, he got up to put a halt to it.

When he looked out the window, he saw Rodney and Alexandra on the sidewalk. Rodney was getting ready to stone him again, and he was yelling at his sister not to throw anything. She was snuggled in coat, hat, mittens, and muffler, managing to hop from foot to foot and trying desperately to get into Rodney's store of gravel.

Charlie Blistre opened his window and shouted, "Come in!" Rodney laughed, saying something unintelligible, while Alexandra jumped up and down and squealed. Grinning broadly, he waved them towards the front door and made it there in record time.

"Daddy! Daddy!" squealed his angel and flung herself wildly into his outstretched arms. "Daddy, Daddy, it's Christmas, and I'm Santa Claus! Look in Rodney's car.

Rodney drove, Daddy, and it was so funny! Look inside the car's lid. Come on, let's go look!" She wiggled down and began pulling his hand. Laughter erupted from him in a spasm of pure happiness. When he opened the car door, Foon jumped out. She ran around Charlie Blistre, whining, and scratching his ankles. He and Rodney unveiled the treasure of the trunk and wagged it upstairs.

Alexandra was sobered by the size of the building and the hollow sounds of their footsteps. Buffy trotted slowly down the hall, stopping often to sniff.

"Is this church, Daddy?" his daughter asked, her little hand in his.

To me it is, he thought, but said, "No, darling, it's the school where Daddy teaches."

"Knowledge is worshipped here," said Rodney quietly. His father gave him a quizzical look, but he only said, "I'm serious. This is like a monastery, say an English abbey like Glastonbury before Henry VIII wreaked havoc on it and the townspeople built their houses of its stones--self-contained and unaware of the outside world. You have your own food services--"

"But we don't grow our own food."

"No one does in this day and age; you have your own groundsman and janitorial service, your own water supply, even your own electricity generator."

"How did you know about that?" He was enjoying this immensely.

"Remember when it blew a couple of years ago? I remember you laughing about it because so many of the girls had to come to class with their hair wet, complaining because their blow-driers were useless."

They laughed, Alexandra, too, even though she had no idea what was going on. Her childish and theatrical glee made the men laugh all the harder. He remembered in time about the babies in the jars and engineered an awkward bypass across the second floor to the opposite stairwell. He made as if for his own office, only to find, "Aaak! Wrong floor!" In mock dismay he ran madly to the safe stairs, and up them and into his office.

"Babies in the museum," he whispered to Rodney, who nodded and smiled.

"So where's Wanda Lee?" he tried to ask lightly. The dog jumped into the Minstral's chair.

"She went out with a man. They're on a date!" Alexandra laughed, pulling at the bags of packages. "Mom goes on dates, too."

On Christmas Eve? thought Charlie Blistre, worrying about Wanda Lee. Why couldn't they have lied and said she didn't want to leave her mother alone? Or is Brigatta out, too? He decided not to think about it.

"Is she all right?" he asked awkwardly. "I mean, I've not seen her, not once, not since--"

"She's the same old girl, Dad. Fat and sassy," said Rodney, in a failed attempt to make him laugh. "Stop that," and he wrenched Alexandra's fingers off a pretty package.

"Creep!" she yelled. "That's mine! Give it back!"

"That's not for you, dimwit. It's for Daddy."

"Ain't no dimwit!" She grabbed the package away from him.

"God," said Rodney.

God, thought Charlie Blistre. "Look here, angel, Daddy's got some presents you can have."

"Goody!" she yelled. She turned to run, then stopped and pointed. Foon had just thrown up on Charlie Blistre's desk. "Yuck," she commented.

"Oh, Lord," he said, and swished her off.

"Here, Dad, I'll get it." Rodney pulled a tissue from his pocket and mopped it up.

"Mommy!" yelled Alexandra. "I mean, Rodney--"

"I'm here," he said, cupping her nose in another tissue. "Blow!"

"I can't!"

"Shut up and do it."

She did, and after Rodney wiped her up, she said,

"Ooh, yuck!" and laughed.

"She's got a cold," explained Rodney unnecessarily. She'd been fine the last time Charlie Blistre had seen her.

"Presents, Daddy," she said, returning to the business at hand.

"You betcha," he said, opening the cabinet door. She screamed loudly and Charlie Blistre jumped. The sound reverberated in the tiny room.

She hooted with glee over her gifts, and it took all their combined powers of persuasion to keep her from putting on her new dress. She blew her nose on the wrapping paper, and Buffy licked it.

Foon scratched open her box of dog biscuits, and performed her retinue of tricks to be rewarded.

"Let Rodney whip!" he wheedled. Buffy hunched over, presented her rear to him, and he patted her firmly on the posterior. She chased her tail, falling over when she caught it.

Rodney seemed to genuinely appreciate his father's gifts. He talked animatedly. He came over often to see Charlie Blistre and sometimes brought Alexandra, too.

She climbed up onto Charlie Blistre's lap and opened his presents, sticking the bows on his head. Later she wanted to "wrassle," so they all four did, and managed not to break anything.

It was nearly eleven when Rodney said, "We'd better go."

"Do we have to?" whined Alexandra. "I want to stay in Daddy's playhouse." Then she noticed the mounted insects for the first time.

"I want bugs on my wall!" she cried. "Yes!"

He was proud.

He took his time dressing her in her outside clothes, savoring her closeness. She still smelled like a baby.

"When are you coming home?" she asked softly.

"I told you not to ask that," said Rodney. He was trying so hard to make her behave, and she'd been quite naughty all evening.

"It's okay," Charlie Blistre said. "What did I tell you last time?" he said to her.

"Maybe never." She sniffed.

He held her close. "I miss you all," he said. When Rodney put his hand on his shoulder, Buffy began scratching his back in jealousy. He laughed.

"Bad dog!" giggled Alexandra, stomping her foot.

So he loaded them with packages and walked them to the car. Before they drove away, both children told him that they loved him.

The Minstral came back three days later, full of

horror stories of child abuse and parental brutality.

"How did you get into the building?" was Charlie Blistre's greeting when the Minstral breezed into his office.

"I'm not saying." He stomped his feet and shivered. "It's cold outside, man. Make me a hot toddy."

"There's coffee on the hot plate."

"Geez, what a cruddy host." But he filled his self-made ceramic cup anyway and kicked off his wet boots.

"Santa brought you a new coat," he said, as the Minstral hung it by the hood on the rack.

He grinned. "L.L. Bean. Can you believe it? I like it, even though it looks too new and too clean. It makes me look like someone who gives a damn. It won't take me too long to grind some personality into it."

He sat down in his chair, propped his stockinged feet on the desk, and regaled him with the woes of his parents' absurd beliefs. It seemed that, having the bad grace to have been born around Christmas, he'd passed a birthday, giving occasion to his father to say, in effect, "Grow up. You're thirty. Clean up. Get a job."

"Thirty!" gasped Charlie Blistre. "I didn't know you were that old!"

"Angel," he replied with a simper, through and around the big gap between his teeth that Charlie Blistre, as

usual, was watching disappear and then appear as the Minstral talked, this time about the demeaning experience of reaching the age of accountability.

The Minstral wasn't the only one who cut his vacation short for him; so did Amelia.

When he heard a key jingling in another door, he investigated and was surprised to see her. He invited her in, sat her down, and gave her coffee. Charlie Blistre drank coffee (and went to the bathroom) all day.

She was flushed, with the cold, he supposed, and he was conscious of how pretty she was. He asked after the folks--"Oh, Roz? She's fine"--and she flicked her hair out of her eyes with a gesture that made him once again seem to recognize her from the past.

Amelia talked animatedly and laughed a lot, drinking her coffee and sometimes walking around the room excitedly. She looked often at his eyes, and he discovered that hers were a lovely deep green. When she left, impulsively she gave him a big hug.

"You know why, don't you?" said the Minstral. Charlie Blistre had told, of course. He could never keep his mouth shut around him.

"What are you talking about?"

But the Minstral just smiled his sly, superior, crooked grin, making his face more lopsided than ever, saying nothing.



## Chapter Seven

"I'm here. I'll take care of you now," she had remarked during their conversation.

Charlie Blistre thought about those words often. He couldn't conceive of anyone wanting to take care of him. He found it quite amusing and, also, quite touching. It was so much nicer than anything Brigatta had said to him in years.

The Minstral's silly remarks made him think, too. Amelia was an attractive woman, yet Charlie Blistre had always prided himself on the fact that he never paid any attention to that type of thing. He was above all that visceral stuff. Yet sometimes he found himself thinking of the way she threw back her head and laughed, or the intent way she looked at him when she said something. And--horror of horrors--once he even found himself doodling their names together, and marking out letters in common, and counting those remaining to discover love, hate, friendship, or marriage. It looked like this:

*CHARLES BLISTRE*

*AMELIA GUTHRIE*

It resulted in friendship, which made him decide to find out her middle name to see if it would improve matters any.

Then he did

*CHARLES BLISTRE*

*BRIGITTA BLISTRE*

And that came out to friendship, too.

"Dumb game," he muttered disgustedly, tearing the paper into fine fragments, to destroy the incriminating evidence. Then he smiled, thinking that he hadn't indulged in that particular form of divination since Latin class, where his name and Rosalind Kelly's had predicted love.

Every day he and Amelia had lunch together. They spent a lot of time in the entomology lab so he could catch her up on insects and a lot of time in the herbarium so she could show him her projects. She was the first one in his office for early morning coffee and always stopped by before going home at night. If no one was around, they shared a quick hug--Charlie Blistre always felt as if he was hugging his sister-- and Amelia stayed later and later and later.

"Your already tattered reputation is being shredded into ruin," the Minstral told him half-bitterly one day. He hardly ever had his friend to himself anymore. He'd wander in at the usual times, and there she'd be, babbling around and often looking Dr. Blistre straight in the eye. He would hold her gaze, smiling softly.

"You're totally daft," he continued. "You could get yourself in real trouble here."

"We're just friends," the inane professor replied. "Besides, I'm a married man."

"That is the most ridiculous excuse I've ever heard. Married man," said the Minstral, too wound up to think of anything else to say.

But Charlie Blistre saved the day by saying. "You know, I need some man talk. Let's go hiking Saturday." The Minstral happily and readily agreed. Charlie Blistre didn't tell him that Amelia was spending the weekend with her mother.

This was the longest walk they'd taken in some time. The paths leading up into the hills around the lake were quite tame, but they veered off at one point where a trail was hardly visible. In late summer or early fall, that could be suicidal, because of overgrown brush and brambles, especially Multiflora Rose (Rosa multiflora) and Kudzu (Pueraria lobata). Charlie Blistre was always thankful that Kudzu didn't have thorns, for it was nearly impossible to extract oneself from its clutches anyway. The only time he really liked it was when it bloomed in September, for the long, dangling, violet blossoms exuded the aroma of grapes. They smelled good enough to eat and sometimes he

was tempted, but he had once seen the Minstral eat Violet (Viola) and Nasturtium (Tropaeolum) blossoms, and was convinced that he was going to die.

"I eat flowers," the Minstral had remarked, noting the look of nausea and discomfiture on his friend's face, "so you must eat bugs."

But today they couldn't consume either, for it was the last weekend in February and the Earth was still in its doldrums. The walking was good. They left the trail early, moving quickly and purposefully, working up a sweat under their winter coats despite the lack of underbrush with which to contend. It felt good to give their legs and bodies a workout, and shake off, for a while, winter's sedation. It was cleansing and strengthening, and the exhilaration also purged their minds and spirits.

They trekked silently, each lost deep inside himself, yet it would have been too lonely alone. For the Earth was unmoving, unspeaking. No rustle of wind stirred the deadened, brown remnants of last fall's goldenrod, joe-pye weed, and grasses. Save for the blueness of Charlie Blistre and the Minstral, no touch of color brightened the drabness--the ground, the old leaves; the trunks of the trees were the same deep, dingy chocolate as was the stag-horn beetle, and the brown of the weeds was the color of grasshoppers. The sky was white-gray, cut only by an

occasional crow or turkey vulture, one of the scavengers.

Charlie Blistre's face was chapped when they stopped for lunch. The Minstral's lips were white and beginning to crack. He pulled off his navy blue toboggan to reveal a sweaty forehead. "Ain't this great?" he laughed. "The worst of both worlds."

He stretched like a cat, throwing down his backpack. They were on a flat expanse of rock, cool to the touch, yet dry, so that when they sat down on it, they wouldn't mildew themselves.

"I've got a surprise," said Charlie Blistre, amazed that he'd managed to keep quiet for so long. He unzipped the backpack and triumphantly extracted a Sterno stove.

"Hot Food!" exclaimed the Minstral. "Savior! I give you my firstborn son!"

"I already have a firstborn son," he quipped, expertly lighting the little device. Then he pulled two battered tin pans out, two packages of ramen noodles, and a canteen full of water. "Ain't this heaven?" said the Minstral, crouching beside Charlie Blistre, intently watching his every move as though he'd never seen anyone cook noodles before. Charlie Blistre felt that funny kind of happiness where your throat feels clogged and bubbly, and you sit there and wonder how you can be so happy over such a tiny thing.

"You are unreal!" he exclaimed again when the meal was over, and Charlie Blistre lit the tiny stove again, then brought out two styrofoam cups and instant coffee. "You'll make somebody a good little housewife," he said, cackling, while his buddy measured the precious coffee with a plastic spoon, and smiled.

To be quiet and still was admirable, but the steam rising from the cups reminded them of the chill, and they started moving and milling around again.

The sun didn't show itself that day. They would have enjoyed being lizards and warming themselves on the big rock. Not long ago Charlie Blistre would have likened himself to this day. But he thought his sun was beginning to shine.

He thought of Amelia and smiled, brushing away the tiny twinge of guilt by thinking, Just friends.

They rambled through the woods in quiet harmony the rest of the afternoon. Charlie Blistre felt like talking, but the time wasn't right, and the Minstral usually wasn't content with silence either. Yet the chillness made them walk fast, and, because it felt good, they walked faster, leaving no breath for talking. He wondered what the Minstral was thinking about and realized sadly how little he actually knew about him. It seemed as though they always talked about Charlie Blistre, a selfish sort of

friendship.

It was late when they got back. "I'm hungry," said the Minstral, and Charlie Blistre asked him what he fancied.

"Show me how you live," was his reply and Charlie Blistre blinked at him stupidly. But the Minstral only grinned.

"What--" began Charlie Blistre, but the Minstral said, "Figure it out."

"You moron," he said. "You think I'm too dumb to live."

"That opinion belongs to no one but you." He kept smiling. Sometimes Charlie Blistre wanted to smack him into oblivion for that smirky, superior, lordly grin, but if he did, he knew that, like the Cheshire Cat's, the grin would remain.

"Oh, you want to eat in my office," he said. Now why couldn't I have kept that to myself, he wondered, befuddling the boy by demonstrating that I knew what he was talking about all along, rather than playing a kid at a guessing game? You'd think that by the time I was this old I would have learned how to behave.

So when they got back, he put soup and minute rice into a pan, and, while it warmed on the hot plate, he filled plastic glasses with water and ice nabbed from the

physiology lab. Then when the soup was ready, he put on the ever-present coffee.

"You mean you're gonna subject me to that in the evening as well?" the Minstral asked, pointing. He then seated himself on Charlie Blistre's side of the desk, to rummage through it while his soup cooled.

"I really wish you wouldn't do that," Charlie Blistre said as he lit two candles, knowing full well his words would have no effect. He placed one on either side of the desk.

As soon as the lights were turned out, the Minstral coyly asked, "Are we having a romantic interlude?"

"Don't smirk or I'll throw you out the window."

"Defenestration."

"What?" he asked, immediately wishing he hadn't.

"Defenestration. A method of execution invented by the Poles and Czechs in the Middle Ages. The honored one is taken to the tallest building and tossed out the fenestra. That's Latin for window."

"I know."

"I amaze you, don't I?" he said, as Dr. Blistre began eating. "I'm quite well read."

"Don't you ever drop that pose? Aren't you ever sincere?"

"Without wax?" the Minstral quipped instantly. "That



is what 'sincere' means, you know. Without wax. Sine cera."

"Don't tell me about the statues. I already know."

And you answered my question, he thought.

"Shall we speak more Latin, then? Ego amo te."

Why was everything lately reminding him of Rosalind Kelly? "If ever a boy takes you by the hand and whispers, 'Ego amo te,' " the Latin teacher had twinkled, "you'll know what he's saying." When he had thought about doing that to her, he'd blushed in class.

I love you.

Was the Minstral mocking him and the "romantic interlude" he imagined had taken place with Amelia? Or did he mean what he said?

"I love you, too, you big ass," said Charlie Blistre. There, he thought, take that either way you want.

But he just smiled benignly and continued nosing into the desk drawers. He found Alexandra's picture.

"Look what a little conner," he said, turning round the frame to show the picture and then turning it back to face himself. "Coochie-coo." He studied the happy-child face, saying, "She don't look beans like you."

"Lucky her."

He studied the picture some more, as if he were working out something quite difficult. Finally he spoke, softly. "If I had something like this, I'd never give her

up. Never. For anything."

Charlie Blistre just looked at him, trying to reach what the Minstral was groping for.

"How can you stand being away from her?" His voice broke and the candlelight played over his slight, suddenly care-worn face, and glinted in his hair. He looked up at Charlie Blistre with a silly half-smile. "I feel so paternal sometimes."

He returned the smile and said quietly, "You'd make a good father. You've not forgotten what it's like to be young. Sometimes I think I never was."

The Minstral kept looking at Alexandra's photograph. A tear rolled out of his right eye and lodged in the smile crease below his cheek. "I want to be a father again someday."

Again? Charlie Blistre thought wildly. His heart began to beat like thunder. Yet he said, equally softly, "You never told me you have a child."

"I don't." Then he said so quietly that Charlie Blistre could barely catch the words, "But I made a woman pregnant once."

Charlie Blistre thought of a thousand things to say and a thousand ways to react, but he only sat there. Nothing would come out. His heart was about to explode with love for the Minstral.

He opened his mouth to let out a long, silent sigh, still gazing at Alexandra. "I was overjoyed," he whispered. "Life! I'd made life! At that moment I knew exactly how God felt after the sixth day. But she--I couldn't convince her. She wouldn't even have it and give it to me. My own baby. She left. I don't know where. But I know," he stopped and swallowed, and the whisper that came back was all but silence, "she killed it."

Charlie Blistre was paralyzed, his hand holding the spoon in the exact position as when he first saw the tear. To move would profane the Minstral's grief and blaspheme his revelation. His mind was blank, yet in his heart he fit in the missing piece that completed the picture of the Minstral. It made the way he lived, and the things he believed, make perfect sense. Still he continued looking into the likeness.

At last he put it back in the drawer, face down as he'd found it, and looked at Charlie Blistre. "Don't let Brigatta take her away from you. Nothing is worth the price of losing a child. Nothing. Not even Amelia. You've lost Wanda Lee, but don't lose Rodney, and, God, don't lose Alexandra."

In spite of the Minstral's teasing and in spite of his own common sense, Charlie Blistre knew he was in love

with Amelia Guthrie.

He also believed that she reciprocated.

They would have laughed had anyone told them they were behaving in a perfectly predictable manner. A middle-aged man in a rut falls in love with a much younger woman. A young woman falls in love with an authority figure old enough to be her father.

They were content with the way their little more than platonic relationship stood. She had problems not calling him Charlie in front of other people. It nearly killed him not to walk hand in hand with her on field trips. But they managed.

He was so eager for the bluebells to bloom so he could astound her with their abundance. They trekked down to the park often to check up on them, both knowing that late March was much too early, but eagerly grabbing the excuse to go out together.

They dined often in his office, especially on weekends when there was no one else in the building. They took lots of walks, behaving properly where the world might see them, then, as soon as the doors were locked behind them, walking down the hall and up the stairs hand in hand or with their arms around one another.

And as they shared their farewell hug, one evening he whispered, "Would you be offended if I kissed you good-

night?"

She couldn't look at him, only at the empty space above his shoulder, and, wanting to say many things, could only say, "I wouldn't be offended at all."

Charlie Blistre intended to give her a soft, feather-like kiss and send her home. But it didn't turn out that way at all.

She didn't leave as soon as she'd planned, either. They moved back into the room and she sat in his lap. As he kissed her, he kept thinking, I shouldn't do this, I'm so bad, I'm married, but his conscience was uncommonly weak. Amelia considered him divorced.

After a while, they stopped in one accord and held each other quietly.

"I love you," Amelia said and he squeezed her, thinking of the Minstral's Ego amo te, but he said nothing.

When I marry her, I will kiss her all the time, he thought giddily, and then he remembered how he used to love to kiss Brigatta. Envisioning Amelia's head on his wife's body made his mind shiver. Amelia wouldn't ever get fat and nag, but Brigatta was once a fun-loving beauty. Yuck. But Amelia was different.

Thinking of marriage made him think of his love-hate-friendship-marriage game. Something is really wrong with you, the Minstral would later tell him. A beautiful woman

on your lap in love and lust with you and you think about kindergarten games?

"What's your middle name?" he asked softly.

"That's a weird thing to say," she murmured as he touched her neck.

"Humor me."

She giggled. "Kelly. It was my Mom's maiden name. Her name is Rosalind."

He pulled away from her a little and looked at her. "I knew a Rosalind Kelly once."

"I know." She looked at him in mischievous adoration. "That's what Roz said when I told her about you--'I knew a Charlie Blistre once.' And I thought, with a name like that it's got to be the same. So she found her annual and we looked you up and it was you. Isn't that hilarious?" She was smiling, and when she stopped talking, she kissed him on the forehead.

"But why didn't you tell me?" He was thinking that this was why Rosalind Kelly had come up so much lately. This was who Amelia had reminded him of--the way she threw back her head and laughed was the same as Rosalind had done when he'd smacked Lucie Margaret McAlpin's blackly clean coat with an eraser all those years ago.

"I was waiting for the right time. Isn't it funny? And Roz said she'd like to see you again sometime."

"Roz." He was thoughtful. "She used to hate that."

"Still does." Then she removed his glasses and began kissing him again.

"Don't, honey," he said, pulling away.

"My, how paternal!" she said, in a love glow, for he had spoken to her as he did to Alexandra when she was naughty. He put his glasses back on.

He shook his head. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"About what?"

"About your mother!" he exclaimed urgently.

"It's no big deal," she said. "What does it matter?"

"I was in love with her!" he nearly yelled. "That's why it matters!"

She looked at him in hurt confusion. "But that was so long ago."

"Not to me. To me it was yesterday." His voice was softer now.

She looked in his eyes, and the look she loved was gone. "Are you telling me that you're still in love with her?"

"I'm still in love with the memory of her. And that's why it's wrong for me to love you."

"You don't make any sense at all," and she got up from his lap and looked at the wall. "I thought you'd like it when I told you about it. So you were infatuated

with each other. Big deal. Why does that have anything to do with me?"

"I can't love you now," he said, looking at her as though she were ignorant. "That's incest."

"Incest? Oh, God, that's the dumbest thing I ever heard of."

"But it is. You could have been my daughter."

"But I'm not!" she yelled, starting to cry.

He sighed and said, "Jesus, honey, don't cry."

"What kind of perverse morality guides you, anyway? It's all right for you to seduce a student, but when you find out that you knew my mother, suddenly it's a sin."

"Amelia--"

"I don't understand you. I guess I'm dumb. I really believed you cared for me." She was looking out the window into the darkness. Only her voice betrayed her feelings.

"I did," he said, and she noted the past tense. "You don't know how much--"

"Spare me," she said abruptly. "But now it's different, isn't it? Now I'm your daughter instead of your lover." Charlie Blistre felt nauseous.

He looked at the desk and nodded.

"So," she said, swallowing. "Easy come, easy go, huh?" She was still crying, as though she were a sponge



and the tears were being squeezed out of her by a power greater than herself. She smoothed her hair. Her lip quivered. "So it's back to student and teacher again, huh? Professional terms? We'll behave like adults? Well, I think you can go to hell, Dr. Blistre," and she was gone.

He took off his glasses, and sat there in the silence for a long time.

## Chapter Eight

Charlie Blistre changed his mind a thousand times a day about Brigatta. One minute he was ready to try anything that would be good for the kids. Then the next minute he decided that they would be better off in separate homes of peaceful sterility, away from the atmosphere of cool distrust that he knew would grow up again between two people who loved themselves more than they loved each other.

But Brigatta knew what she wanted, and, in effect, made up their minds for both of them. Brigatta wanted a divorce. She had known, she said, from the time Charlie Blistre moved out. Probably she had decided before. She wasn't interested in discussing alternatives; for the first time in her life she was resolute.

They eventually worked things out between them before they went to the lawyer, which took some doing, for Brigatta could hardly bring herself to speak to him. The main point of contention was, of course, the kids.

Brigatta wanted them all.

Charlie Blistre wanted Alexandra and Rodney all the time--he didn't really want Wanda Lee (guilt, guilt), but he just said he knew she would never leave her mother.

Wanda Lee would just as soon die as live with her father.

"You never did care about her. I'll tell the lawyer that," she said.

She argued that the kids ought to be with their mother. Charlie Blistre said, "Not necessarily," but couldn't make himself bring up his main point against her, which was, You raised Wanda Lee almost single-handedly, and look what she turned out to be!

Eventually it came down to Alexandra.

Charlie Blistre didn't mind paying child support, but he was damned, he told the Minstral, if he would support a woman who was no longer his wife. Brigatta, getting the feel of her new independence, said she didn't want alimony. She was working now, as a cook in the senior citizens center, and she could support herself, thank you. Charlie Blistre was relieved. You can't support the kids on that, he'd told her, not mentioning child support (which he would have given her anyway even had not the law made him do it). "I know," she said ruefully, "but we'll make it somehow."

"Give me Alexandra all the time and Rodney on weekends," he said. "That'll ease the crunch."

All of them on weekends; she gave in that much.

"Fine," he'd answered, "and Alexandra all the time."

"You're out of your mind. That child can't live in

your office."

"You must be dumber than you think I am," he returned, "if you think I'd try an ignorant stunt like that."

They argued, complained, and wrangled over Alexandra.

"You'll not get a divorce if you don't let me have her," he threatened.

"Oh, yes, I will," she replied, undaunted. "It doesn't matter if you get what you want or not."

"You'll just stick her in day care all day," she said.

"As you do right now," he rejoined.

Wanda Lee said, "God. You two make me sick."

An exasperated Rodney finally said, "Why don't you just ask her who she wants to live with?"

Both agreed, confident of victory.

It was the happiest moment of Charlie Blistre's life when Alexandra chose to live with her daddy. An emotionally exhausted Brigatta gave in.

"Okay," she said, her defeat evident, "if that's what she wants. And you'll find out what it's like to have a bundle of spastic energy on your hands all day. Maybe it'll make you finally grow up."

Charlie Blistre later giggled over it, but at the time he felt like slapping her.

She stayed with her mother until the divorce was final, and Charlie Blistre searched for a house.

He had a lot of time to think, and he thought a lot about Amelia. He missed her; he saw her only in class now and on those rare occasions when she needed advice on her thesis that she couldn't get from anyone else. She never showed him her bubbly ebullient nature anymore; she was totally professional.

It gave him a twinge, yet he decided that it was all for the best. He had been ripe for an affair of the heart, and she just happened to be the one who came along. It could have been anyone. Besides, he was too old to start all over again, and she was still a little girl. She could do a lot better than Charlie Blistre. And never, ever could he look at her the same after he knew about her mother.

He wished he hadn't kissed her. That would have made it so much easier. That kiss tumbled down so many walls and exposed so many vulnerable places. . .

"I'm finishing up this summer," she'd said the last time she came to his office. "Here's my final draft. I'd appreciate it if you'd look it over."

"Sure," he said. She looked out the door, and all of a sudden her professional seriousness was replaced by an inviting smile.

"I'm in a hurry," she said.

He nodded. When she was gone, he stealthily snuck

a peek around his door. She was on the arm of a man with humongous shoulders. He heard her laughter and saw the movement of her head. Her hair was longer now.

Charlie Blistre felt like throwing up again.

The Minstral was very supportive and once again offered Charlie Blistre, and Alexandra, too, the dubious comforts of his home.

"It would be a great place to bring up a free-spirited kid," he gushed. "No rules to be broken. She could draw on the walls and abuse the furniture. I do." But he didn't want her living in a condemned building (he didn't want him living in a condemned building), but vowed that he would share her with the Minstral whenever he could. They got along well, what little they'd seen of each other. They were on exactly the same level.

Near the end of the semester, Charlie Blistre was summoned to the department head's office.

"There have been problems lately with some of our staff, particularly in biology, on the compliance of the rule about wearing ties." He looked pointedly at the bow tie Charlie Blistre had clipped to the pocket of his lab coat.

"Are you the instigator of this aberrancy or merely a follower?"

All innocence, Dr. Blistre said, "The ruling made it

mandatory to wear a tie. It didn't say where."

The department head closed his eyes, tired of the ties that he had seen clipped on innumerable pockets in countless positions, on shoes, and tied around arms, legs, and heads.

"Dr. Blistre, this has got to stop. You are a highly respected member of the biology department, and if you cease this ridiculous behavior, others, I'm sure, will follow in your stead."

"Certainly," replied Dr. Blistre, who, upon dismissal, transferred his bow tie to his rear pants pocket. He didn't wear his lab coat the rest of the day.

He threw away his tie at the end of the semester, vowing he wouldn't wear one in the fall. But of course he did.

He was tempted to take a leave of absence during the next academic year, and spend all his time with Alexandra before she started school, but he couldn't afford it. He comforted himself with the thought that they would have all summer together. They would do lots of enriching things, he planned, like camping out and going to the beach and, even though he didn't know how himself, he'd teach her to ride a horse. And Grandma Petunia promised to come for a long visit. Charlie Blistre was hoping she'd move in.

So Charlie Blistre finally got his way. He was beginning to live out his fantasy life of just him and Alexandra. He was happy--he had his daughter and his job and the closest friend of his life. Every night he went to bed thinking, "I'm not gonna screw up. This time I'm not gonna screw up."

It was late April when the divorce was final, and he and Alexandra moved into their new house. The Minstral invited them out for pizza to celebrate, and on the way home, they stopped at the park to check out the bluebells.

A few of the pinky-blue flowers had come out to ring in the Spring and Charlie Blistre's new life: the first blooms on the first day of his new life. They strolled in peace, listening to Alexandra's babble. Charlie Blistre was writing a poem in his head called "To a Blue Flower." "The lady who is inside of you is sleeping quiet and still," it began, but he never got any farther than that.

Alexandra picked some of the flowers, even though her father initially told her not to. But it was going to be a good year; in a week the island would be carpeted with blue. They would visit it many times.

The Minstral and Charlie Blistre kept to either side of Alexandra. She had picked a nice little bouquet and gotten herself totally filthy. Charlie Blistre thought



she was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen.

They went home, leaving a trail of bluebells and mud behind them.