

Bluebird Song by Morrison Phelps

PROLOGUE

TWO YEARS IN THE FUTURE

Susan Murphy was exhausted. Admittedly she was out of shape, but the gorgeous morning had inspired them to keep going. Supposedly it was going to be a walk along the winding riverbed trail that runs through Miller Canyon. But as soon as they started out, Mark couldn't take his eyes off the snow-capped mountains jutting high above the canyon rim. Moved by their magnificence, he exclaimed in a moment of spontaneity—"Hey, let's do Miller Peak, the big one there in the distance!" And so off they went.

Decades earlier the canyon bed had been the location for narrow gauge track used by mining cars. Although mostly removed years ago, a few rusty sections of rail were still visible, protruding from the underbrush of this riparian region. As they hiked, Susan had the strange feeling that she knew the place, yet she was quite sure she'd never been there before. It wasn't a déjà vu sensation as much as a feeling of familiarity that she couldn't put her finger on. A little over two hours into their ascent they reached the summit where Susan stood on a rock ledge and looked back into the huge cavity below. From this perspective, based on the now barely perceptible roadbed that was mostly worn-away through decades of abandonment, she could see that at one time a network of train tracks crisscrossed the canyon floor.

Then it came to her.

When she was a preschooler her parents had taken her to Disneyland where they rode on what was known as The Mine Train Through Nature's Wonderland. The ride featured a so-called "living desert" that included cacti, buttes, waterfalls, teetering rocks, a lake, and tunnels that permitted the train to go deep inside the dazzling caverns beneath Rainbow Mountain. Illuminated with black lights,

Bluebird Song

the caverns were spellbindingly beautiful with shades of glowing purple, green and orange.

Deep inside the mountain was a feature that became Susan's favorite. At a certain point the train came to a stop in the pitch-black tunnel. From seemingly nowhere emerged a full-scale diorama depicting a gold rush boomtown. She could see miners, mules, an assay office and a lively saloon interior complete with the rhythmic sounds of "Oh My Darling Clementine" pounded out on a honky-tonk piano. The scene was bathed in brilliant golden light. When the train moved again it soon exited the tunnel, piercing its way into bright daylight, but only for a short minute. The train chugged its way into a second dark tunnel. Once inside, again it stopped. Another scene emerged—this time a ghost town.

She soon realized she was looking at the same town that appeared in the previous tunnel, but now it was abandoned. Infested with decay, covered with cobwebs, skeletons strewn about, there were even several ghosts flying around courtesy of hologram technology. This second scene was covered with a cold white light, giving a hauntingly macabre aura to the now dead town. The message was clear: the gold rush had ended; riches are fleeting. Over the years of occasional home movie viewing, Susan had come to call this portion of her beloved train ride—"The Tunnels of Warm and Cold Lights."

Of all the theme park rides, the mine train also became her father's favorite, so much so that at the ride's conclusion he declared that his dream upon retirement someday was to be the engineer for the Lilly Belle Locomotive, named in honor of Mrs. Walter Disney. Taking a second train ride before they left late that evening, they were treated to the best view in the park of the nightly fireworks display. Throughout the day her parents shot plenty of home movie footage, which due to her age became the actual basis for Susan's Disneyland memory.

In the years ahead, Susan's father built her a toy train set modeled after the Disneyland ride. Paying attention to detail, he even taught his daughter what the locomotive's various whistle patterns were intended to communicate. Late in the '70s when the

Bluebird Song

Disneyland train was replaced by The Big Thunder Mountain Roller Coaster, Susan's father experienced such a deep sense of grief that, at the time, it was a significant concern to his wife.

While there's still a Disneyland train today, most would agree it doesn't possess the charm or the allure that surrounded that original mining train ride.

And now, as she and Mark took in the grand vista from atop Miller Peak, Susan was overcome with the urge to revisit those treasured old family movies. Not having seen them in over twenty years, she vowed to herself to watch them as soon as they got back home, hoping her mother hadn't thrown the old reels away. Lately Susan had been wondering if she'd ever see her father again, and right now she was excited about the prospect that at the very least he would re-appear to her in those nostalgic movies from her childhood, a time when her father was so happy.

From the summit, the two hikers were afforded Arizona's best view of "The Sky Islands," more officially known as the Huachuca Mountains. Below them they could see the natural reservoir called Heaven's Mirror as it reflected inverted peaks and cumulus clouds that looked like large cotton balls. The cobalt sky reflected by the pristine reservoir appeared even bluer in the still water. The views all around them were breathtaking, but there would be a price to pay for the privilege of experiencing nature's grandeur on their arduous hike.

Sore and worn to a frazzle, just as the sun was setting they finally made it back to The Old Caretaker's Bungalow, where they were staying, and where they found Susan's mother in a dreamy mood, a state rather uncharacteristic for her. She explained that the majestic views from the bungalow, the cool mountain air, a glass or two of wine, the stunning little hummingbirds, and some enchanting music coming over the radio, had all converged to create a "happening" of sorts, putting her into a transcendent mood. When pressed by Susan for more information about the so-called "happening," all Millie would offer was that she had experienced "a mystical communion" with her husband Murph, Susan's father.

Bluebird Song

After a bite to eat and a glass of wine, a very tired Susan excused herself and headed off to early bed. Knowing she would awake in the morning with aching muscles, she took two tablets of an over-the-counter pain reliever. In her groggy condition, she failed to notice that the label on the bottle stated, “sleep aid.” Soon she began to fall into a deep sleep. While drifting off, she thought how fortunate that her mother had so many good memories of her husband. Surely those early years make up for those difficult last years, and that horrible last week.

“Dad left us so suddenly. It’s all such a mystery.” As drowsiness quickly took hold on her, Susan wished she could visit him and get some answers to her questions. But that was simply out of the question, for now anyway. She prayed that one day they all would meet up again for a grand family reunion. This put a smile on her face as she fell fast asleep.

Thus the stage was set for Susan’s vivid dream. Like her mother that afternoon, Susan would have her own “happening” of sorts. But there would be a distinct difference between the two encounters with Murph. Millie’s thoughts of her husband on that day had left her with a sense of comfort about him and his whereabouts. But Susan’s dream would be quite unsettling as it presented her father struggling with a degree of mental anguish.

The dream would take the surreal form of an old movie. More specifically, she would see her father in a film resembling one of those home movies her parents took during summer excursions and every Christmas morning. Adding to the eerie nature of the “visitation” with her father late that night, Susan would be able to clearly hear her father’s thoughts coming to her from a far away and undisclosed location.