

STRUCTURAL DEFECT

by Robert F. Young

Looking for a bluebird in that perfectly laid-out utopian suburb was not always quite as easy as the blueprints had provided—in fact it was rather the reverse!

SPARROWS had moved into the bluebird house again, and this time Melray really was annoyed. Everything else in the bright little garden managed to perform its intended function efficiently enough: the fountain twinkled with just the right iridescence in the summer morning sunlight, the petunias grew neatly along the precise pebbled paths, the rose vines made pleasant arabesques on their pink trellises....

The only recalcitrant was the bluebird house. It simply re-fused to attract bluebirds.

Melray looked over the white plastic fence into Mr. Grover's garden. It was a fac-simile of his own, of course (Standard Suburban, Fountain Included), as were all the others in the block. His eyes sought the slender white pole with the little rustic house on top, and concentrated on the tiny orifice of the door in search of a wisp of blue. As he watched, an arrogant sparrow came out and perched on the diminutive front porch though it owned the world. After surveying its domain for a moment, it made brief flight to Mr. Grover's catalpa tree where it disappeared among the ovate leaves and the crooked branches.

Melray concluded then that all the bluebird houses in the block had sparrows living in them. Perhaps even in the whole city. It was a perfectly logical conclusion in view of the fact that the houses were mass-produced: if a structural defect appeared in one or two it would inevitably be repeated in all the others. Mass production *did* have some disadvantages. But of course when you considered all of its advantages, the disadvantages were rather inconsequential.

Sparrows, for instance, weren't much of a hardship. They were a dirty gray to be sure, instead of a bright blue; but outside of that there was very little difference between them and the house's intended occupants.

Just the same, though, it could be nice to have a blue-bird in the garden for a change. He wondered if you could buy domestic ones....

“DID YOU have a nice walk in the Garden, dear?” Barbara asked.

"Fine," Melray said, sitting down at the breakfast shelf. "Except for one thing. There's—"

"The poached eggs are done!" the stove said.

"Time to butter the toast!" announced the toaster.

"Yes, dear?"

"I was going to say," Melray said, "that there's another family of—"

"Turn me on! Turn me on!" cried the Reassurer. "You don't want to miss the Happy Philosopher do you?"

Barbara pressed the little blue button and sat down. "A family of what, dear?"

"A family of—"

"Good morning!" the Happy Philosopher said. "And what a fine bright (0831) summer morning it is! Flowers blooming and birds singing. Happy people sitting down everywhere to delicious poached eggs on toast and exquisite Barkam's coffee!

"The daily prognosis? You lucky people, you! The prognosis for today is perfect! (0832). The Office of Statistical Extrapolation anticipates a minimum of accidents, no deaths—"

"Don't people *ever* die any more?" Melray asked loudly.

"Darling, don't say such things!"

"—speaking of the low death rate, did you know that the Longevity Level has risen to 104.6? That's right! Isn't that simply wonderful, folks?"

"Well, folks, just one more day and another glorious week-end will be on hand. Don't forget, all you lucky people with red cars—this is Red Car Sun-day coming up. It's going to be *your* turn to use the highways! It's been an astonishingly short week, hasn't it! And filled with happiness and contentment and well-being; bounteous (0833) leisure and fine, oh *superbly* fine, anamorphic entertainment. How do you like the new family hour? The Smiths. Really nice people to welcome into your living rooms, aren't they? You *bet* they are!"

"The trouble is." Melray said, "they come in whether they're welcome or not."

"Don't *talk* that way!" Barbara said. "If people hear you they'll think you're un-happy."

"Maybe I am." He reached up and turned off the Reassur-er. "We've got sparrows in our bluebird house again!"

"Not again!"

"Yes, again. Grover's got them in his, too. Must have been a bad batch of houses."

"Why that's a shame!" Barbara said, "We paid perfectly good credits for that house. It could at least attract *one* blue-bird."

"I've been thinking." Mel-ray said. "Maybe we could buy one, a tame one of course. One that wouldn't fly away. It would brighten up the garden a lot."

"Why don't you try, dear?"

"There's a bird store near the factory. I'll stop off on my way to work and see what they've got." He stood up. "Time for the bus, Babs. Got to go."

She came round the shelf and kissed him. "Why don't you drop over to Birth Administration during your lunch hour," she said shyly to his lapel. "Maybe they didn't get our application at all. Or maybe they lost it. We should have heard by now."

He smiled softly into her chestnut hair. "All right, Bobs, I'll check on it. But I think they got it all right. The wait-ing period might be longer than we figured.... See you, Baby."

"Bye, Darling."

MELRAY had never seen so many birds. There were red ones and yellow ones and green ones and multicolored ones; big ones and little ones, quiet ones and noisy ones; caged ones, chained ones, some perched on little trapezes, some fluttering about the shop.

The little gray-haired proprietor approached him. "Can I help you, sir?"

"I'm looking for a blue-bird." Melray said.

The man gave him an odd stare. "You know, it's the strangest thing, sir," he said. "You're the fifth person to come in here this morning looking for a bluebird. Why, you're at least the hundredth one this week!"

"Do you have them in stock?"

"I have cockatoos and parakeets and lorries and lovebirds—practically every kind of domestic bird in existence. I have a splendid pair of Martian *palavavavas* if you're interest-ed in extraterrestrial—"

"But bluebirds. Do you have bluebirds?"

"You see, sir, bluebirds aren't a domestic species. Even if I wanted to carry them I wouldn't be able to get them. Now I have a singularly fine pair of Venusian *arises*—"

"Then you don't have blue-birds at all?" Melray tried to conceal his disappointment.

"I'm sorry, sir. I'm afraid not. But you might try The Bird House on Center Boulevard. They *might* carry them. But I doubt it very much."

"Thanks," Melray said. "Maybe I'll stop there on my way home...."

"YOUR APPLICATION is on file, sir," the thin faced girl behind the window said. "You'll just have to wait till it comes up for approval."

"But can't you give me some idea how long it will take?" Melray asked.

"Issuance of Maternity Licenses is contingent upon the death rate. Surely you're aware of that, sir. *Surely* you attend Citizen Class regularly!"

"Oh yes. Of course," Melray said. "But I thought—"

"Your application will come up for approval in due course. Definitely within the next ten years. You may be confident of that. Was there anything else you wanted to know, sir?"

Melray stepped back from the window, bumping against the first man in the long line of men behind him. He felt numb. "No, that's all," he heard himself say. "Thanks."

Center Boulevard was a wide straight river with white high banks of buildings. It was filled now with glaring after-noon sunlight and homeward-hurrying people. Melray left the airbus a block from The Bird House. He felt like stretching his legs a little, soak-ing up some summer sun. Air-buses were fine—you couldn't ask for better transportation—but they *were* crowded some-times, and very little of the bright fresh air they traveled through ever penetrated as far as their interiors.

There was a long queue of people lining the dazzling facades. Melray walked past them, wondering what new deepie had opened, wondering why *any* deepie would open at such an unconventional hour. There was no kaleidoscopic marquee at the end of the queue, however. When he reached the end of the queue he discovered an ordinary store front with an ordinary sign over it that said, *The Bird House*. Beneath the sign a flustered little man was stand-ing, waving his arms and shout-ing. "Go away, go away!" he was shouting. "I tell you I haven't got any bluebirds. I haven't *got* any!"

IT WAS nice to have a retentive memory; to be able to recall an obscure little store on an obscure little side street that you'd visited only once, and quite a long time ago at that. Melray was rather pleased with himself when he left the airbus at Center 6-41. He was even more pleased with himself when he turned down the side street and discovered—as he'd expected to, of course—that there was no queue of people up before The Aviary.

Barbara was going to be up-set when he didn't show up for dinner on time, but it couldn't be helped. She'd have trouble keeping the—let's see, it was Thursday, so it would be braised beef—warm for him. But he'd been looking for bluebird practically all day, and somehow he hated to go home without one. Besides, a bluebird might take her mind off what he had to tell her about the application....

Apparently, everybody in the city was looking for bluebirds. All of the bluebird houses produced within the last few years must have been defective; there was no other way to account for a common bird species having become so much in demand virtually overnight.

Well, Melray thought, find-ing bluebirds was like finding anything else. You simply had to know where to look for them.

He turned into the, sunken entrance of the little shop. There was a big sign on the door. *We Do Not Have Bluebirds*, the sign said.

EVEN WITH the anamorphic images of The Smiths crowding into it, the living room seemed strangely empty, Barbara had scarcely spoken at all since he'd explained to her about the application. A peculiar look had come into her eyes, a sort of glazed, empty look, and she hadn't even seemed to hear him when he'd told her about the dearth of bluebirds.

She sat now staring at Little Timmie Smith with a kind of mesmeric fascination. Little Timmie Smith was jumping gleefully up and down on the Smith's davenport which ob-truded itself (anamorphically) right out of the life-size aspect screen and into the living room. He was so close and so real that you would have felt that you could have reached right out and touched his pink, roly-poly, little boy's body if you hadn't known before hand that all you would really touch would be thin air.

Mr. Smith was sitting in his big comfortable chair (part of that stuck out of the screen too), discussing the comfy, trivial matters of everyday living with Mrs. Smith, who sat comfortably on the davenport (complacently tolerant of Little Timmie's ecstatic tramp-ling), crocheting antimacassars. "You know, Mother," Mr. Smith was saying, "this is a petty fine little old world we live in. Whenever people want something all they have to do is say so, and bingo! right away they can buy it!"

"It's a great little old world all right," Mrs. Smith said.

Mr. Smith lit his pipe. He leaned forward in his comfort-able chair. "Yessir," he said. "Why, look what everybody's got already!" He began to enumerate on his fingers: "A swell new car, a fine new garage to keep it in, a beautiful new modern house with all the latest conveniences, a pleasant garden to relax in, an anamor-phic set— Why, I could go on forever, Mother!"

"Watch me *jump!*" Little Timmie shouted.

"We're pretty lucky people all right," Mrs. Smith said. "Be careful, Timmie!"

"Well I guess we *are!*" Mr. Smith said. He blew a big cloud of smoke. "And now, do you know what, Mother? Lots of people are looking for do-mestic bluebirds. That's right. Bluebirds. It seems a bad ship-ment of bluebird houses got dis-tributed by mistake. A pretty bad shipment, I understand. And bluebirds, being pretty persnickety critters, just won't come around and live in them." He blew an even bigger cloud of smoke. "Can you beat that, Mother?"

"Well I declare!" Mrs. Smith said.

"Yessir. And that's why I say that this is a pretty fine little old world, because do you know what, Mother? Some fine big company heard about this sudden demand for bluebirds and they went way out of their way to get some. Just so all those dissatisfied people could be happy. Now isn't that some-thing, Mother?"

Mrs. Smith shook her head in reverant admiration. She cluck-clucked. "Well I guess so!" she said. "I think it's sim-ply marvelous!"

"You just *bet* it's marvel-ous!" Mr. Smith shifted around in his comfortable chair so that he faced the Melray living room, and every other living room in the city. "Now this fine big company is mak-ing bluebird deliveries this very night to every aviary, eve-ry department store, and every credit store in the city. Now all you dissatisfied folks have got to do," he said, looking Melray straight in the eye and point-ing stabbingly with his pipe, "is step into one of those stores tomorrow morning and there'll be a bluebird ready for you, just waiting for you to buy it and take it home. How's that for service, folks? By tomor-row night there'll be a bluebird in every backyard!"

"Say," Melray said, "that's all right. Did you hear that, Babs?"

Barbara's eyes reluctantly relinquished Little Timmie. They weren't empty any more, Melray noticed. They were overflowing now; overflowing with something that was even worse than the emptiness had been. "Hear what, dear?"

"About the bluebirds. You can buy them now."

"That's wonderful, dear."

"I'll stop by first thing in the morning before they're all gone." He watched her eyes as they drifted away from his— drifted back to the screen and Little Timmie Smith. The silence that crept into the room was so tangible that even Mr. Smith's complacent braying could scarcely penetrate it.

IT WAS a fine bird all right—so brightly blue it almost hurt your eyes to look at it. It perched charmingly in its little plastic cage, its tiny radiant eyes steadfastly regarding its surroundings. Every now and then it would ruffle its bluer-than-blue plumage, and make a soft twittering sound. Shortly after that it would leap to the transparent wall of the cage and beat its wings rhythmically for several seconds, as though in flight, and then it would return dutifully to its perch.

When he got to the factory, Melray set the cage on the bench beside his panel, and all day long, during the inter-vals when no buttons were lighted up for him to push, and during his lunch hour, he watched its azure occupant. He was so excited that he could hardly wait to get home so that he could show the bluebird to Barbara.

"Look, Barbara!" he said, the minute he came in the door, "Isn't it *beautiful?*"

"Oh, it *is!*"

"I'm going to put it in the bird house. Want to come out and watch?"

"Of course, darling."

He shoed the sparrows away. They made angry gray streaks against the late after-noon sky,

twittered shrilly in and out of the catalpa tree. Melray opened the cage, took out the bluebird, and set it on the little front porch of the bluebird house. It perched there motionlessly for a moment; then, after ruffling its plumage and softly twittering, it spread its wings and became a blue blur in the shimmering summer air. Melray watched, entranced. Why, that was what it had been trying to do all day! After flying twice around the catalpa tree it returned to the little porch and perched there charmingly.

"See," Melray said proudly. "It always comes back." He pointed to a small plastic tag riveted to the base of the cage. "Guaranteed not to fly away," he read.

IT WAS an empty, lonely sound; a deep, broken sound. A sound of desperate, yearning sobbing in the night. *A terrible, hopeless sobbing....*

Melray sat up in bed, the soporific sheets billowing around him like surf-crested waves. The moonlight softly streaming through the translucent roof lay like silver snow in the room. He got up and went over and stood helplessly by the silver snowbank of Barbara's bed.

He stood there for a long time, till the coolness of the artificial temperature penetrated his pajamas and touched his skin; till he was shivering, standing there, standing there helplessly, listening to his wife's broken sobs.

He found his bathrobe in the dim wasteland of the room, and he slipped his icy feet into his sandals. The thought of the bluebird flew through his mind, a warm, bright blur of blue. He knew suddenly that that was what he needed, that that was what he had to have.

He would bring it back to the room and show it to Barbara, and the two of them would sit there through the lonely hours discussing its blueness and its beauty; and somehow the night would go by without bitterness and pain, without emptiness....

The moon was a mellow, macrocosmic fruit suspended against a scattered, twinkling foliage of stars. The garden was a quiet place of argent patterns. He could see the dainty silhouette of the bluebird as he walked down the pebbled path. It was ruffling its plumage. As he approached, it twittered softly. Then it spread its wings and flew twice around the catalpa tree.

Didn't it ever sleep?

He reached up and took it down. It perched obediently on his forefinger, its tiny, pincer-like feet cold against his skin. *Metal cold.* In sudden, shocked horror he felt its cold blue body, searching desperately for the warmth that must be there, for the tiny quiver of heartbeat that *had* to be there.

The body was like ice. The small breast was silent. The little radiant eyes looked at him blindly.

It ruffled its plumage. After a precise interval it made a soft twittering sound.

It was almost time for the flight around the catalpa tree....

Melray tore its head off. There was a brief flurry of blue sparks, a stench of shorted wires. The tiny light-bulb eyes popped out like bright bees and dropped to the ground.

He tore off the plastic wings and crumpled them in his hand. He snapped the little metal feet and he ripped off the plastic legs. He plucked out the cellophane feathers one by one.

When his hands had stopped trembling he went back to the wasteland of the bedroom and lay in the cold moonlight listening to Barbara's sobs. And seeing Mr. Smith every time he closed his eyes, and all the mass-produced houses and the mass-produced gardens; and all the mass-produced people living out their mass-produced lives in pursuit of mass-produced happiness....

After a while he got up and was horribly sick in the bathroom.

THE END