

the bluebird planet

by *ROBERT F. YOUNG*

She'd never seen so many birds. The woods were blue
with them. And then a bird perched on her shoulder!

Robert F. Young, author of WISH UPON A STAR, our lead novel in our December 1956 issue, works in a machine shop in upstate New York and usually writes stories critical of tomorrow's machine age. Here is a gentler story, however, an exception—the story of a lonely woman, and a bird.

THE SHIP had landed in a clearing in a forest. The grass was jet-burned just beneath it, but a little ways away the grass was green, and dancing in a summer wind. And beyond the dancing grass the forest trees curtsied like timid girls in new summer dresses.

Miss Mintz could hardly believe her eyes. They'd *said* that Deneb 6 was a lovely planet, and they'd *said* that once you landed there you'd never want to leave; and they'd *said*, just wait till you see the moon! But Miss Mintz was invariably skeptical of the third person plural, particularly when it referred to travel agency pitchmen, and she'd taken what *they* had said with several grains of salt.

But she needn't have, she saw now. She climbed the rest of the way down the disembarking stairs and stepped into the dancing grass. The Senior Class came tumbling down behind her, laughing and shouting like the kids they really were beneath the blase exteriors they had affected throughout the trip. There was a winy tang to the sparkling air, and winsome little white clouds hung high in the bright blue sky.

In the clearing the whole class began talking at once:

"Did you ever *see* such green grass?"

"Just *look* at that sky!"

"Say— There's a bluebird!"

"Where?"

"Over there! Why— There's another!"

"And *another!*"

Miss Mintz saw them then. The forest was full of them. Her heart began to pound. It pounded even harder when Chief Petty Officer Burke, whose responsibility it was to see that excursion parties got started off on the right foot, appeared in the ship's lock at the top of the stairs and raised his hand for silence.

"The bluebirds can wait," he said when the seniors had quieted. He pointed to where Deneb blazed like a macrocosmic gasoline lantern in the middle of the afternoon sky. "When that sun sets it's going to get dark awful quick, so what you kids had better do is start setting up camp right away—unless you want to spend another night aboard ship."

There was a chorus of "Oh no's!" and "I should say not's!" followed by enthusiastic activity. Miss Mintz took command in her capacity as chaperon and oversaw the unloading of the collapsible camp-village. After consulting with Mr. Burke she selected a site at the edge of the forest conveniently close to an effervescent brook. The Jiffy Huts were set up in a jiffy, and by the time the first night shadows had begun to creep in out of the forest there was a little plastic village nestling at the feet of the trees within shouting distance of the ship. Shortly thereafter a portable generator began to hum, and new-strung electric lights came to radiant life along Little Main Street and shone warmly from the square screened windows of the huts.

The Mess Hut had been assembled with loving care and a little after sundown it was ceremoniously christened the Deneb Six Cafe. After the christening the male division of the Senior Class carried the treasured provisions from the ship's deep freeze across the clearing to the kitchen where the female division took over the task of preparing the first cooked meal the class had had since leaving Earth. Everyone got in each other's way, and Miss Mintz found herself involved in a chaos of kids whose appetites had merely been stimulated by the condensed breakfast, lunch, and dinner tablets which Excursion Lines, Inc., called food, but presently the chaos gave way to a semblance of order and after awhile the aroma of pork chops and scalloped potatoes rode appetizingly on the night air of Deneb 6.

Miss Mintz was afraid, at first, that Mr. Burke had forgotten her invitation, and she was relieved when she finally saw him come striding up Little Main Street, bedecked in his spaceman's blues. She met him just outside the entrance. "Welcome to the Deneb Six Cafe," she said.

Mr. Burke sniffed the night air. "Smells almost like pork chops," he said. "But of course that's impossible. You couldn't *really* be having pork chops."

"Oh yes we could," Miss Mintz said, "and we're having scalloped potatoes with them. Come on in, Mr. Burke. We're just starting to serve."

There were three long collapsible tables and two small ones. Miss Mintz chose one of the small ones, a little apart from the others, and one of the senior girls came over and took their order. Mr. Burke winked at her just as though she were a regular waitress, just as though he and Miss Mintz had been out doing the town and had stopped in for a bite to eat before grabbing a skycar home.

Looking at him across the little table, Miss Mintz could hardly believe the last three days. The first one had been the most incredible of all. That was when Mr. Burke had said good morning to her on the passenger deck and had stopped to pass the time of day. He had never even noticed her before and Miss Mintz was sure it was the dress she was wearing that had caught his eye. It was a new dress, one of the two she'd bought especially for the trip—a novelty number with an upturned collar and a girlish swirl skirt that was guaranteed to make you look younger and feel younger.

She had been sure at first that it was the dress, but the next day she wasn't quite so sure, because on that day she wore her ordinary lounging slacks and her ship and planet blouse with the little space ships stenciled on it, and Mr. Burke said good morning to her anyway, and stopped for an even longer time to pass the time of day. He'd had a great deal to say that morning, particularly about the monotony of the ration tablets. He'd reminisced a little about the "old days", only it was a sort of vicarious reminiscing, for Mr. Burke was much too young to have had much to do with the "old days." He was around Miss Mintz's age, and Miss Mintz was only twenty-nine.

"Can you imagine, Miss Mintz!" he had said. "They used to serve hot beans for breakfast on the first star ships. *Hot* beans, mind you! And I've heard—though I don't believe it for one minute!—that the crews used to gripe about the chow. Imagine anybody griping about real beans! They should have had condensed ones, then they'd really have had something to gripe about!"

That night she hadn't been able to get him out of her mind and she'd had a silly dream about him—one that made her blush the next morning when he stopped to talk to her on the passenger deck just after the ship had come out of transphotic and Deneb 6 was a gauzy ball of blue yarn in the viewplates. He'd gone into more detail about the monotony of the chow, and that was when the inspiration had come to her, when she'd said, vibrant with sudden singing happiness, "Why Mr. Burke, why don't you eat with *us* during stop-over? We've brought all our own food from home and we're going to cook our own meals for a whole week. I'm sure you'll like some of the things we have."

That was the way it had happened, but it was still hard to believe, even with Mr. Burke sitting across the table from her, smiling his disarming smile, his carefree blue eyes lighting up when the "waitress" brought over two plates heaped with scalloped potatoes and pork chops. The pork chops were a little on the crisp side, but they tasted so good that Miss Mintz, who ordinarily ate like a bird, had two of them. Mr. Burke had five.

After the meal she walked to the end of Little Main Street with him. "You know," she said, as they paused beneath the last light bulb, "I think I'm going to love it here."

"It sure is a pretty place," Mr. Burke said.

"All those bluebirds! I think we should call it Maeterlinck's Planet, don't you?"

"Did *he* discover it? I thought it was a trader by the name of Schmidt who landed here first."

"I—I didn't mean it quite that way," Miss Mintz said. "But we could call it the Bluebird Planet. That would be just as good."

"Sounds all right to me," Mr. Burke said. He raised his fingers to his lips, stifling a small burp. "Excuse me, Miss Mintz," he said. "I guess I ate too much. But everything was so good I couldn't help it.... Well, I've got to be getting shipside."

"Oh... Are you on duty, Mr. Burke?"

"We're short-handed, or I wouldn't be. Imagine a C.P.O. having to pull the first watch! But there's nothing I can do except make the best of it. Good night, Miss Mintz." He started to turn away.

"You'll be with us for breakfast, won't you, Mr. Burke?" Miss Mintz said. "We're having bacon and eggs."

"Eggs? *Real* eggs, Miss Mintz? Not powdered, pulverized, condensed or synthetic?"

"Why of course real eggs!"

"Miss Mintz, you're a dream!" Mr. Burke said. "I could kiss you." For a moment Miss Mintz thought he was going to, but he didn't. Instead he raised his blue kepi and executed an exaggerated bow. "I'll be waiting at your doorstep. Good night, Miss Mintz."

"Good night, Mr. Burke." She watched him walk across the clearing toward the ship. The huge Deneb 6 moon was rising behind her, infiltrating the forest with silver, turning the clearing into an argent lake. The silvered ship was like a peaceful church steeple on a still summer's night on Earth, and Mr. Burke was a lonely silver figure wading through silver-drenched grass. For a moment Miss Mintz could hardly breathe. Abruptly she turned and ran like a high school girl up Little Main Street to her hut.

Betty Lou Faraday, one of her two hut mates, awakened her the following morning. "Miss Mintz! Miss Mintz! Look! I've caught a bluebird!"

It was the second time in twenty-four hours that Miss Mintz could hardly believe her eyes. She rubbed them to make sure that she was really *seeing* and not having another silly dream, but when she got through rubbing them Betty Lou was still standing by her bed and the bluebird was still perched charmingly on Betty Lou's forefinger. Its plumage was even bluer than Betty Lou's eyes.

"See, Miss Mintz? I'm going to build a cage for it with my Do-It-Yourself Kit!"

"Why, it's beautiful, Betty Lou. How did you catch it?"

"Oh, they're easy to catch, Miss Mintz. All you do is walk into the woods and they fly right up to you. All the kids are out looking for them. Why don't *you* catch one, Miss Mintz? I'll build a cage for you to keep it in."

Why not indeed! A bluebird would just match the way she felt. She heard her happiness singing inside of her. "I think I will, Betty Lou," she said, getting up. "I—I've always wanted a bluebird..."

Miss Mintz had never seen so many birds. The woods were blue with them. And she had hardly gone two steps before one of them—the bluest one of all, it seemed—flew right down from a leafy limb and perched upon her shoulder. Miss Mintz trembled with excitement. She raised her forefinger to her shoulder and the bluebird hopped daintily upon it, its tiny golden eyes twinkling in the sunlight.

And as though that were not enough, when she returned to her hut there was Mr. Burke waiting on her doorstep just as he had promised."

"Good morning, Miss Mintz," he said. "I see you've been joining the youngsters in bluebird hunting."

"Oh, I have, Mr. Eurke! Why, I never saw so many bluebirds!"

Betty Lou came out of the hut then with two plastic cages. One of them already had a blue occupant and she exhibited it proudly. She gave the other cage to Miss Mintz. "Thank you, Betty Lou," Miss Mintz said. She put her bluebird into the cage, secured the little door, and carried the cage into the hut and placed it on top of her collapsible wardrobe. Then she returned to the street and walked with Mr. Burke to the Deneb Six Cafe.

In every hut they passed, enthusiastic seniors, breakfast forgotten, were hard at work with their Do-It-Yourself Kits fashioning plastic cages. Bluebirds were everywhere—perched on youthful shoulders, on roof peaks, on door R sills; weaving ephemeral blue patterns in the sparkling summer air.

Miss Mintz shook her head in wonderment. "Are all the birds on Deneb 6 blue, Mr. Burke?" she asked.

"I've heard they are," Mr. Burke said. "I've heard other things about them too. For instance, they're hypersensitive: When you catch one and keep it, it reflects the way you feel—something like a dog, only more so."

"Why I didn't know that, Mr. Burke. It's funny the guidebook doesn't say anything about it. The guidebook doesn't even mention bluebirds."

"Guidebooks!" Mr. Burke said. "What the people who write guidebooks don't know would fill a thousand times as many books as they write! I'll bet your guidebook doesn't mention the Deneb 6 Exodus either."

"Why no, it doesn't," Miss Mintz said.

"About a thousand years ago—long before *we* had space travel—the original natives took off and never came back. I don't mean all at once, of course, but over a period of three or four centuries. They're scattered all over the galaxy now, I've read. They—"

"But why? Why did they leave, Mr. Burke?"

"*Why?*" He stared at her. "Now that's a silly question if I ever heard one, Miss Mintz. Why wouldn't they leave once they'd developed a technology that enabled them to? There's nothing here but trees, and trees aren't good for anything any more. Everything's made of metal now, and there isn't a decent ore deposit left on the whole planet. And there's hardly an ounce of uranium either!"

"Oh..." Miss Mintz said.

They were at the entrance to the Deneb Six Cafe by then, and Mr. Burke sniffed the morning air. "Bacon and eggs," he breathed. "Real, honest to God bacon and eggs! Miss Mintz, I love you!"

It was a purely hyperbolic remark of course, but it left Miss Mintz breathless just she same. She could hardly speak all through breakfast, but then, speech wouldn't have been appropriate anyway, for Mr. Burke was too preoccupied with his bacon and eggs. Miss Mintz was a little bit awed by his appetite, but then of course you had to figure that the poor man had been eating ration tablets for at least a third of his life, and anyway, six eggs wasn't such an awful lot for a robust man to put away. Lots of people ate six eggs for breakfast. She'd have liked to see him eat twelve, for that matter: it made her happy to be able to give something away. She'd never had much of anything to give before...

The meal over, she went out to the kitchen and got a handful of bread crumbs for her bluebird, then she walked with Mr. Burke to the end of Little Main Street. "You'll have lunch with us, won't you, Mr. Burke?"

"I'm afraid I'm taking advantage of you, Miss Mintz. I don't want to eat up *all* your food on you."

"Oh, don't worry about that. We've got plenty more than we'll ever be able to get away with by ourselves. And we're awfully glad to have you with us."

"Well, in that case, it would be sort of foolish for me to stay away, wouldn't it?" Mr. Burke smiled his disarming smile, exposing his white, even teeth to the morning sunlight. He doffed his kepi in the charming way he had, and executed his exaggerated little bow. "I'll be waiting at your doorstep," he said.

And he was. And he was waiting there again for dinner. Miss Mintz accompanied him part way back to the ship that night. The full moon was rising—on Deneb 6 there was always a full moon; the guidebook

had got that much right—and once again the ship seemed like a church steeple, all soft and silvered, the forest like a tossed silver sea around it, the grass so drenched with silver that it splashed on your shoes when you walked through it and splotched your legs with evanescent patterns ...

"Well, I've got to get ship-side, Miss Mintz. That watch again."

"You'll be with us for breakfast, won't you? We're having wheatcakes and sausage."

"Real, honest to God sausage?"

"Why of course real sausage. Don't you like sausage, Mr. Burke?"

"Do I like it? Miss Mintz, I love it! And I love you too!" He doffed his kepi and executed his bow.

"I'll be waiting at the usual corner of your doorstep. Good night, Miss Mintz."

"Good night, Mr. Burke."

THE next morning Miss Mintz couldn't get over how blue her bluebird was. It put Betty Lou's to shame, and beside it Teresa Best's—her other hut mate—seemed positively lacklustre—as thin and pinched and colorless as Teresa herself.

"Gosh, you found the bluest bird on the whole planet, Miss Mintz," Betty Lou said.

"I'll say," Teresa said. "What do you feed it, Miss Mintz?"

"A few bread crumbs from the kitchen is all," Miss Mintz said. "Birds don't require much food."

"I feed mine bread crumbs too, but it doesn't seem to fill out. It looks like it's half starved."

"So does mine," Betty Lou said. . . "Are you coming to the Farewell Dance, Miss Mintz? We're holding it in the Deneb Six Cafe."

"Why of course. I *have* to be there."

"Oh, I didn't mean in your *official* capacity, Miss Mintz." Betty Lou lowered her blue eyes. "I thought maybe you'd ask that handsome officer who eats with us."

Miss Mintz turned pink. "I—I never thought about that."

"I bet he'd like to come. Why don't you ask him?"

"Maybe I will," Miss Mintz said. She finished dressing and made her cot, her heart singing. It had been years since she'd danced. Lonely years. Her breath caught in her throat. I wonder if he *would* come, she thought. I could wear *my* new white dress with the star and galaxy sequins. It's just decollete enough for such an occasion, and it's really not *too* young for me.

The invitation trembled on her lips during breakfast and during lunch and during dinner; but it wasn't until she was walking part way back to the ship with Mr. Burke that she found the courage to deliver it.

For a moment Mr. Burke was silent. "Of course I'd *like* to come, Miss Mintz," he said finally. "But you see it's that first watch—"

"Oh..." Miss Mintz wilted in the moonlight. "I—I forgot all about that, Mr. Burke."

"We're so short handed it's pretty hard to get relief. ... I *could* ask someone to take my place for awhile, though—long enough to drop in for a couple of dances. How would that be?"

"Oh, that'll be fine, Mr. Burke. I— We'll be ever so glad to have you."

"We'll leave it that way then... See you in the morning, Miss Mintz. The usual corner of your doorstep."

"Good night, Mr. Burke."

The days flew by. The seniors fished, hunted, played tennis, baseball, badminton and scuffle; laughed and sang; had ephemeral romances and brief broken hearts—

And one by one, their bluebirds sickened and died...

Miss Mintz couldn't understand it. If what Mr. Burke had said was true, their bluebirds should have been blue and beautiful with so much happiness to reflect, for she had never seen a happier bunch of kids in all her life.

Morning was at seven in her own world, and all of her hillsides were dew-pearled. Day after day, before her shining eyes, Mr. Burke ate his way through roast beef, southern fried chicken, Virginia ham, Venerian swamp duck, and Martian *pfall*; smiling his disarming smile and exposing his even white teeth, doffing his kepi and showing his wavy brown hair, uttering his outlandish hyperboles and making his

nightly quip about her doorstep. Her own bluebird was a thing to behold: it was so brightly blue it almost hurt her eyes to look at it, and it grew more and more beautiful every day.

Finally the night of the dance arrived.

"Why what's the matter, Betty Lou?" Miss Mintz asked, coming into the hut after her nightly walk with Mr. Burke.

Betty Lou raised her tear-wet face from her pillow. "Everything," she said. "Just everything's the matter!"

Miss Mintz sat down on the edge of the cot and lent Betty Lou her handkerchief. "Everything can't be the matter, Betty Lou. One or two things, but not everything. Why don't you tell me what's wrong?"

"It's my dress, Miss Mintz," Betty Lou said. "The one I was planning to wear to the dance. I forgot to pack it and now I won't be able to go. And my bluebird's dead!"

"Dead?" Miss Mintz got up and looked into the cage. She saw a motionless little heap of faded blue feathers. "Did you feed it every day, Betty Lou? It looks so thin, so starved—"

"Why of course I fed it! I fed it just as much as you feed yours. But it didn't do any good, it kept getting thinner and thinner all the time, and tonight when I looked in the cage it was dead!"

She began to cry again and Miss Mintz patted her shoulder, "Why such a silly thing to cry about," she said. "Tomorrow you can catch another bluebird, and I'm sure one of the other girls has an extra dress they can let you take."

"No!" Betty Lou said. "The only extra dresses they've got are rags, and I won't wear them. I won't!"

She was crying harder than ever. Miss Mintz walked nervously around the hut. In a way it was a shame to be as beautiful as Betty Lou was, she thought. Being beautiful warped your perspective; it made you too self-centered. Betty Lou would be attractive no matter what she wore to the dance, but being merely attractive wasn't enough: she had to be the most attractive, the cynosure—

Of course I could let her take *my* dress, Miss Mintz thought.

But I'm not going to! Why should I? I've looked forward all week to wearing it. It's the most beautiful thing I have, and—and Mr. Burke is the most beautiful thing that's ever happened to me. There'll be hundreds of dances for Betty Lou. There may never be another one for me.

She went over and sat on her cot.

Of course I could wear my second best one—the plain one without the stars—

But I'm not going to! Betty Lou is young—she'll get over having to go to one dance in a not-quite-new dress. She'll be the center of attraction anyway. All the young men will flock around her the way they always have—the way they always will. They never flocked around me. Never, no matter what I wore, and now, just when, when—I'm simply *not* going to let her take it...

Presently she gave a little sigh. She got up and opened her collapsible wardrobe and unhooked the dress from its hanger. The stars winked in the electric lights, the galaxies pinwheeled; the dress itself snowed in billows and flurries to the floor. Miss Mintz choked back a little sob as she carried it over to Betty Lou's cot. She patted Betty Lou on the shoulder. "Here," she said, "you can wear my dress. I'm sure it will fit you, and I wasn't going to wear it anyway. It's much too young for me..."

The seniors had brought along a payload of canned music. Most of it was ultra-modern—incomprehensible, that is, to anyone past the age of eighteen. But there were a few old numbers mixed in with the scintillating array of avant-garde pieces—ones that had been around when Miss Mintz had gone on *her* Senior Trip.

She stood by the soft drink dispenser listening to them, watching the kids dance incongruous dances to them. Remembering.

The soft drink dispenser was opposite the door, and standing by it, Miss Mintz had a good view of Little Main Street, silvered with moonlight now, despite its tinselly electric lights, and if anyone were to come striding in the direction of the Deneb Six Cafe, she would be the first to see him.

But no one came striding in the direction of the Deneb Six Cafe, and the little musical minutes accumulated, became an hour. Two hours. The dancers whirled and pirouetted, and young faces swam dreamily in the subdued light of muted electric light bulbs.

He probably couldn't get anyone to relieve him, Miss Mintz thought, sipping her fourth Centaurian fizz. I wonder if he can hear the music from there. I'll bet he can. His post must be outside the ship. It must be lonely, standing there all alone in the moonlight—

One of the senior boys came over and asked her to dance. Laughing, Miss Mintz shook her head. "You go ahead and dance with your girl," she said, looking over the youthful shoulder at empty Little Main Street. "Never mind your Ancient Literature teacher."

His girl of the moment was Betty Lou Faraday. Miss Mintz watched them as they floated away. Betty Lou was like a silver snowstorm on a summer's night, all white flakes and flashing stars and coruscating galaxies. It made Miss Mintz's chest feel tight just to see her, she was so beautiful.

I wonder what made her bluebird die, she thought. She's so happy—All of them are so happy. Why didn't their bluebirds reflect their happiness instead of dying? Maybe they're just ordinary birds after all. Maybe they don't reflect anything but hunger. Maybe bread crumbs really aren't enough to keep them alive. Maybe they're nothing but sparrows in bluebirds' plumage.

But bread crumbs seem to be enough for mine. Mine certainly isn't sickly. Mine is beautiful. And it *must* be beautiful because I'm happy, because I'm happier than Betty Lou, than the others. And I am happy. So very very happy...

She glanced up Little Main Street again. It was just as empty as the last time she had glanced up it. He'll never come now, she thought. You'd think there'd be at least one of his ship mates who'd be decent enough to relieve him for a little while. Unless, unless he forgot—

But that was absurd. Mr. Burke had never forgotten before. He had never neglected a single invitation; he'd always been there waiting "at her doorstep" just as he'd promised. And tonight he'd been there just as punctually as usual to help finish up the left-overs. He'd really helped to finish them up, too: his stalwart appetite had been just the right supplement to the stalwart appetites of the seniors; there hadn't even been enough food left to prepare a snack for the dance—

A rather horrid suspicion obtruded itself into Miss Mintz's mind. She swayed momentarily, her paper cup of Centaurian fizz almost slipping from her fingers. She set the cup down and gripped the handle of the dispenser for support.

But she recovered herself quickly. She forced a laugh to her trembling lips. I *am* a paranoid old maid! she thought: thinking things like that. Why, Mr. Burke is the nicest person I've ever met; he couldn't possibly have any but the highest motives. He's probably standing by the ship right now, listening to the music, just wishing he could join us here. Standing there all alone in the moonlight, watching the stars.

All alone. I'll bet he'd love to have someone to talk to. I'll bet—She knew that if she hesitated she wouldn't obey the impulse, and she wanted desperately to obey it. She slipped out of the Deneb Six Cafe and ran up Little Main Street. The clearing was a silver dream, and the ship was more like a church steeple than ever—a church steeple overlooking an imaginary village on a tropical Christmas Eve. Miss Mintz's heart pounded as she ran through the gossamer night, her shadow playfully traipsing before her. The church steeple grew out of the moonlight, resolved gradually into the ship it really was, and the companionway light gleamed through the open lock, pale and sickly against the argent grandeur all around it.

Apparently Mr. Burke's post wasn't at the base of the ship as she had thought. Miss Mintz paused at the foot of the disembarking stairs, looking about her. Suddenly she heard voices coming from the open lock, voices accompanied by a peculiar rattling sound. One voice in particular—

"Seven again!" the voice in particular said.

"That finishes me," another voice said.

"Me too," still another voice said. "You're hot tonight, Burke."

"That's because I've been eating right," the voice in particular said. "You guys don't have foresight. You see an old maid school teacher with a payload of chow under her fingertips and you don't even think to play up to her. Now you take me—"

Miss Mintz stood just within the door of her hut, afraid to turn on the light. She was sure that her bluebird was dead.

She felt her way through the darkness to her cot. Her eyes had dried by now, but her shoulders still

shook. She saw the small dark blur of the cage on top of her collapsible wardrobe and she visualized the little pile of faded blue feathers inside of it. Suddenly she couldn't stand it any more and she switched on her cot lamp with a convulsive jerk of her fingers.

And then she gasped. For her bluebird wasn't dead at all. It was even bluer than it had been before. It was a vivid flame of blue, a beautiful shining flame—

Miss Mints sat there looking at it for a long time, and as she looked it seemed to become bluer and bluer. Presently she heard the soft sound of footsteps in Little Main Street and she switched off the light and went to the door. A boy and a girl were walking in the moonlight, hand in hand. The girl was wearing a white dress frosted with stars and galaxies, a snowfall of a dress, a lovely snowfall of a dress on a summer's night.

Miss Mintz watched them pass. She saw their moon-softened faces. She saw Betty Lou's face. Her breath caught in her throat. Betty Lou's face had changed. The dress and the moonlight had subtly altered it, had lent it a serenity and a maturity it had never known before—transformed its tinselly prettiness into something very close to beauty.

I helped create this moment, Miss Mintz thought. I made this moment possible.

She stood in the doorway long after the couple had gone by. She felt her happiness glowing warmly inside of her, the ordinary quiet kind that never sang false tunes, the kind that was uniquely her own; the calm, trusting, generous kind that was an inseparable part of her, that throbbed deep within her in cadence with the rhythmic beating of her heart.