



Moonlight For Sale

Betty Talbott

H. Ec. Sr.

THE speaker was finishing now. "And may I say this to those of you who remember real moonlight before the moon disappeared. I am sure that the moonlight we are producing here tonight will make you think that once more the real moon is shining. I am sure that our moon will seem just as bright as the one which shone when you were young and, ha, ha, in love."

The little white-haired lady sitting with her grandchildren had not heard much of his speech but these last lines. It wasn't that the public address system wasn't the best possible. She could hear his words just as well as if he had been on the other end of this long wooden bench. She pulled her coat a little closer around her shoulders. It might have been the spring night air that made her shiver.

She hadn't listened to the last man talking because she was remembering the one before, a man about as old as she was now, a man who had seen the moon before it had disappeared. He hadn't said much. The man after him had supposed it was because he was so thrilled about the show they were putting on, but Grandma knew how he had felt.

She realized that Bobby, squirming beside her, was saying in a loud whisper, "Grandma, Grandma, hey Grandma—"

"Yes, Bobby?"

"Hey, Grandma, you remember the moonlight, don't you?"

"Yes, Bobby, I was a little younger than your mother then."

"Where did the moon go, Grandma?"

"Didn't you hear the man tell about it?"

"He said it was a strange—"

"Shh—", Barbara warned him, "Here it comes."

THE darkness over the administration building in the park dissolved into light. The roof seemed to sink lower until finally the whole moon was in view, so far away that no one was quite sure where it came from and so small that Bobby could have put both his arms around it and had his fingertips touch.

There was a sound among the watchers like the sigh of a breeze just before the rain, then scattered talk like the first rain chatter. "But it's so perfect," Grandma breathed.

"Pretty good, huh. Why, in Popular Mechanics—"

"Is it really perfect, Grandma, just the way the real moon was?"

Barbara balanced on the edge of the bench, her hands braced against her knees, not taking her eyes from the sky.

"It's too perfect, more perfect than the real moon some way—oh, I know, there's no face in it."

"No face? No what?" Both children confronted her.

"Why, we called it the man in the moon. Some people said he watched everything that went on down here and was winking one eye at the crazy things humans did."

"Aw, there couldn't be any man in the moon." Bobby reconsidered, "Or how could he get up there, anyway?"

"He was supposed to live up there. You could see other figures up there too if you looked right. The old woman with the bunch of sticks on her back and then the faces of the two lovers who had to part but loved each other so much that they were put up in the moon to look at each other every time the moon was full."

"Well, I like it better not all marked up." Bobby swung his leg over the bench and looked again at the moon.

"Why could they see each other only when the moon was full?" Barbara's back was to the moon, which seemed to touch her honey-colored hair with shining strokes.

“There was only one face in a half moon.” Grandma wanted to reach out and touch the hair that looked so much as Barbara’s mother’s had that last night that anyone had seen the moon. She knew that it would slip softly and feel cool under her old hands.

“Oh, I see. Is it just the same except for the faces then?”

“No, not quite. I don’t know how it’s different. There’s something in the feel of it. Like the difference between hard and soft water, nothing you can tell, but somehow you know. Moonlight used to be soft and thick. The shadows had depth to them and faded at the edges rather than having the definite line that the shadow of this elm trunk makes.”

GRANDMA looked around, far off to the smudge of black trees at the edge of the western sky. “It was all over too. This park is big, but it’s just a patch of moonlight really. There used to be a song started, The moon belongs to everyone. That’s the way it was. There was moonlight enough for whole mountains or oceans. The ash pile in Mr. Lar’s back yard got just as much moonlight as the fountain at Mr. Hood’s.

“When I was just as old as Bobby we used to swim at night and throw up handfuls of water to see the drops catch the moonlight in the air and bring it down to the tipping cups of moonlight that were in every ripple. In the winter the little creek we skated on was a glaze of moonlight. It wasn’t lighted nearly as well as your ponds are with spotlights. Sometimes it made us jump over bumps that weren’t there or trip over cracks we couldn’t see, but that was part of the excitement.

“The fields were a wide haze of moonlight. It seemed as though the little towns slept under a blanket of it. The woods were shafted with it too. I remember one night when we climbed a small mountain by moonlight. We lost the trail we were following because the light made aisles through the trees and we followed them instead of the right path.” She sat smiling into the darkness remembering how the pine needles had smelled when they had crushed them as they stumbled up their individual paths to the moon. She could almost feel the underbrush clawing her legs and the twigs whipping her face, “but we kept on,” she assured herself aloud, “we kept on until we had all the moonlight there was all around us at the top of the mountain, all

around us, treetops full below us, and the whole sky full above us.”

BARBARA settled back to look at the moon again. “Whole treetops full, a whole sky full,” she repeated under her breath.

“I bet it couldn’t get into the houses.” Bobby was proud of this new thought.

“No, people managed to shut it out of the houses pretty well, but it did come in the windows, big squares of it. Some people were afraid to sleep with the moon on their faces for fear of being moonstruck. I liked it though. The square would move across the bed and finally slip off to the floor. Something like the way the sun does, only milder, not picking out the specks of dust, but more like softening everything up a little. Why, even the polished oak floor looked soft.”

“Yah, but I bet when the light was on you couldn’t see it.”

“No, you couldn’t then. You couldn’t see it very well in the cities either with all the neon lights and airplane searchlights and the high walls of buildings to shut out what did get through. Funny though, finally the people didn’t even notice that they didn’t have any of that moonlight that was supposed to belong to everyone.”

“Oh, look,” Barbara gasped. “The moon’s tangled in the top of that tree over there.”

“It’s all right. It’s just behind the tree.”

Bobby was on the grass at Grandma’s feet now, chin on knees. “Did the people in the city notice when the moon disappeared for good?”

“I guess some of them didn’t know until they read about it in the papers.”

“How did it go, Grandma? What did the astronomers say? Was there a big explosion?”

THE old woman watched the man-made moon slip away from the branches and shifted to have the breeze at her back. “No, Bobby,” she sounded tired, “It wasn’t that way at all. It was, well—” she laughed a little without smiling, “I guess no one was ever quite sure what did happen.”

“Maybe a meteor hit it. Couldn’t they even see what happened or weren’t they watching?”

“They couldn’t see it for the weather I guess. You see it was the dark of the moon. Then we had a lot of rainy weather, some awful thunder storms, and finally when it did clear up and was time for a new moon, the moon just didn’t show up.” Grandma’s hands, relaxed, palms up in her lap, looked empty somehow. She glanced down and turned them over.

“They could have figured out if a meteor had hit it though, couldn’t they?”

“Maybe so. I never held with the meteor idea myself. Of course after it was all over some people said that they remembered at such and such a time on a certain night there had been an awfully peculiar stroke of lightning, and they’d just said—oh, but then none of their stories agreed. Of course some folks said it was a visitation of the Lord, but they couldn’t prove anything either.”

The children had forgotten the moon now and watched the old lady.

“Mm hm, another thing, someone had just sent a rocket ship up to the moon. Some people believe to this day that the thing got there and destroyed the moon. Decomposed it or dissolved it or something.” She eased herself forward on the bench. “Looks as though it’s about over now. Almost rolling down those hills over in the west now. Time for you chickens to be in bed.”

“Just till it sets, please.” Barbara’s eyes reflected the low moon.

“We’ll walk on slowly, just as I used to do with your mother and her dad in the moonlight.”

BARBARA’S feet dragged slowly as if trying to scoop up the moonlight from the grass. By the time the last wedge of moon was hidden somewhere in the hills, Grandma and the two children were at the gate of the park. That is why they did not hear the last announcement. “This moonlight demonstration has been given by the Universal Electric Company. For further information as to uses and prices, call 1538 or inquire at 739 Elm.”

On the way home, Grandma held Barbara’s hand as the little girl skipped along singing to a little tune of her own, “The moon belongs to everyone.”

The streetlights were bright but with her eyes half closed Grandma could almost imagine that it was moonlight falling through the long arch of elms as she walked home.