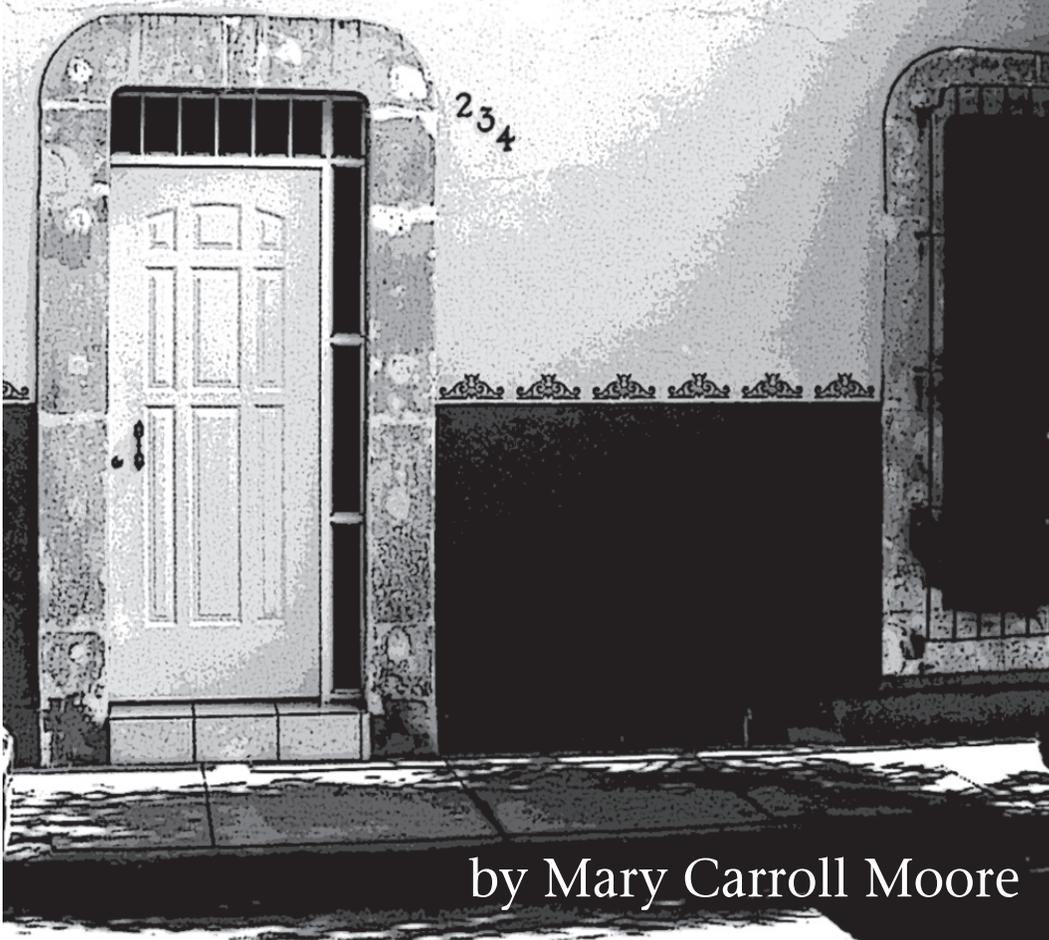


ELUANI



by Mary Carroll Moore

Gudy
78

The women at the evening market tell her there will be moon and sun in the sky together at dawn, so Luna Diego gets up before the street vendors and leans forearms on the windowsill to watch the two dance in the sky.

She sees a waxing gibbous moon, the faint outline of coming fullness milky and incomplete, bowing to a growing sun. She pushes the wooden shutters open, knowing the noise will wake Carisa.

Carisa stumbles out of her room, pours bitter coffee, sits with half-closed eyes. Carisa isn't interested in the moon. Like everything else, she says, it will leave soon enough.

By the time the vendors set up in the narrow street below and their voices rise to Luna's windowsill like smoke, the moon disappears. What is left: steamy air ripe with fish frying, rotting mango, women's laughter. The smells and sounds of her mother's culture, kept carefully foreign.

Over the street a long banner ripples, announcing the opera, her mother's name printed in sun-bleached letters. Luna watches it move, feeling the thousand miles behind her, the distance from her father's home in California to this Mexican city's hot mountainous air.



One week ago, Luna thrust a newspaper clipping in front of her father, registering the slight paling of skin, how his eyes dilated. "Where did you get this?"

From the radio, opera lifted through the room. Her father turned it down then shook his head, a slow practiced movement that barely stirred air. "She mails them to me. They are nothing I want to know about."

"It's her. I must go." Then, "Who mails them to you?"

"A friend of your mother's. In Mexico." He bent over his book, ignoring the grainy photo. "Your mother should think twice before going back to that city."

Luna pressed her face close to the newsprint, studying white-powdered cheekbones, elegant nose, elaborate Chinese princess costume. Famous soprano sings Turandot, one performance in hometown. She knew the story: Principessa of great beauty has executed all suitors who could not answer her three impossible riddles, their need for passion so bad, they have sold everything for a tiny chance. One remains, nameless and hopeful.

Luna traced the photograph with her finger. "She's even more beautiful now. I think we still have the same eyebrows. Will you let me go?"

Her father sighed, settling into the folds of his armchair. Lamplight cast a yellow circle across his hands. "Luna." He spoke gently. "If you go find her, you will be hurt all over again."

Luna felt heat stitch along her skin, burning as if she was already under a Mexican sun. "What is the friend's name?"

"Carisa." Then, as if he were talking to himself, "They were very close, but some people make you do impossible things for love. You would be lucky if you never saw your mother again."



Luna brings very little because she isn't staying long. Her red backpack has three changes of clothing, her diary, the blurred newspaper photograph of her mother, Carisa's phone number, a palm-sized silver mirror. Her father's money is in her pocket, enough to travel by train then bus. Enough for clean hotels. The air grows more dense and heated each day. At night, on rough sheets, Luna tilts the silver mirror toward new windows, catching reflections of different stars. She is an explorer, defying gravity. Solving three riddles that are not easy: why her mother left, what she has found, what she is still searching for.

Carisa puts both hands to her mouth in delight when Luna finds her way to the apartment by late afternoon. The front door, the shutters of Carisa's home, are the color of bluebird's wings. Carisa is an unhurried stork, arms bony and sharp. Her embrace is welcoming.

"Your mother is in those beautiful eyes. I am sorry, she left me too."

Luna takes off her shoes and follows Carisa inside. Carisa's ruffled skirt swishes across the floor. The tiles under Luna's feet are still warm from the day's heat.



“If you forget me, you’ll remember this.” It was an autumn evening five years before, Luna’s twelfth birthday. She was lying with her mother on a blanket in the orchard behind their California ranch house. It was not a wealthy farm but the pear trees were heavy with fruit. Her father would begin harvest the next day, first the fields, then the trees. He, round and solid as the fruit he grows, loved her mother’s music; her mother, lithe as tall grass, was restless.

Her mother offered a gift, flipping it in her hands. It was a tiny mirror. One minute Luna’s smile shone in reflection, next minute the mirror turned and the smile disappeared. Slightly bigger than a large coin, the reflective side as round and perfect as the full moon that hung above them, the back of the mirror laced with intricate designs.

“Birthday present?” Luna pulled the blanket closer and tried to snuggle against her mother’s shoulder, but her mother sat up suddenly, held the mirror close to Luna’s face.

“Look into it. All of us are here.”

Below them, the moon silvered the still grass of the field. Her father would cut the grass the next morning, hours after her mother left them for good.



Carisa shows Luna her closet: “Use what you need.” Cotton skirts in ten different colors, a battered serape and shoes for winter, three pairs of strappy espadrilles, a stack of straw hats. Luna sees, on the floor, a red leather suitcase. Her mother’s.

Carisa’s face is long, nearly beautiful. Her voice is gravelly but kind. When she smiles, there are gold teeth and a warmth Luna has never seen before in a woman’s eyes.

“Is the suitcase empty?” Luna asks.

“No.” Carisa sets it almost reverently on the bed. “Real leather.” Her hand caresses. “From Paris.”

Inside the suitcase the lining is satiny like an elegant blouse. There are pockets for everything. Fourteen programs from operas, a small bag of coins from different countries, several crushed packets of Russian cigarettes. “She never smoked. I don’t know why she kept these,” Carisa says. Two silk scarves in magenta, a photograph tucked inside pale blue stationery.

Luna places the photograph on the bed like a jewel: All her father's are of her mother in costume, her face a mask. Here, her mother is real enough to touch: dark hair blowing across her face, in a short black skirt and white jacket, the magenta scarf at her neck. Leaning in to fit in the frame, arm around her shoulders, laughing, a narrow man with an elegant hooked nose.

Carisa lifts a hand in his direction. "This man was very kind to her. The only one, I think, who understood her need for freedom." She looks at Luna, deciding. "But he still follows her."

Luna fans programs on the bed: Vienna, Milano, Moskva, London, Singapore.

"Why hasn't she come back for all of this?"

Carisa fingers a crushed cigarette packet, pulls out a long black Sobrani. "She hates what I do. She felt it would leak into her life. It was easier to leave."



At noon, they close the blue shutters against the heat. They try to sleep. At six, they buy tortillas and goat meat from the street vendors. At nine, Carisa gets ready for work. Luna sits on a stool by the window, leans over the tiny balcony railing to study the swarthy sea of moving people below, wondering which black head might be her mother's. A woman in a dress the color of the abandoned suitcase walks by, and Luna silently tells her, "Look up." The woman's eyes rise to the window, unfamiliar thin eyebrows, a face round as a sphere.

Above the street, the banner sways on thin ropes. Turandot is sold out. Letters, nearly invisible after a week in this sun, declare her mother's popularity.

"I won't be going tonight," Carisa says, "maybe neither should you." The smoke from her cigarette clouds her hair. She lays a short dress on a chair and bends to unfasten her shoes.

To travel all this way and not see her mother as the cold Chinese princess? Unthinkable. Luna fingers the tiny mirror in her pocket and shifts on her stool. She plans to catch a spotlight in its reflection, remind her mother of bent pear trees and a satin sky. But there is no ticket. Her body wavers and she presses a palm into the sill to steady herself, turning her face toward the street.

Carisa catches the longing look. "There is one possibility." She is sitting now, slowly painting her eyes with iridescent shadow the color of her front door. "If you can't barter memories for love, you try something else."

Luna traces the mirror's knotted design, desperation in her throat. Maybe she will do anything.

"The man who follows her, he works in a small office behind the theater. Tonight, after the performance starts, he will be the only one there. He is kind but not generous. He might let you in for the last act." Carisa pauses, hand suspended before her face. Gets up, takes the photograph from the suitcase in the closet. "You may need this."



Many years ago Luna learned something: In her mother's wayward family, the birth of a child when the moon was holding its breath, never fulfilled, never quite what it envisioned for itself, was a sign of displeasure rooted forever in the child's soul. A waxing gibbous moon was often mistaken for a full moon, her mother told her, but it wasn't the real thing at all.

"I did everything I could to have you earlier or later," her mother said before she left. "I did all I could."

Luna long ago decided this was superstition, another part of her mother's culture that could be discarded after her mother was gone.



Luna studies the photograph a long time, so it is late when she walks to the theater. She has chosen a white linen skirt and a pale shirt with puffed sleeves to look different, but then laces a pair of Carisa's red espadrilles up her ankles and wraps the thin fringed shawl from the breakfast table around her head until it looks like a blood-red moon.

The opera theater squats proudly in the oldest part of town, fronting a spacious square. Houses surround the theater, streetlights pool yellow onto smooth cobblestones. Luna traverses the empty square, hearing violins and a high soprano voice.

A narrow alley runs along the left wall. She sees the open window, wide to the night, the small office and a man at a beat-up wooden desk. He is turned away, sipping amber liquid from a glass, counting slips of paper anchored by a stone. The papers rustle lightly from the breeze of a whirring fan. The night is hot. There is a red vase of freesias under a huge poster of the opera, her mother's face. The perfume of the flowers floats toward her.

Luna gathers strength, slides a sleeve from one shoulder to scratch a mosquito bite. The man looks up. It is as if he'd been expecting her. He stands. He is very tall. He comes to the window.

Luna makes herself just as tall. "Please," in halting Spanish, "I need to hear my mother sing." She has the photograph of her mother in her skirt pocket but the photograph is electric against her hand, sticking to her skin.

The opera is louder here. They must be near the stage door. A bass voice rumbles, timpani flashes sound, but the man doesn't flinch. Maybe he has heard a hundred rehearsals. He leans out the window, smiling. She smells clean sweat, sandalwood soap. He speaks perfect English and she realizes his accent is as Italian as Puccini. He lights a cigarette, long and black.

"Do you sing?"

"I know the arias." Time is passing, she should have come sooner. Never quite fulfilled, her mother says in her mind and this makes Luna's skin heat again. She looks past him, sees the door she could run through. Almost unconsciously, she begins playing with the mirror in her pocket, lifting it out to flicker a reflection from window to wall. The man's eyes follow the pale spotlight she makes. Maybe if she blinds him, even for a moment. She wills herself to give him the photograph but thinks of her mother singing *Nessun dorma* under the pear trees.

"I have money," she says instead.

The man slowly sips the liquid. The cigarette burns, unheeded. She watches his throat move. "Tell me your name."

"Luna. I am a friend of Carisa's."

"La bonita." Luna stays perfectly still, trapped by his eyes. "Bonita," he says, again, beautiful, then switches to Italian. "Bella luna."

The music rises; it is the end of Act II. She hears the applause, the growing murmur of voices as people rise and stretch. Hurry, she thinks, take me. The man's eyes absorb her the way she's seen men study Carisa's face and body.

Luna looks at this man's elegant hands holding the glass, imagining him becoming a shapeless wisp of air, just for wanting something very badly.

She whispers, "There must be a ticket I could buy."

"There are none to buy."

A woman's laughter rings out, sudden and familiar and sweet. Behind the door? On the street? Luna turns, sprints away from the lighted window, following sound.

“Principessa,” calls the man. “Bella luna! What will you give for the music?”

The square jostles with people taking the air. Shadows, even the shadow of her own body, lay sharp on the cobblestones. She hears the splash of water in the ornate fountain. Over it the man, still in the small room, begins singing *Nessun dorma*, as beautiful as any tenor on her father’s radio. But instead of the words, “Nobody shall sleep,” he sings her name, Bella Luna, over and over. Pulling her, wanting her. In the square people are laughing, enjoying the night. Luna stands in the center of these sounds, as if her life were a simple choice between two directions.

The man’s singing grows louder, another aria from Turandot, the section where the two lovers finally surrender to each other and know each others’ names. Everything lost, found and whole. The man sings a few lines, continues the melody with her name, Bella Luna, as if he is singing to the moon that now rises triumphant in the sky above the city.

It is not a small thing, what she will have to do. But after its quickness, because she believes it will be quick and distant in all its ways that are not her own, she will have what she needs. She tells her reluctant body that it is time. She tells it to turn toward the narrow street.



At age twelve, lying on the orchard blanket, Luna saw perfect forms of moonlit fruit. She leaned in, hoping for her own face in the mirror again, round and complete. But Mara, her mother, flipped the mirror to show its reverse, the weave of intricate silver knots trimmed by red lines. She told Luna that both sides were beautiful; one was looking out, one in.

The circle flipped again, catching moonlight. Then flashed back to dull silver shine.

Fascinated, the child reached, bent. This was when Mara grabbed her daughter’s hand, palm up. She lay the mirror into the small shell of skin, pressed tightly.

The engraved design imprinted, red on white.

Luna cried out. “Why did you hurt me?”

“So my mother taught me. So I must teach you.”

Tears were in her mother’s eyes. Her face was almost beseeking.

The mirror fell between them, turning on the blanket. “It is a mother’s job

to prepare her child for betrayal. What better place to hear it.”

Luna wanted to run, to say no. But like a trusting animal, she inched toward warmth. Mara Diego did not pull away this time. As she gathered Luna in, her arms cushioned against everything that could happen.



People are pouring back into the theater. The man is silent, waiting.

“What will you take in exchange for letting me in?”

“The beautiful moon.”

She hears Carisa in her head: “It is not so bad. The first time you betray yourself is the hardest.” Maybe his desire will be clean. Maybe it will not hurt so much. Luna bends her head, walks in the door.

Inside is not as ugly as she had feared. There is order and beauty here, an unexpected neatness which soothes her. The man clears a small red chair for Luna, and she sinks into it. He slides a cushion of matching color behind her back. The scarf around her head is unwinding, loose now down to her shoulders.

“I have entertained many beautiful women in this room,” he says, handing Luna a glass of the same amber liquid, “but I have never brought the moon here.”

This man does nothing she expects, studying her face as a familiar puzzle. “You remind me of someone.” He runs one palm lightly along the skin of her shoulder. “Where do you come from?” She can see banked longing; his eyes want to peel back her skin.

She shivers. Her own skin is too much to give. She feels past the mirror in her pocket, holds out the only real image of her mother.

“What is this?”

“Where I come from.”

Everything slows. Inside the theater the orchestra is beginning. The man sinks into the chair by his desk, holding the photograph. Luna sees his breathing stop, resume.

“This is your mother?”

“She is called Mara Diego. She is singing tonight.” Luna points to the poster above his desk, the principessa.

His eyes follow briefly. She sees pain in them.

Luna sets the glass on the floor and clasps her hands between her knees. She thinks of her mother under the orchard trees, everything in nature stilled to listen to the silvery voice; takes a deep breath and lifts the thin blouse over her arms, lets the material fall to the floor in a light insubstantial heap.

The man slowly shakes his head. He picks up the blouse by her feet and brushes it clean.

“I will let you in. In exchange for this.”

The photograph disappears into the wooden box.



The seat is good, third row center. The room fills with murmurs and smells, heat from many bodies, people eager to see the last act. Luna presses back into her seat when her mother comes on stage. The white face, the gold and green Chinese robes, the exquisite black hair twisted into tall ropes, Peking City behind her.

“What is born each night and dies each dawn?” sings her mother. The moon, whispers Luna. Choose me. She doesn’t mind that her mother’s voice is as icy as it is passionate, that it cuts down hope like the executioner’s sword.

As her mother sings, as Luna cries, she closes her eyes and feels the rough blanket they lay on, imagines the pear trees of her father’s orchard, sees moonlight silver the field. She feels the mirror’s design pressed into her palm, but now she welcomes the pain.

The new prince answers two of the three riddles correctly. Turandot will soon lose herself, give up her passion for love. But she has not lost yet. “What is like ice but burns like fire?” she sings, giving the final clue to her soul; there is no hesitation. In the moment of fullness, the prince calls her name.

Before the final curtain, Luna slips outside. It has rained briefly, in the manner of tropical cities, and the night air is clear and fresh. A wind from the mountains cools the square. The fountain splashes, unceasing. She knows the way to the narrow side street, the familiar window warm against the darkness. She asks one more favor.

“You know the story,” the man says. “To see the princess means death. I have died many times.”

“Not death for the person who answers her riddles,” says Luna. “She must welcome that person. She must love her.”

The man inclines his head in acceptance. Light from his desk lamp illuminates the edge of his hair.



They make their way backstage, past huge sections of set—the balcony, the courtyard, the executioner’s platform. In a small dressing room, her mother sits at a mirrored table, sponging away layers of white make-up. Costumes lie on chairs and tables. A girl Luna’s age carefully examines each garment for tears, hangs them in the huge cloth-covered wardrobe.

The man clears his throat. “Mara.”

Her mother stares at him from the mirror, expressionless. She sees Luna’s reflection. Her hand slowly sets down the make-up sponge. “Thank you,” she says to the man.

Soon Luna is alone with her.

“I must finish this,” Mara says, and Luna nods. For long minutes her mother cleans her face. She wipes her hands, pats the skin under her eyes. She has not turned around, never once said Luna’s name. But her eyes never leave the reflection of Luna’s face. Finally she asks, “Did you like the opera?”

“It was very beautiful.”

“It is actually very sad.” Her mother gets up from the padded bench, gathers the hair streaming down her kimono, twists it into a loose knot. Finally, she comes over to Luna and places her hands on Luna’s cheeks. Luna closes her eyes, trying to recognize her own life in the smooth pressure of her mother’s palms.

Luna reaches into her pocket and pulls out the mirror. “I brought this for you.” She rubs its surface, trying to erase the tiny traces of tarnish. Turns it quickly in her hands, capturing light from the dressing table and transferring it to her mother’s face. Enchanting movement, dancing, beckoning.

When her mother reaches, clumsy, the mirror slips from their hands, bouncing once on the carpet, skittering against a table leg. Her mother bends to pick it up. It is scored with a tiny crack.



It is late when Luna leaves the opera house. Carisa is waiting, the only person in the square, the fountain splashing behind her in its everlasting

music. Luna walks slowly, her eyes on the cobblestones and the tiny scalloped shadows each makes from the brilliant moon.

Carisa holds out her arms. "Did you see her?"

Luna lets herself fall into the angles and edges of Carisa's body, but this time, unlike a day ago, their skin and muscles come together with a sigh rather than a noise like clattering bones. "She asked me to stay with her. Tomorrow she is going to Chicago. There is a place for me if I want to come."

Carisa tucks the loose strands of dark hair behind Luna's ear. Luna nestles herself deeper into the folds of Carisa's shoulder.

"That is what you wished for."

Luna thinks how her mother's face was unchanged after the make-up was sponged off. "She never said my name. Not once."

Carisa nods.

"Why did she beg me to stay, as if I have an answer for her?"

"You do."

Luna stares at the tumbling water, thinking. "I told her no. That was my answer."

"A good answer." Carisa reaches for Luna's hand, stroking the palm with thin fingers.

"It hurt."

"It will fade."

The moon is high in the sky now, whitening the heavens and only the strongest stars are visible. "Do you care if we walk home?"

"What choice do we have?" Luna answers.

Behind them the square of yellow flickers out and a heavy window shuts, the sound echoing hollowly in the empty square. Luna lifts an arm around Carisa's shoulders and they move away from the theater, toward the part of the city that never sleeps.