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Mia Golding dropped her boys off at their friend's loft and was free for a couple of hours. She hadn't been down in that part of town in years. She'd always known it as Little Italy but it didn't look much like the Little Italy she'd known. The streets were the same, of course, the buildings, the cemetery was still on Mott street, but the feel of the place was different. The old stores that had once been dark green and peeling were now all chrome and mirrors. The young toughs in their undershirts and their Neapolitan grandmothers sitting out on the stoops had been replaced by fashionable young people right out of the glossy magazines. The sidewalk market stands, where she could find them, were more Chinese than Italian. Bok choy and Mustard greens moving in, espresso and cannolis fading out. If Salumeria was still there on the corner of Mulberry and Grand she'd pick up some olive oil and a good crusty peasant bread. She turned into Hester Street and couldn't resist glancing up at her old apartment. She didn't feel nostalgic, only curious, when an impulse to check the bell drew her to the door. It too was different, yet familiar. Fresh red paint, a sharp new intercom and still the same old rippled glass of midnight blue in the transom.

Manny Orman. Hard to believe. His name was still on the buzzer after all these years. Manny still there. She stood with her finger poised over his name till her hesitation became ridiculous. She pressed the buzzer then wished she hadn't. What would she say?

A few feet away an old woman said something in Chinese to a doddering Italian prodding his cane at the curb. The man blinked.

A suspicious "Yes?" crackled through the intercom startling Mia.

"Hi, Manny. It's Mia, remember me?" She had to add that, even now, even with him, not completely sure of herself.

"Mia? No kidding. Hi, how are you?"

How fitting, that the first time she heard his voice in a dozen years it should be over some electronic device.

"I'm pretty good, thanks."

The old Italian man said: "Eh?"

"Wow. It's been a while."

“Yeah. You busy? You got a minute?”

“Oh, yeah ... yeah, sure, sure.”

He hesitated before buzzing her in.

Her voice disturbed Manny more than she knew. It broke his shell of protection, disrupted the predictable. He listened to the street door open, a sharp Chinese voice shouting, and then close with its familiar crash. She had sought him out after all these years. Why? She'd come to him. Why? He took his finger from the button feeling confused.

When they first met what Manny had loved about Mia was the way she cornered. Instead of giving walls and doors respectful distance, like anybody else, she'd walk straight at a corner as if she was going to smash right into it. And she'd be moving too. Chin out determination, hair piled-up in that academic bun spiked with pencils, her ankle length dress catching the snaps of her work boots. You'd think maybe she doesn't see it through those little wire frame glasses, that she's distracted. Then at the last possible instant - you'd already snatched your breath - her shoulder would dip and she'd swivel with toreador grace leaving the corner to shave the lint from her baggy sweater. It was a treat to watch her work the editorial offices up and down the corridor. Twisting, pirouetting. And the best part about it was she didn't have a clue she was doing it.

Mia paused as the door slammed behind her and took in the once familiar lobby. The light fixture was new and hideous. The stucco on the walls even more so. Mosaic tile, patterned and chipped, still covered the floor, and the smell of stale cooking still hung on the air. Even the stucco couldn't cover it. She set her hand on the worn cast-iron newel and looked up the walk-up, run-down, marble stairs.

What Mia had loved about Manny was that he wasn't like her. His energy for life was boundless with an appetite for novelty and the hip. She was a bookish recluse, an aesthete confident in ideas she was too shy to express. Shy of her own shyness. Manny was animated and opinionated about everything. If you could see him, gesticulating, but not hear him, you might think he was singing some impassioned song, throwing his arms about, popping his eyes. Mia liked to watch him at his desk working the phones. Impatient with their slowness he would stick his finger in and zip the dial around, then sit there mimicking, chicka, chicka, chicka - the sound of the dial slowly backpedaling to its original position. It was one of the happiest days of his life, the day they installed the touch tone phones.

Manny scuffed the stubble on his chin. Proust, that's who she loved, Marcel Proust. Manny made his way to the bathroom recalling her description of the writer in his cork lined room. He

examined his face in the mirror. It wasn't so bad, was it, he'd worn fairly well. Without his reading glasses all the small imperfections blended anyway. Her eyesight wouldn't be any better. All the reading she did she was probably half blind by now. He picked up his razor and turned it in his fingers. No time. He took the nail scissors instead and did a little trimming. Marcel Proust, now there was a firecracker.

What they had had in common was youth. Mia fresh out of college, idealistic and passionate about books. Himself not much older thinking about advertising. They worked for a small publisher, Mia as an editorial assistant, Manny in sales. Youth was a glue more flexible than binding. She stamped possessive ex libris in her books. He labeled his albums with permanent markers. They were still looking for who they were and who they wanted to be and they put on the Stones and danced beyond exhaustion.

Mrs. Armanti came fluidly to mind as Mia turned on the first landing. Mrs. Armanti the Mafia auntie. Manny named her the night they saw a fierce looking man, with an ominous bulge under his coat, hugging the mustachioed old lady 'good night'. The little crucifix was gone from her door. She'd be dead by now, Mrs. Armanti. He was fun, Manny, his wheels always spinning, constantly agitating for something new, something different. Trends or music or his bellbottoms. It's here, it's now - he was perfect for advertising. Mia felt a twinge of embarrassment for having given him Ulysses for his twenty-fifth birthday. She'd been thinking of Bloom and his advertising. Trying to change him. Manny bought himself one of the new calculators. An elegant black tablet that fit the palm of his hand and contained the state of the art technology.

"Look," he turned it in his hand, a jeweled amulet, mesmerizing. "It's magic ... amazing."

"For seventy-five dollars it does square roots?," she was the realist now. "You think you'll need a lot of square roots?"

"No. No I don't need it at all."

She was miffed. "So, what're you going to do with it, algebra?"

"I don't know. It's here, it's the future. It's better than magic."

She wanted to say something about it costing half the monthly rent, but he was already lost in logarithms.

Manny ran his hands through his hair - he preferred tousled to the neatly combed, it showed a sense of independence. He took a mouthful of Listerene and leaned back to gargle, Mia, Mia, Mia, Mia, Mia. She was so quiet. Silence is Golding. Delicate. Was that the right word? Very feminine despite the work boots, like some romantic pre-Raphaelite figure. But tough. Girl knew her mind. Quiet, tranquility was all she craved. To cook, to read. He'd tried to help her - get her out of herself, gave her plenty of ideas for books and magazine articles she could write. Too

introspective, never wanted do anything fun - just for the hell of it. Amazing they lasted as long as they did. It was the sex probably. They did have good sex. Is that what she has in mind?

Mia turned on the second landing. There was the hot night she sat up in bed and watched Manny fumble across the room by the light of the sulphurous street lamps.

"What time is it?" Her voice thick with sleep.

"Sorry, I wake you? It's about three."

"Three! Where were you?" Mia reached for bedside lamp. "It's four-thirty!"

"Really?" Manny sat on the bed pulling off his clothes. Sweat glistened on his body. "We went dancing at Studio 54. You should have come, I called you."

"You said you were going to dinner with the guys after softball."

"I did. We did. Wilenski's. Then Chuck said he could get us into Studio 54. It's really hard to get into that place, you know."

"What's it like?"

"Amazing. Wild. The whole place sorta throbs. The music's visceral, very physical. And flashing lights. Everybody in world's there. Celebrities... everybody."

"Like who?"

"I didn't actually see anyone, but Robbie said he saw lots."

Mia didn't say anything, and Manny slipped into the warm bed beside her. They made hot, sticky love the way you can when you're young, and he kept humming some repetitive dance tune.

When his head turned away he said: "Big night." and his breathing fell into a steady rhythm. Mia lay staring at the ceiling thinking of her own small evening with her book: *Against the Grain*.

A speck of color no bigger than a sesame seed caught Mia's eye. A tiny patch of the old paint the stucco man had failed to cover. How well she knew these stairs. How many times had she climbed them?

"If you have message for Mia Manny ... no, if you have a message for Ormanny Man ... Damn!"

Mia pulled her key from the door and closed it. Manny was at the table hunched over a gray plastic box, talking to it. "Hi, whatcha doing?"

"Tryin' to put a message on this answering machine."

"You got one? Boy, you didn't waste any time."

"Finger on the pulse. Never miss a call." Manny was with a promotional company now. "You want your full name or just Mia?"

"I don't get many calls."

"You'd get more if you made more."

"If you wish to receive letters, Mrs. Bennet," Mia rolled out her British imitation, including raised eyebrows. "You must wrrrite letters."

"Huh?"

"Jane Austin, P and P. Do I have to have my name in the message?"

"Of course, Jane Austin's right. You've gotta reach out, be receptive."

Even subconsciously would it be sex? It was some kind of need. Manny crumpled the potato chip bag and threw it into the waste basket. He loved junk food, Mia hated it - empty calories, she said. Manny was at ease with the sugar highs of his time. The technology, the noise, the clubs, the TV. He had a sense for every nuance of the candy caloric culture. Mia didn't. She seemed part of another generation or outside generations altogether. The night he brought home their first VCR she loved the movie but ignored the VCR completely. Even the remote, that magic keyboard of distant delights. Just another winking light in the corner, she said. It was the same when they brought in computers at work.

"Aren't they great?" Manny made expansive gestures. "Have they taught you how to use it yet?" Mia nodded enigmatically.

"I've learnt how to turn it on."

It was standing in front of the new ATM machine that Mia finally woke up to computers. It was ten o'clock at night, and she was withdrawing money from the bank and there was a line. A line. The surreal that Manny described of Studio 54 had spilled over on the outside world. Except these weren't fashion dupes, these were brittle-eyed young men and women in business suits talking fast and acting agitated. Computers had crept into her life without asking.

Mia paused a little, surprised by the climb, as a couple came out of the third floor apartment. Manny must be in good shape doing these five flights every day. She'd gained a little weight with the kids but this wasn't funny. The couple were young, tattooed and clothed in black with ringed ears - conformists to their age. They passed Mia their open fresh faces bickering with open animosity, and went down stairs holding hands still bickering.

Manny set up the new fax on top of the microwave as Mia watched with annoyance.

"Not there!"

"Why not? It's the only outlet."

"This is the kitchen. I cook here."

"But you hate the microwave.....and the fax for that matter, and the phone. What do you have against progress anyway?"

"I'm not so sure it is progress. I hate being forced to use something just because its available. What's the point?"

"You send documents instantly."

"I'm in no rush. I'll write a letter."

"C'mon. It's here, it's now, it's happening!"

"Well, I'm here and I'm now and I don't want it happening in my kitchen, thank you!"

Manny looked about the room they'd once shared now dominated by technology. Would she understand its male sparseness and simplicity. A world of elegant certainty. Problems irrefutably solved without the messy entanglements of emotional needs. She never did understand. She thought chips were something that came in a bag. Always home baking, reading some hundred year old book - out of touch, locked in the poet's Ivory tower of beautiful thoughts and agonizing self-doubt. There was no doubt here. Things were either on or off.

Mia looked for the broken newel on the fourth floor and saw it had been replaced by a cheap imitation. She used to say she'd been replaced by a computer. Or was it just the day that youth ran out? Coincidence? She had got a job in the editorial department of Metropolitan and was trying to tell Manny but he wouldn't shut up about his new computer. He spoke a new language that was all megabites and chips and semi conductors and switches and software and platforms and phasers and extensions that she didn't understand and didn't care to. The new mistress was a clay colored box which sat at the center of the room full of ram and rom and totally shameless. Manny hunched over her hour after hour pecking and mousing away, retrieving lost data in a cloud of static electricity. When she finally told him about the job at the museum his reaction was predictable:

"Hah! The perfect ivory tower for a recluse. You'll never see daylight again."

Manny tried to remember the year they split up. Was it the year cell phones came out or was it cable TV? He stood by the open door listening as her approaching shoes hit each marble step with a clap. How long ago. It seemed their relationship had taken place in the dark ages of LP's and rotary phones. After she left he'd used his time in a spree of short liaisons. Then one or two more serious, and then the serious business of business. How innovation stole time away. She was going to be impressed with his new set up. Cutting edge, there was nowhere he couldn't reach out to now. It was a whole new world of the net, interactive TV, fiber optics, things she probably never gave a thought to. And the money he was making - doing well. Or was she still immune to such worldly things?

Mia glanced up the last flight of stairs as she turned. For a year after they split up she buried herself in work at the museum. Then miraculously she found Tim. He worked in restoration. He wasn't the vibrant character that Manny was, which is probably why they married so quickly. And then the boys. The rowdy non stop madness they dished out every day. Work, kids, the house. A pretty humdrum life. Manny was probably zipping off round the world, too much of a pistol to be tied down. The here, the now, the just do it guy. The children had broadened her life. She wouldn't have missed that. Maybe Manny had kids, married some beautiful woman..

He was waiting at the door when she came round the final turn of stairs. He was a dozen years heavier, his features thickened, but that was to be expected. It was the look that caught her off guard, something vital was missing - vitality itself. They hugged and he aimed a kiss for her lips. Mia turned her cheek, she didn't know why, embarrassed by him, by herself, by time.

"So good to see you. Come in, you know the place. You look great."

"You too." It was the best she could do. He was still a good looking man without the sparkle, without the vibrancy. Mia was never good at empty compliments. She went ahead of him, her eyes darting, looking for signs of a partner, a child. "It's just you?"

"Yeah. Just me. My world."

Like returning to a childhood room the place seemed so much smaller than in memory. The studio apartment was never big but now it was filled with computers and TVs and other electronic devices whose purpose Mia could only guess.

"Control central." Manny sat in the office chair in front of the computer. "Got the whole world here at my fingertips. See that screen, that's the Nikkei the Japanese market. This one's the DAX in Frankfurt. The net, see? Work - play. Whole world's right here."

He looked proudly over his domain of humming screens and flickering diodes. Lounging back in the swiveling chair his pose accentuating the transformation of his body. The young man she'd known had turned soft and fleshy, his skin unwholesome and pale.

"Ooops, hang on." Manny lunged at the keyboard and furiously typed something then refocused on the Frankfurt screen. "Almost missed that." He said, then turned to the TV where a pretty anchor woman talked as the jumbled letters of the stock market ticker flowed beneath her face. "And there's my girlfriend."

"Really?" Mia came alive with disbelief.

"Not really, virtual. Everything's virtual. Everything I need, right here. No need to leave cyber space. It's a virtual world, Mia."

He watched his girlfriend. Mia looked from the screens to the room. It was unbearably cramped and neglected. The bed was disheveled, containers of coffee sat growing old on stacks of magazines, and through the kitchen door she could see pizza boxes piled on the counter. By her

feet a potato chip bag re-inflated itself in the waste basket. The disquieting whirl of the machines suffocated the room. A room too much lived in. The heavy air used, and re-used. The sky beyond the grimy unopened windows was a cloudless blue, and Mia knew that if she stood close to the wall she would be able to see the Empire State Building in the distance. How long ago had she done that? How things had changed. She couldn't find herself there in the room, had she ever lived there? They had outgrown their youth and become themselves. She turned to Manny motionless and still transfixed to the screen his hand hovering over the keyboard. He'd already forgotten she was there.