

Mona Lisa Summer

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That summer Nat Cole was singing Mona Lisa and Crosling met her on the fifteenth floor. Graduation a vague memory, he had his first job with a messenger service in the city. Not as glamorous as lifeguard or camp counselor or Stock Exchange trainee but Crosling loved it. He loved the rattle of the rush hour subway and the wide Manhattan streets, taking everything in, learning his city. Friends he'd grown up with never left their borough. Their six block piece of turf was the only city they'd ever know.

He traded tee shirts, dungarees and sneakers for pressed slacks, shined shoes, and white dress shirts, grateful he didn't have to wear a tie. His usually unruly brown hair was trimmed and combed. Running track in high school had built his stamina, made him lean and muscular, with strong legs. On good weather days he skipped public transportation to walk his rounds in a smooth, long legged stride.

At first the Park Avenue buildings overwhelmed him, but amused glances from people who never looked up made him feel like a tourist. He soon learned to look as if he belonged there, eyes fixed on street level.

The fifteenth floor was one of his regular stops, two or three times a week. He brought bulky manila folders to a retired eye specialist. A good tipper, the wispy white haired, leathery faced man never failed to remind Crosling to take care of his eyes. He rode the tiny elevator, whistling to drown out the fan's hollow whoosh and the motor's rumble and clank.

Having survived another trip without plunging into the basement, he sighed relief as the double doors creaked open. Crosling must have gaped because the woman's eyes widened for a moment in silent question. Then she smiled, eyes and mouth, without baring her teeth, and squeezed past him. Aware of his bad manners too late he jumped aside, banging his shoulder hard against the closing door. It groaned, reopened. Humiliated, he hurried down the silent, carpeted hallway to the doctor's apartment, his numbed mind filled with her image.

When he returned the doors were still open, a slim, long fingered hand holding the rubber edge. The smile was real. As they rode down Crosling held his breath and stole glances at her. He sensed that she was aware of his staring but he couldn't stop.

Her hair was rich auburn, center parted, falling to where her neck curved into her shoulders. She wore little makeup. A touch of lipstick, a hint of eye shadow. Her scent was light and airy, yet powerful enough in the closed spaced to dizzy him. In her sandals she was shorter than he, the top of her head level with his nose. A light summery dress bared her tanned arms and legs.

Before the doors opened he thrust his hand out and rammed his fingers against the hard rubber. Holding the door he gritted his teeth against the pain, his eyes watering. She floated past him, head tilted, eyes merry, that smile surrounding him. In a trance he followed through the lobby and into the street, his stare never wavering as she moved in no hurry down two blocks and around a corner.

He stood there stunned. A cab sped by, windows open, radio blaring. Nat Cole was singing his new hit song. The lyrics echoed through the city's din.

Crosling schemed for extra time, rushing through his other deliveries, going out of his way to pass by her building. He hounded the dispatcher early for afternoon assignments, skipped lunch with the other messengers in the dingy room next to the office and hurried to Park Avenue. After his workday, before crowds swept him down into the subway, he stood across the street peering through the sea of rush hour traffic for a glimpse of her. It was impossible, stupid, he told himself.

And then he saw her again.

She was opening a cab door but something made her pause and raise her head, looking directly at him across the gap in traffic, freezing him at the top of the subway stairs while people streamed around him. Her face tilted upward to bathe in slanted sunlight. He thought he saw that enigmatic smile. Then she was gone, the cab a yellow blur merging with sunlight and vehicles.

In the elevator there was a faint trace of her scent.

The old doctor was astonished to see him. Crosling was frantic without a package to deliver. His throat closed. Finally he blurted out a brief description, mumbled something about finding a bracelet in the lobby. The doctor stared at him, frowning. Crosling wanted to turn and run.

"Ah! You mean the missus Peredue, yass, there, down the hall at the end, a lovely lady. How are your eyes?"

The long hallway seemed to close in on him the closer he got to its end. Her door and the nameplate under the bell loomed too large. He stepped back. Z Peredue. The missus, the doctor had called her. She was married. Crosling stood transfixed, staring at the foreign name. The doctor's door slammed, a gunshot in the hallway quiet, making him flinch. He heard the click of the peephole opening and he ducked down, turning, hugging the wall as he duck-walked all the way to the elevator.

She came out of the building with two young children, girl and boy, both with dark eyes and silky black hair. There was a man with the same dark eyes and a thick black

mustache curling downward. A receding fringe of hair clung to his head. He was short, stretching up to kiss her cheek.

Crosling wanted to laugh. What kind of competition was this balding midget with the cartoon mustache? He caught his breath. Husband and children were inside a cab, waving. She stood waving, then turned back to the building. Crosling sprinted forward to hold the door. She smiled that maddening smile but gave no sign of recognition.

In the elevator he lost himself in her scent. Before he could stop himself he had whispered "Mona Lisa". She turned, eyebrows arched. He blurted an explanation about the song, about seeing her that first time, while he mocked his words in his head. He wasn't even certain she understood him.

Her half smile was fixed and her eyes glinted, then glistened with what he thought were tears. Without a word she leaned into him and brushed her lips against his. The doors opened. She pressed a slender finger to her lips, motioned to him to hold the elevator, and left. He couldn't have moved; he was stone, his mouth tingling where her lips burned. He listened, straining to hear some movement. The door kept banging into his rigid hand.

She returned at last and when the doors closed she leaned into him again, offering her mouth. He kissed her. Explosions danced behind his eyes. He couldn't hold or touch her. His arms hung numb at his sides. She stepped back just before the doors opened. The lobby was empty. Crosling leaned against the back wall, legs rubbery. When he finally recovered enough to lurch out into the street she was turning the corner.

Smile not quite a smile, dark dark eyes, finger pressed to lips. These things defined her and confounded him. Was she a mute? Did she not understand English? He didn't care. She had kissed him. Twice. The first was an offer, he was sure. We're making a mysterious pact. The second was his agreement to follow wherever she led.

"Danny?"

They were sitting on the schoolyard steps near the corner basketball court. The night lights from the barbershop and the cleaners across the street illuminated the backboard and rim where Crosling had spent so many nights shooting baskets to improve his aim. It seemed so long ago now. He could see Ceil's dull blonde hair, cut short for the summer, but not her shadowed face.

"What?"

"You aren't even listening to me!"

"Uh---sorry."

Her voice was a pout. She seemed to pout a lot lately, not that he blamed her. He hadn't been good company. The old neighborhood seemed alien to him. By end of summer he'd be gone.

"Are we going to the dance tomorrow night, I asked."

"I don't know---I gotta work, I might get back late." He lied without thinking, his mind filled with the image of the elevator and her light summery dress.

"Everybody says you changed since you started working," Ceil said in a low voice, "like you don't want to know your friends anymore."

"Everybody, everybody!," he shouted. "Never get off this block, never get outta this neighborhood, they have no idea there's a world on the other side of the bridge! I have to work, I need the money if I'm gonna go to college in the fall! Everybody! What the hell do they know about it, nothing!"

"What's wrong, Danny?" Her face moved from shadow into the light. He saw the tears.

Crosling just shook his head.

Manhattan was less frantic, with fewer people. He was surprised at the Saturday calm, the mood of unhurried ease. The day was his, no job to steal his precious time, no need to snatch free minutes when he could. He strolled the block across from her building, glancing up at the windows. He saw figures. Was she watching for him, waiting for him to come? A policeman stood on the corner. Crosling shrunk, trying not to look suspicious, trying not to look as if he didn't belong there. He strode to the corner, waited for the light, crossed the street. He felt the cop's eyes drilling into his back but kept going into the building.

The elevator, as familiar as his room. He closed his eyes, swaying to the sluggish motion, inhaling what he was convinced was a trace of her scent, feeling her presence stirring the air.

And then the doors slid open and there she was, lips parted in surprise, one eyebrow arched in question. He opened his mouth but her eyes narrowed in warning. Yelps of laughter boomed in the hallway. The children barged in, joyous, chattering about the park, the zoo, balloons, ice cream. He fell back against the wall as if pinned there. The husband appeared, the competition, looming between the closing doors which he stopped with a deft hand. Crosling held his breath, burrowed into the wall, stared at the floor. The children went quiet, clinging to their father's legs, shooting shy glances at the stranger.

Your wife and I are in love, you bastard, let her go, you can have the kids.

The man paused, held the door, looked at Crosling, then shrugged and let it close and pressed the down button. Silence expanded like a bubble. Crosling sweated, kept his eyes on the backs of her feet. She had moved in front of him as if to shield him from her family. Crosling blocked out the husband and children. He concentrated on her, so close, standing erect, hands clasped behind her. He breathed in the scent of her hair, grazed her hands with his. Instantly her fingers found his, skittered along his skin, rubbing his palm and the hollow between his thumb and forefinger. He swayed with the thrill of her touch.

The lobby. They filed out. As the door closed behind him he bent down as if to tie his shoe. He was still too close to them as he left the building and he turned in the opposite direction, picking up speed.

"---seen him around here before---" The midget's voice was high pitched with a heavy accent. Crosling didn't hear her reply.

At the next corner he dodged traffic to get to the other side and follow them. He watched the husband to see if he would turn around, watched the children dart back and forth between their slow moving parents. At last he felt safe enough to concentrate on her. He ducked into shop doorways on the street, peeked out from behind boulders or trees in the park, followed her along the winding paths, stayed close to knots of people in the zoo and the skating rink. She stood out in her bright colored dress, arms and legs bare, dusky olive, hair shimmering in the sunlight.

Their song played everywhere, on passing car radios and portable radios in the park, the lyrics a stereo echo drifting through the air.

She knew he was following. She would pause and glance back, sometimes shading her eyes from the sun glare, sometimes sweeping her gaze in a long slow arc. Once he waved to her. She didn't wave back, of course, but lowered her head in what he took to be recognition.

And later that afternoon he followed them back, waited until they were inside the building. Waited, his heart hammering. He took the elevator to her floor. He held the door. Waited.

Door slam, steps coming toward him. She stood there, smiling that Mona Lisa smile, finger to her lips. Inside she pressed the down button and turned to him. In a daze he took her in his arms and kissed her and was pulled into the whirlpool of her reaction. Her tongue was in his mouth, her hands tangled in his hair, her body glued to his. His erection was swift. She ground her pelvis into his. When she broke the embrace he was trembling, breathing hard. They were in the lobby. With a quick glance outside she pressed her floor button and they were off again, kissing, rocking to the car's motion. He felt it building, tried to warn her, but she clung fiercely, grinding, thrusting in mock coitus. He moaned into her demanding mouth as he ejaculated. The doors opened. He slumped against the wall, exhausted, drained, legs rubbery. She glanced down at his crotch, waggled her slim fingers, smiled and was gone.

Up, down, up and down, summer passing, the song everywhere. Crosling expected to hear it piped into the elevator. Up. Down. Just pressing the button charged him, sent his blood coursing, dizzied him. Before his hand dropped to his side he was aroused. And she was there, enigmatic smile, finger to lips, bright summer dresses and sandals. With each trip her boldness grew. She set the pace, getting more daring, and he followed her lead. He was content just to hold her until the day she reached down between them to touch him, caress him through his slacks. He climaxed quickly, stunned. When they met again she let him fondle her breasts but he backed away, afraid of his passion. She sighed, leaned her head back, and guided his hands.

One day she came in and drew down the peasant blouse to expose her bare breasts. Crosling could do nothing but stare all the way down. On the trip back she moved closer and brought his hands to her cool flesh. He devoured her, thrilled at the way her wine dark nipples stiffened and the way she moaned low in her throat. At her floor she held the door open while she rewarded him. Her hand was swift, urgent.

He lived in the elevator. The days he worked, weekends, he rode up and down, waiting. He saw less of his neighborhood friends and Ceil. He waited for glimpses of her, waited for what she might do next. She didn't disappoint him. She stopped wearing a bra. Her skirts were shorter and she would raise the hem slowly, revealing bare legs, raised it higher, higher, and she would smile at his gasp as he gaped at her dark pubic thatch.

He was dimly aware of the danger of being caught, of the risks they were taking, but he couldn't stop. She was unconcerned. She had the uncanny ability to sense trouble, moving away, rearranging her clothes, cool and calm just as the doors opened to admit another passenger. She would smile or nod but keep silent. They looked at him but he refused to meet their curious gazes, his hands clasped in front of him.

Obsessed, he thought of nothing else but running to the building. And she was there, that smile pulling him. The doors closed. She unzipped him, freed him, grasped him, lifted her skirt, pulled him closer. He cried out as flesh pressed to flesh. She moved against him. The elevator stopped, the doors opened. He didn't care who was there, the whole world could be there, as he exploded against her belly. She held the door as he staggered back, gasping. She dug into his pocket for his handkerchief and calmly wiped the semen from her glistening skin and tucked it back in his pocket. She kissed his mouth, a sweet, lingering kiss. The doors closed.

The job was over but he didn't care. He had more time to spend with her. He wasn't thinking about college. He ran, ran, and stopped. There was a bright yellow moving van idling at the building entrance, behind it a dark green station wagon. The two children were laughing, their arms out the window waving, their faces raised toward the corner window on the fifteenth floor. Their father laughed too, mustache drooping, as he

gestured them back inside. On the passenger side a bare arm rested across the back of the driver's seat. Crosling stumbled forward just as the van moved and the wagon followed. He stood in the gutter as they turned right at the light, slowing in the heavy traffic. Her head turned and she looked back, her face framed in the window, her dark eyes finding him, and that smile, that smile---

"Danny wait, come on, wait!"

Ceil tried to keep up with his long legged strides up the steep sloping bridge walkway. At last he stopped in the center of the bridge and leaned his arms on the railing. To their right was Brooklyn, to their left Manhattan, below the river in late summer twilight. A tugboat moved in slow motion toward the bridge, pushing two barges filled with garbage. An elevated train rumbled just below the walkway.

Ceil stopped next to him, out of breath, and glanced at the record he held. Crosling followed her eyes and seemed surprised to see it. He slipped it out of its jacket, crumpling the paper into a tight ball. He flung it behind him onto the walkway. A light breeze skidded it along the railing. Crosling stepped back and cocked his arm. The record sailed out in a long lazy arc and plummeted down toward the tugboat. For a moment Ceil lost sight of it in the distance and then saw it just before it hit the water far from the tug. She turned back to Crosling, head tilted in question.

He gave her a grin, put his hand on her shoulder. "Never did like that damn song. Come on, let's go back, hang out awhile with the gang."

They held hands all the way back across the bridge.