

The Telescope

by Ben Loory

The man meets a woman while out on his lunch break. She seems nice; they strike up a conversation. Before leaving, the woman gives the man her telephone number. The man goes home and thinks about it.

It's been a long time since he's been on a date.

The man calls up the woman and asks her out. They go to the movies. It is a lot of fun. The next day they have dinner, and then go for a long walk.

The man really likes the woman.

Then she invites him up to her place.

The man walks into the woman's apartment and immediately stops short. The place is beautiful-- warm, comfortable, homey. The woman goes to fix drinks in the kitchen.

The man wanders around, through the various rooms. There are so many things to admire. Books, paintings, carpets, sculptures-- Then the man sees the telescope.

It is set up by the window, looking out over the city.

The telescope bothers the man. He stands there and stares at it for quite a long time.

Then the woman enters with drinks on a tray.

The man and the woman drink their drinks in silence.

Is there something wrong? the woman says.

Wrong? says the man. What could be wrong?

I don't know, says the woman. You're very quiet.

The man stares at his drink.

I don't feel good, he says. I think maybe I should go home.

Oh no, says the woman.

It's okay, says the man. I'm sure I'll be fine in the morning.

The man drives home and goes straight to bed. He lies there, thinking about the telescope. He remembers a movie he once saw on TV, about a man who spied on his neighbors.

I bet she uses her telescope for the same thing, he thinks. She probably does. What else would she do with a telescope? That's really all there is.

He gets out of bed and goes to the window. He stands there, looking out at the city.

There, he thinks, somewhere in the distance, she's standing there looking at me.

He draws the shade.

The next day, in the afternoon, the telephone rings. It is the woman; she wants to know if he's okay. The man assures her he just has a cold.

I'll call you this weekend, he says.

But when the weekend rolls around, the man does not call her, and does not answer the phone when it rings. The phone rings more and more, and then more and more, so the man unplugs it from the wall. In his mind, the man pictures the woman in her apartment, at the telescope, with the telephone in her hand. She's gazing down at his drawn shade, angrily dialing away.

Why won't she just leave me alone? the man thinks. Why won't she leave me alone?

Then the knocking starts on the door. The banging, and the calling out, and the pleading.

Are you in there? the woman says. Are you in there? Are you in there?

The man hides in the bathroom. He doesn't answer.

The woman keeps coming back-- and coming back, and coming back-- and knocking and knocking at the door.

One night the man wakes up to find someone's breaking in his

window.

Leave me alone! the man screams and screams. Go away! Just go away!

Some time goes by. The telephone stops ringing. There is no more knocking at the door. There is no calling out, no scraping at the window.

The man feels better-- much better.

The man goes back to work-- shaky but resolved. Lunchtimes are hard-- he's scared he might see her. But he stays away from the places they went, and he never speaks to anyone.

Months go by.

The man opens the shade.

For a while, everything's fine.

And then one day there's a knock on the door.

Delivery, says a voice. Open up.

The man opens the door.

There's a stranger on the doorstep.

I'm a lawyer, the stranger says. I'm delivering this package. It was left to you by the late Sylvia Archer.

Sylvia Archer? says the man.

He sees the woman in his mind.

Yes, says the lawyer. I'm not sure if you're aware-- she killed herself a few months back. Now if you don't mind, this is actually very heavy.

He sets the package down on the floor.

When the lawyer is gone, the man locks the door. Then he stands and looks down at the box. He feels frightened, confused. He doesn't know what to do.

He reaches out and opens it up.

Inside the box is the telescope.

The man stands staring down at the telescope. Then he lifts it out of the box. He walks to the window, carefully sets it down, then raises the shade and points it out.

He peers into the viewfinder and is amazed by what he sees: a whole bright sun-filled world. His eye wanders over all of the buildings, across the parks and the people and the cars.

And after a while, his gaze drifts to a building-- an apartment building some distance away. The circular image in the viewfinder comes to rest on a window near the top.

There, inside-- in a warm, comfortable room-- a man accepts a drink from a woman. The two of them laugh, and smile at each other, and then move to a nearby telescope.

The woman reaches out and shows the man how to work it. And then, as one, they peer through. And their combined gaze falls directly on the man.

The man in his apartment, below.

Their gaze hits the man like a slap in the face. He staggers back and falls to the ground. The dead woman's telescope teeters off balance, and crashes down to the floor.

The man skitters backward-- feet flailing wildly-- and crawls into the bathroom, where he hides.

In the other room, the phone starts to ring.

The phone rings all through the night.

