

“Aperture of Love”
by Peter DeWolf

Her overloaded car comes to a stop in front of her new apartment building.

Finally.

The drive was long. The Hanson songs sung along with, many. The bathroom stops, incalculable.

She gets out of her car and stretches.

The search for a yoga studio quickly moves up her mental to-do list.

The sun is shining and it is unseasonably warm.

A small dog saunters up towards her, wagging his stubby tail.

She crouches down and smiles at the pup.

“Hi, boy. Hi.”

She exhales slowly and thinks about how this is a pretty ideal arrival at her new home.

Then the puppy lifts his leg and pees on her shoe.

The sheer volume of belongings she has removed from the car, and placed in her new living room, would make an amazing commercial for the interior space of a mid-sized Nissan. Or one for back pain meds.

Her furniture and larger items had already been shipped and were waiting for her. But still.

She snags a bottle of water from her fridge and finds a spot on her couch to sit down.

She looks around.

She takes a swig of the water.

She looks around again.

She wonders if dozens of cardboard boxes scattered around are a legit decorative style.

She delicately presses the thumbtack into the cork board.

She takes a step back and looks at it. She nods. Satisfied.

The entire wall is filled with photos and writing. Various boards with distinct themes. Beautifully and meticulously laid out.

“In-person Pinterest! I’m a friggin’ genius.”

She steps forward and adjusts one of the photos, laughing to herself that she can never admit just how much time she spent working on this.

“Tell me that I spend too much of my life online?” she mutters to herself. “I can totally entertain myself without the Internet.”

She looks at it. She grabs her phone off the table and snaps a pic of her handiwork.

She stands there. She taps her foot, “now what?”-style.

“Oh! I’ll post it on Pinterest!” she says, selecting the app on her phone.

The names of all the people she’s been introduced to this morning have already been forgotten. She has a great memory, but the sheer number of them won out. She’ll get there eventually.

Her office is a decent size. Spartan, but she’ll make it her own.

She spins around in her chair.

“It must be nearly lunchtime.”

She checks the time on her computer.

9:45 am.

The break room fridge door opens and she sticks her head in.

Her bag of carrots doesn’t float her boat.

Or blow her skirt up.

Or scratch her where she itches.

She closes the fridge door, while thinking about how strange those expressions are.

Something pink catches her eye. She doesn’t want to turn to look, but she does.

A beautifully decorated cardboard box.

She knows before she knows. And yet...

She opens it.

Cupcakes as far as the eye can see!

Or, you know, four rows by three rows.

The chocolate one with white frosting and silver sprinkles stares at her.

She closes the box.

She turns away.

She turns back.

She hesitates.

She shakes her fist skyward. Maybe at the people in accounting on the third floor.

Finally she just opens the box and gloms the magical sugary confection.

She dances around, a little, munching on the cupcake.

She notices a flyer tacked to the bulletin board.

A group yard sale in a suburb she could find. Most likely.

She hmms.

Garden Gnomes creep her out. Their eyes follow her everywhere she goes. If pressed, you might get her to admit her secret fear that they'll come to life and gnaw on your Achilles tendon.

She looks at broken candle stick holders, mismatched salt and pepper shakers, the world's largest selection of Archie Comics, and an ancient couch, presumably held together by nothing but stains and regret.

The sun and all of it's brightness is just beginning to annoy her when she notices the lamps.

They're not particularly nice. Too old to be new. Too new to be "old." They exist somewhere in between. Like Courtney Cox.

The home-owner lady appears out of nowhere.

"You like the lamps, eh?"

“Maaaaybe.”

“Twenty-five bucks,” home-owner lady tells her.

“I don’t think I twenty-five bucks like them.”

“You’re single, aren’t you?” h-o l, asks.

“Am I wearing a sign?”

“Tell you what I’ll do... twenty-five bucks for the lamps and I’ll throw in this amazing telescope.”

“Ehh. Not much of a star-gazer. Twenty bucks for the lamps.”

“Fiiiiine. Twenty bucks... and I’ll throw in the telescope.

“You can keep the telescope,” she says.

“You want the telescope,” h-o l, says.

“We’re saying telescope a lot.”

“Take the telescope.”

“Did this telescope hide you from the Nazis?”

“Trust me... woman to woman. TAKE the telescope.”

“I think I’m going to take the telescope. But only because I fear this sale will devolve into bare-knuckle boxing if I don’t.”

“You won’t regret this,” home-owner lady assures her.

“You frighten me.”

There are three types of wine in her world: 1) yummy, 2) “I’ll just give this away as a gift” and 3) I wonder if licking the floor will get this taste out of my mouth.

This one tastes somewhere between 1 and 2 to her. It’ll do.

Her phone chirps from under her blanket. She sees that it is a text from Stacy. A new girl she works with.

And she shouldn’t be confused with Stacey in payroll or Staci in marketing.

Stacey and Stacy are in a feud over what one of them said at the company Christmas party. Or what one of them wore. Or how many covers of Rhianna’s “Umbrella” (ella ella) are too many covers.

She finds it odd that Staci seems to be the least slutty one.

“We R at bar i told you bout. cum out !”

“That makes me sad,” she says.

She looks at her bunny slippers and hole-filled jammy pants.

“Oh screw it.”

She downs her wine and gets off the couch.

Five steps inside the bar, she felt dirty.

Ten seconds after she arrived, she decided that the best way to describe the decor is “Late 80s Douche.”

Fifteen “Woooooos!” have exploded from Stacy and the Stacettes since she’s been there.

Twenty bucks is what she’ll tip the cabbie outside to get her butt home before “Say Yes to The Dress: Big Bliss” comes on..

There are only so many walls you can place a couch against in a rectangular room. She’s tried them all. Twice.

Her sore back has decided that it’s current location is far and away the best one.

She looks over at the telescope in the corner.

Maybe it wouldn’t be so bad if people thought she cared at all about the outside world.

She picks it up and carries it over to the patio door. She points it skyward and takes a gander.

“Hey! Stars! Quelle surprise.”

She randomly moves the telescope around, not focusing on much of anything. Until...

A well-lit, and under-curtained apartment catches her attention.

Maybe it wasn’t so much the apartment as the tall unshaven man with messy hair.

She can tell that he’d been wearing a baseball cap all day.

He’s eating organic cereal for dinner and watching some television program about the history of space exploration.

She finds that impossibly charming.

Then she realizes that she's watching someone through a telescope.

She takes a step back.

"I can't be telescope-girl."

She holds one hand over her head, palm parallel to the ceiling.

She jumps. She spins.

The Backstreet Boys beseech some girl, or girls, to stop playing games with their respective hearts.

Seems a fair request.

She jumps. She spins. She sings.

She stops.

"Hmmm. I hope nobody is watching ME with a telescope."

She shrugs.

She jumps. She spins. She sings.

The song ends and she falls on the couch.

Her cheeks are a little pink. He hair is a little messy.

She looks across the room.

"I'm not going to do it. I'm not. It's creepy. I'm not going to do it."

She quickly hops up and walks to the telescope.

"I'm only going to do it a little."

She's eating a Taco Bell burrito as she stares through the telescope.

"Is he singing? He's singing something!"

Judging by all the food wrappers lying about, she's made many runs for the border.

She reaches up and adjust the tiara on her head.

She notices a framed photo of the cutest little girl she's ever seen in his apartment. The girl is in a wheelchair and laughing so hard.

She awwwwws.

Then a burp slips out. Loud.

She covers her mouth quickly, before she realizes he can't actually hear her.

She burps again.

"Am I talking to myself a lot more than I used to?"

She looks at herself in the mirror.

"Naw."

She moves one of the seven pillows and sits on her bed.

She holds her phone. She debates.

She scrolls through her contact list. She stops at "Amanda."

Her thumb gently touches the "phone" icon.

It dials. As phones do.

Ring. Ring. Ring.

A chipper female voice answers, "Hi!"

"How're you?"

"Good good. Haven't talked to you in forever," Amanda says.

"I know. Sorry. Still settling in."

"And how's that going?"

"Ehhh. Okay. There may be a boy..."

"A boy?!" Amanda yells.

"Yup."

"Tell me more. What's his name?"

“Not sure.”

“What’s he do?”

“I haven’t figured that out yet.”

“Does he like you back?” Amanda asks hopefully.

“I think he would...”

“You sound like the perfect couple.”

“Here’s the thing... I’ve only seen him through the telescope.”

“I think we have a bad connection,” Amanda says.

“No. You heard me right.”

“So you’ve only seen him through... a telescope?”

“Yesssss,” she replies, leaning forward and hitting herself in the head with a pillow.

“Have you seen his... you know?” Amanda asks.

“His what?”

“You know...”

“Are you making suggestive eye brow-raising faces right now?”

“Yup,” Amanda replies.

“On the phone?”

“Yup...”

“Okay.”

“But have you?” Amanda asks.

“No! It’s not about that. I’m not a Peeping Tomasita. This is about finding a soul mate. Finding my other half. Finding love in a world that sometimes seems so determined to keep us alone. It’s about happiness and truth.”

“I’m sorry. I--”

“And his shower is on the other side of the apartment.”

She watches him sweep his floor. Noting the thoroughness.

He suddenly stops and walks over to the door leading to his balcony. He steps outside and bends over.

He picks something up.

She strains to see what's in his hand.

A little bird!

It's a little bird.

He holds the bird gently in one hand, while removing his plaid shirt with the other. He fashions it into a nest on his table, and gently places the bird in it.

"Oh come on..." she whispers, with the goopiest of looks on her face.

She pushes her coffee mug aside and places the clipboard on the table.

She looks through the telescope.

"I like that shirt."

She reaches for the coffee, without breaking from the telescope, and takes a sip.

"Rinses dishes before putting them in the dishwasher."

She stops looking through the telescope, for a moment, grabs the clipboard and jots down a few notes.

She turns her attention back to him again.

"He's regular. Good. Good. He takes his Kindle Fire to the bathroom. NEVER borrow the Kindle Fire."

She loves her mittens.

She's never understood people who prefer gloves. Why separate fingers? They're warmer if you keep them together. Finger solidarity!

She loves her mittens. And she really appreciates them today.

If she made a list of the proudest moments of her life, standing outside of his apartment building in freezing weather wouldn't be on there

Unless they have the cutest meeting in the history of cute meetings.

Maybe he's a mitten guy too.

He looks like a mitten guy. All tall and secure in his masculinity.

The cold does nothing to shrink her smile.

She expects him to come out any minute now.

She likes her hat.

It just about matches her mittens.

She pulls it down further over her ears.

He didn't leave at the same time this morning.

Maybe he's sick, she muses. The very thought makes her sad. She wonders if she has her mother's soup recipe.

Her mother would not approve of what she's doing right now. But her mother doesn't approve of much, really. Boys. The cold. Making the first move. Rainbows.

He's not sick, she decides. He's just given himself a morning off because he works so hard. He deserves it.

She expects him to come out that door any minute now.

Maybe.

She hates her coat.

She went with style over substance when she bought it.

She touches a frozen mitten to her nose, to make sure it's still there.

She feels like Luke Skywalker on the frozen planet of Hoth.

See? What guy wouldn't love a girl who makes such references, she asks herself.

It seems to be getting colder, as the sun begins to slide down behind the skyline.

She decides he's not coming out that door.

She begins a slow walk home.

She hugs the mug of coffee between drinks.

After a hot bath, and wearing just about every article of clothing that she owns -- like Joey did to Chandler! - she is beginning to warm up.

Almost.

She looks over at the telescope.

And she starts laughing.

She stood outside all day. In the freezing cold. For a complete stranger.

She pushes the four blankets aside and gets off the couch.

She picks up the telescope. She walks over to the closet, opens the door, and places the it inside. She closes the door and stands there for a moment.

She walks over to the couch, grabs her laptop and has a seat.

She types "match.com"

It's almost as though her clothes know how little she wants to go on this date, and are refusing to hang flatteringly on her body.

Her make-up was applied with more speed, and less care, than ever before.

Her hair looks like she just woke up from a nap. Hanging upside down. In a hurricane.

And she doesn't care.

"Coming up next: A Full House marathon" teases from her TV speakers.

She turns slowly. Her eyes light up for the first time all day.

She considers it. She really considers it.

But she promised. She made a commitment.

And really, she wonders, how bad could it go?

There are times in our lives that change us.

On a profound level.

Forever.

You go in full of optimism, hope and belief in your fellow humans.

And then.

Then you see the darkness that can live in a man's soul.

It shakes you. No matter who you are, or how ready you think you are, it shakes you.

His dream dinner party includes Sarah Palin.

And she wishes to never speak of it again.

She hits "publish" on a blog post.

It says:

Being alone kinda sucks.

Within two hours, she has 437 comments agreeing with her.

Her bedroom door hitting the wall causes her to sit straight up in bed.

She tries to blink her eyes into focus.

Light pours in from the hallway.

And she sees the telescope sitting there.

Then it starts walking towards her.

"What kind of mushrooms were in that salad?" she mutters.

The telescope starts dancing and swinging its "arms."

And signing.

"I know you're thinking
what you're doing is shady,
but if you don't find love
you'll be a cat lady.

sleeping alone again
watching a telescope dance and sing
sit me back up at the window

you can't wait for Ryan Gosling."

The telescope stops. It bows.

And it walks out of the room.

"Was that the Macarena?" she asks herself outloud.

"Yes!" comes from the living room.

The telescope is back at the window.

And she is looking through it again.

She has her dinner sitting next to her on the table.

He's eating his dinner too.

"How was your dinner dear?... Oh really? A promotion? That's fantastic... You saved a bus full of nuns from going over a cliff? Oh that sounds like you... Me? Shucks. This old shirt? Thanks, love..."

She notices a little food on his cheek and actually reaches for a napkin. She catches herself.

"You'd think I'd feel more ashamed about that," she says to herself.

"I can do this," she tells her reflection.

She's what one might call "all gussied up." You know, if "one" was your grandmother.

She notices a wrinkle in the front of her shirt. She grabs her still-hot hair straightener and irons it out.

She feels like the lovechild of MacGyver and Martha Stewart.

She wonders if she could make potato salad that would break her out of a Cambodian prison camp.

"Okay. Focus. I absolutely can do this. I'm just going to walk over there. I'm going to knock on the door. I'm going to pretend I'm looking for someone named Martha. I'll say 'You don't look like Martha... Maybe a little around the eyes' and he is going to find me positively charming. He's going to like me. I'm sweet. I'm cute. And my ass is so nice it could start a war. I can do this!"

She nods to herself in the mirror.

She walks quickly through the lobby of his building and right into the elevator.

She pushes a button. The door closes.

The door opens and she walks back out.

She stops.

“I CAN do this.”

She turns and walks back into the elevator.

She pushes a button. The door closes.

Her heart beats loudly in her ears as she moves her little fist towards the door.

She stops it.

She takes a deep breath.

And she knocks.

Then she waits.

And waits.

“But... You were just home four minutes ago.”

She knocks again. Harder. There’s not much room in her petite body for patience.

She notices how oddly dirty the door is.

“Weird...”

One thing her body DOES have room for is nosiness. She tries the knob. It’s unlocked. She slowly opens the door.

“Hello...?”

Nothing.

She pushes it open all the way and is shocked by what she sees.

Shelves. Lined with products.

This is not the apartment she sees through the telescope. This is not an apartment at all.

She leaves and closes the door. She goes to the door to the left of this one. She opens it and sees the same kinds of things. Cleaning supplies. Dozens of rolls of toilet paper.

She tries the door to the right of the first one. It is completely empty.

She is beyond confused.

The elevator doors open to the lobby, and it takes her a few seconds to get out.

She wanders aimlessly until she spots the building directory on the wall. She rushes over to it.

She traces her finger along the listing for his floor. Industrial supplies (and lax security.) No apartments.

No apartments on any of the floors.

She just stands there.

A custodian with a floor polisher works around her.

Car horns honk, but they sound a million miles away.

Every pedestrian seems to be walking in the opposite direction of her.

She steps off the curb and into a deep, cold puddle.

She doesn't even notice.

She walks into her apartment, drops her coat on a chair and misses.

She walks to the fridge, pulls out wine and takes a swig from the bottle.

The springs protest as she plops down hard on the couch, and leans her head back.

She sits up again.

The telescope stares at her.

She shakes her head.

Another swig of wine.

On auto-pilot, she gets up off the couch and walks over to the telescope.

She hesitates for a moment. Then another.

Finally she looks through it.

She recoils immediately.

It's him.

It's there.

Here's there.

She grabs the telescope and runs to the closet. She opens the door and throws it in.

The knock at her door makes her cringe.

Not because she dislikes people. Well not just because she dislikes people.

They're interrupting her during You've Got Mail.

She presses pause on the DVD, but keeps reciting the dialogue as she walks over to the door.

"The Godfather is the sum of all wisdom. The Godfather is the answer to any question," as she looks through the peephole.

She recoils quickly.

Her mouth is wide open.

She hesitantly steps forward and looks again.

It is him.

Him.

Him.

It is him.

She blinks and blinks.

It is still him.

She opens the door slowly.

“Hi,” he says, with a smile that almost makes her weep.

“Hi,” she replies, as much a question as anything else.

“I just moved in next door.”

“Okay...”

“I know I’m a stranger. And this is the city. But I swear I’m not a creep or anything. I just... Here’s the thing... My wireless won’t be installed until tomorrow morning. I would love to borrow your wifi a little. See, if I can’t set my fantasy football line-up, I will be subjected to a kind of mocking the likes that has never been seen in the history of the world.”

“We can’t have that,” she says, trying to regain her composure.

“I’ll owe you huge.”

“One problem... I have a very embarrassing password.”

“How bad?” he asks.

“Bad.”

“I won’t judge. I got conned into watching Twilight.”

“Worse.”

“Really?”

“Really,” she assures.

“I’m intrigued and mildly terrified.”

“I’ll go to your apartment and type it in for you.”

“Sure. I’m only *mildly* terrified.”

He opens the door, and leans against it as he ushers her inside.

She stops immediately.

She sees the photo of the cute little girl in the wheelchair in the exact same spot.

On the exact same table.

IN THE EXACT SAME ROOM.

“I know. I just moved in yesterday. I’ve been up since six a.m. moving in. I hate boxes everywhere.”

She nods. Sort of.

It’s all there.

Everything.

“Oh I’m a terrible host. So sorry. Would you like a dri--?”

“YES.”

Craigslist fills her laptop screen. She types.

“To Give Away: One AMAZING telescope. Ladies, you need this telescope. No. You need this.”

She hits “Post.”

She looks up at him sitting at the end of the couch, warming her feet under a blanket. He smiles at her. Her face lights up completely.

He turns backs to the TV and whispers along with the movie.

“Don’t cry, Shopgirl. Don’t cry.”