Under the Mango Tree

 It was hot and I was bored but I kept on sitting in the bushes by the fence and watching through them. I was hoping one of the neighbors would come out. I didn’t want them to see me, of course. I just had to keep looking.

 I fidgeted, occasionally glancing across the river of gravel at the rickety porch that Dad sometimes came and sat on just to breathe the air. I couldn’t seem him through the window, but I knew he was in there. The trail of curly smoke pointed towards the couch. By the way it occasionally lit up, I knew he was watching TV. That’s all there is to say about him, really.

 The coast was clear for now, so I wiggled my butt a foot or so to my left, awkwardly curling by back to keep my ancient blue sweater from being caught on the fence behind me. I ground my knees into the dirt in the process, but I wasn’t too worried about those jeans. Turns out I should have worried more about those jeans, but the deed was done.

 A light flipped on in the neighbor’s house and I heard the distinctive sound of cackling. It was muted at first, but rose to such a volume that I was sure a doppelganger of hers had somehow materialized beside me. There was something about that lady, and it was going to be me that found out what it was.

 I wished I had a set of binoculars, and I got *this* close to swiping the pair that I knew Dad kept in the storeroom for when he went hunting. Unfortunately I was a bit of a coward, and decided to settle for the curve of my fingers pressed against my forehead in their stead.

 Dad had told me that she was just a person. She was just a person like me and I should leave her to her own devices and play in the woods, maybe down at the creek. I just couldn’t forgive myself if I did that instead of something as important as finding proof of what she really was. She had a mango tree. Mangos! How could a person “like me” be growing mangos in this dead old dirt? She had to be hiding something nefarious. When you’ve got mangos and mysterious cackling, you know that you aren’t dealing with a normal “like me” lady.

 Sometimes I wanted to tell Mom about the neighbor. But truth be told, it was better that she didn’t know. And besides, I had three solid days before I saw her next. Surely I would get to the bottom of this before then. Regardless, I had heard enough advice from her to know how to handle myself in those bushes. Go on adventures, she said, but don’t regret ‘em afterwards.

 Regret was the least of my worries. I just wanted a glimpse, and I was gonna get it, too. After my first day of watching, I thought I hit the jackpot. The neighbor opened her door at 10 A.M. and proceeded to walk across the manicured yard in a dramatic waltz like that was a perfectly normal thing to do. All the leaves were raked, and she had no mail. She went around the side of her dilapidated fence, slumped over like a wounded soldier in a trench, and instead of stopping to investigate it; she kept on going until I could only see her head for the tomatoes, then the grapes. Eventually, she disappeared.

 She never stopped at the fence. Not once. No matter how broken it got, I was certain that she never would, either. Witches didn’t care about fences broken by time’s abuses, just mangoes.

 That day, I could almost see wherever it was she wandered off to. Every so often I would see a flicker of blue and yellow – the colors of the flowing shawl that she wore when the wind blew, something that she seemed to notice much more than I could. An hour passed, and I found myself sitting in the bushes and blowing spit bubbles to pass the time.

 The sun was getting higher and I knew I wasn’t going to see anything. She had out-smarted me, for now. My gaze swept over the garden one last time, and that’s when I was locked into a dead-on stare with my neighbor.

 I leaped straight up out of those bushes, and didn’t breathe for a solid minute. By the time I realized I was breathing at 1000 miles-per-hour, my feet were stuck in the primordial tar that she summoned to prevent my escape. And there she was, smiling at me with a grin so evil that only someone who has seen a witch’s sorcery could understand.

 It was the catchy bass of the talk show introduction that Dad was watching that snapped me out of her spell. I thought I heard a sucking noise as my feet lifted themselves free and carried me, panting, across the gravel road, up the porch stairs, and through the screen door so fast I couldn’t even hear her inevitable screeching. I was completely out of breath at that point and Dad just gave me this look.

 I said, “She…she!” between puffs of breath, nearly swooning from the exhilaration of barely escaping with my life. I expected rage and frustration. Dad, in reality, was a bit of a push-over. He just liked to act like a gorilla sometimes. He didn’t yell, though. Instead, he let out a sigh so heavy that you’d have thought it was him that needed air from all of my running. As the sigh escaped his lips it left a wide tunnel through the fragrant smoke in front of him. I always thought I could tell what Dad was thinking by the shapes in that smoke. That time I saw a lonely dog that had just been kicked.

 He told me to please go to my room, and I did. That was where I wanted to go, anyway. There was a window in there that I had seen her out of, once. But that wasn’t why I wanted to go. I wanted to lay in my bed and look at the ceiling, and hear Dad rustle through his boxes of ancient papers. He only did this when he thought I couldn’t hear, or was otherwise preoccupied. He dug through his artifacts until he found his last photo album, yellowed despite its relative newness to its peers, and return to the couch to slowly, quietly turn the pages and look at the pictures by the thick whiteish light of the TV screen. He would sit like this for many long minutes, remembering what I presumed was the time when the three of us all lived in this dead old house, letting out the tiniest of gorilla sobs in time with the turning of the pages.

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 The next day I stole Dad’s binoculars while he left the house to get groceries from Jim’s Market. Before I ventured out, though, Mom called. She had this ability of knowing right when Dad left the house. Her words gurgled together, and the most interesting thing she had to ask about was if I was having fun playing in the leaves. She knew that I used to love to do that. I lied.

 Dad’s binoculars were heavier than a family-size can of ravioli. Luckily they had a handy braided lanyard that I was able to loop around my neck. As soon as I reached about the halfway point of the road on my way to my usual observation point, the binoculars were being pressed aggressively into my face. They had a large number of knobs on them, and no matter which ones I turned everything still seemed blurry. Somehow I made it to the bushes, regardless. And when I got there, I was able to get them to focus on a distance near the grapes. It was close enough to see the twigs and rocks on the ground. There was a hideous statue of a frog with butterfly wings at the edge of the old fence that I had never noticed before.

 Curious about the mysterious power of the binoculars, I laboriously swung my head towards my own house. It took a little bit of wrestling the bush to create a proper observation point, but I eventually found a position that was good enough, even though the part of the yard in the direction of Dad’s crotchety teal Mazda truck was totally obscured. I didn’t need the binoculars to know it was covered with a large variety of sun-bleached stickers.

 The porch, however, was a totally different story. With Dad’s binoculars, I began to discover whole new universes within the microcosms of rotting wood and chipped paint. I could distinctly make out a conga line of ants crawling up and away on the walls towards the roof, ignoring the front door and the potential treasury of split syrupy beverages to enjoy inside. Their path disappeared behind a wind chime and an imperfectly cleaned deer skull. On the floor of the porch were piles of dirt and twigs, screws and nails, buckets and baskets, and pieces of furniture, within all of which lived an untouched, morbidly mundane reminder of what our lives have always been. There was an uneven path through all the junk, at the bottom of which was a piece of carpet that was barely distinguishable from the warped wood underneath it. All of these were things that I lived with, sitting quietly in the background until now: including the photo album that Dad had left sitting on the arm of the couch.

 She didn’t come out of the house. I swerved my binoculars to and fro, from her front door to her garden, and the closest I came to seeing her was marked by a ripple across the mango-colored curtains that she had hanging in her windows.

 The binoculars must have been keeping her away. She must have sensed them, and knew about their power to discover. I had found her weakness. With this totem, I could venture closer than ever before. It was dangerous, sure. But today, I had the binoculars. They were infused with the smoke and the sadness. They would keep me safe from the mangos and the waltzing. I stood and stepped out of the bushes, in the direction of the neighbor’s garden. I set a course for her mangoes, and began my march with all the gear I needed pressed so closely to my face that I could feel my cheeks and forehead bulging around it.

 I passed the mailbox and the leaves and the fence. I walked straight through the tomatoes and around the grapes. From there, it was unexplored territory. There were apples and strawberries that floated right by me. I even walked past a fluffy, enticing bunch of blueberries, because right past them was the mangoes. The tree was so large it was a wonder I didn’t see it from my bush, from my house, from Jim’s Market. Some of the topmost fruits were large enough to completely eclipse the sun, despite their distance. I hated them. Releasing my grip on Dad’s binoculars, I grabbed the nearest fruit and squeezed until it oozed between my fingers and dripped all over my nasty sweater.

 My neighbor was there on the other side of the tree, a perfect mango in her outstretched hand. In the corner of my eye, I saw him peek through the mango-colored curtains. It was the catalyst, the source, the enemy, the goal, the impossible: her husband. I gasped, and was once again locked into her gaze.

 My feet sunk, and I was trapped. The ground melted into the texture of rotten fruit, and I felt my guts grow sweet. My bones found room to grow, creaking into place through my mango-colored flesh. I began cackling and grinning, and it hurt.

 Smoke started to leak through the cracks in the mango-curtains, and the piles of leaves near the road grew shallow. I looked at Dad’s porch and then the leaves, the splintering house and the divergent curtains. Dad pulled his truck onto the road beside us, Mom in her car behind him, and I saw them stare at me with accusatory questions on their faces. I could tell they just wanted to join me, but I was on my own now. I stood and grabbed the binoculars from where they had fallen, and, noticing its lack of heft, lifted them high above my head and grinned and cackled and hung them on the nearest branch. I left the sad gorilla and the dog-kicker in the garden and slipped between the mango curtains. The two of us watched a talk show over dinner and ate fruit until our teeth were sore.