**Crane**

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Below it is misty but Kevin peeks out above the cloud. His clean shaven chin gleams in the morning sun. He takes a deep breath, it is still so quiet, and he is about the break the silence.

He wraps his hands around the controls, presses the pedals with his feet, hears the familiar rattle of the winches. A facade element for a future office complex rises up; he allows the jib to come around in the direction of the scaffold where laborers are already waiting to receive his little package. They wave to him, grinning.

Kevin is the best, he knows it, and his boss says so too. He is precise, patient, quick. He is the first on every new tower crane that stretches a little higher and further, can lift more, the first to climb it, to steer it, to break it in. Other crane operators look up to him, literally and figuratively, and he feels good up there. He is fearless when it comes to heights, has impressive stamina. Can go for hours without a bathroom break. His head is empty, he loves that. His element is air and he is in his element.

Around eleven he gets his Thermos and lunch pail from his briefcase. There are colleagues that come down for lunch but he prefers eating up there. There are those that bring binoculars with them so that they can study the ants at ground level more closely, primarily the scantily clad on the balconies and in the backyards, he gets enough from the city itself, the outlines of the buildings, the layout of the streets. The forms, the patterns, the colors. He drinks coffee and eats peanut butter sandwiches and enjoys the overview.

In his headset he hears his boss clear his throat. ‘Kevin,’ he says, ‘can you come down?’

Kevin wonders what this is about. His boss is a stickler for time, an announcement during dinner can only mean a couple of things. He takes off his headset, puts his helmet on, gets into the little lift, glides down the yellow mast with the last corner of sandwich in his hand. A new crane pops into his head, a new model must have been announced, and his boss wants to arrange a test drive for him. It must be something like that.

When he walks into the site office he knows immediately that he had it all wrong. His boss is clutching a thick envelope in both hands and eyeing it with suspicion. ‘From a lawyer’s office,’ he says. ‘Certified mail.’

Kevin shrugs.

‘It’s for you,’ says his boss.

Kevin takes the envelope, rips it open, lets a pile of documents slide out. The logo of the law firm on the front page. His surname in the subject heading. A couple of measured paragraphs. The name of his wife. The text seems to swim, Kevin grabs the coffee machine for support, breathes through his nose.

‘Do you want me to read it for you?’ his boss asks.

The house is empty when he gets home. His wife has taken her things, she is staying with a friend. Their little boy is over there too, of course. Kevin orders Chinese and watches soccer, it is not much different to a normal weekday evening. But as he chases sleep he keeps seeing the little lift going down, himself walking into the site office. And he tries to steer his thoughts, to make his boss start speaking about a test drive, but every times he gets the divorce papers pressed into his hand after all.

Even so: once he is asleep he dreams of a sort of super tower crane. Kevin sits high above the city, sorting it. He puts all the churches together. The parks next to the parks. He raises the crane even higher and sorts entire cities. Higher still and he sorts countries. The world is divided up into clearly defined elements in bright colors. It feels good once everything is in its place.

The days pass. Kevin takes the lift up the mast and he is happy up there, he takes the lift down and he is unhappy. The happiness is just big enough to make the unhappiness bearable. When his boss asks him how it’s going, he makes light of the situation. ‘Me and my old lady never did get along so well,’ he says.

Kevin had loved her but in his own way, he had thought that she understood him. He had difficulty with the things that spouses do: sitting together on the sofa, or in the sun, days out, chatting, watching TV. He would have preferred just to look at her.

On the weekends his son comes over. They don’t talk but they are together. He values those moments. But his discomfort only passes on Monday morning, when he takes his place in the cabin, takes off his helmet, headset on, and wraps his hands around the controls. He looks at the horizon. Sorts girders, cylinders, cubes, sometimes a pyramid. He is only truly at home when other people are at a distance.

Kevin is not sure why he accepted the invitation. The reunion of his grade school class in someone’s sprawling home. He drinks a couple of beers; that makes everything easier. The vaguely familiar faces evoke feelings of familiarity and anonymity. For the first time he shares the entire story, about the family that he had but lost. People react sympathetically, Kevin feels seen.

He is about to leave when she comes in. He has to look closely but it’s her. His first girlfriend, who kissed him at school summer camp in sixth grade, on the edge of her bunk. She went on to high school, he went to vocational school, they never saw each other again. She recognizes him immediately, walks over and starts a conversation. She makes no effort to simplify her language, which highly educated people tend to do, and tells him about how she went self-employed as a visual artist, how she paints, how she studied art history but how in the end it was all too theoretical for her, how she has since finished art school, is preparing an exhibition she is nervous about.

He already has a marriage behind him, she is still just a girl – Kevin feels a bitter jealously that he can’t put into words. ‘Your eyes are still exactly the same,’ she says, and he notices that he’s getting angry. He says that he needs to go to the bathroom, grabs his jacket, disappears.

Later that week, when he’s waiting for the next load and a seagull lands on the jib not far above him, he notices the composition, the seagull on a third of the triangle that forms the jib, stretching towards the horizon. He can’t help but be reminded of his father. The iron weaver.

Kevin’s head is usually empty when he works, he feels the slight sway of the crane in the wind and thinks of nothing, not even the past. But now he remembers what he thought an iron weaver was when he was a little boy. In his imagination he had seen his father bending iron bars, making them into the shapes of animals, people, abstract figures. He wove everything he could conceive of as if it was nothing. When his father watched soccer, Kevin saw an artist recovering from his creation. Until one day his father took him along to the construction site and he discovered what he really did.

Kevin had shoved it far enough down that he didn’t have to feel it, a shipping container locked up in an echoing hangar. He sees himself as a young boy of around eight, close-cropped hair, light blue eyes, as he looks in photos from that time, full of energy and conviction, head held so high. That boy who has just discovered that iron weavers prepare the framework around which concrete is poured, every day the same perpendicular reinforcement bars, every day the same grid.

And he can’t remember the last time that he did this, but he cries. What was then a disappointment is now a tragedy. Because just like his father, Kevin is a servant of the blueprint, nothing more, nothing less. Diverging from it was never a real proposition. There was no art in the house, he had no artistic uncle, no art teacher to help him on his way. Had he wanted a different life, he would have had to intervene himself and he never did. Kevin’s little boy would be under no illusions about his father’s artistic ambition. Nor about his ability to maintain normal relationships. At least Kevin’s father had a stable marriage.

His mood darkens. He feels trapped in the cabin. Reacts more slowly to the instructions that the headset pumps into his head. Begins to make cock-ups with the rigs.

Then he is called to his boss again. Kevin fears the worst. His unhappiness must be palpable, you must be able to read it in his silhouette, a massive right angle with drooping shoulders. He is no longer the operator he once was, he is going to be fired, Kevin is certain of it. Last time, his boss gave him the divorce papers, this time he’s getting his redundancy letter.

But it turns out the opposite is true. His boss hands him a folder about the latest model, an enormous beast in bright green, with a revolutionary grabber that the crane operator can attach to most objects from his dashboard. You no longer need a man on the ground to attach the hook. Sure, you need someone to monitor, the manufacturer, Health and Safety and the union agree on that, but in theory it is possible to do without them.

‘I want you to be the first one to try it,’ his boss says.

Kevin is overcome by professional pride. He cannot resist; the sombreness remains but a grin spreads across his face like a thin layer of tarmac over the top of it.

‘You in?’ asks his boss.

‘You bet your ass,’ says Kevin.

He does the test, the crane is good, they lease it and from that moment on Kevin is even higher, he stretches even further, and the new grabber gives him even more control. Every crane sways slightly differently, he enjoys mastering the finer points. Kevin is himself again, nothing but concentration, nothing but contentment. The world stays outside the cabin.

Until one morning, on the way to the construction site, he encounters his old classmate’s poster. The opening of her exhibition. He climbs into his crane and, in a rush of controlled aggression, lifts a cement truck. He holds it perfectly level and sets it down gently on the other side of the site. His boss is furious. The driver was still on his way in, the cement truck was empty, but even so. Everyone is furious. Kevin says he has just been so tired recently, which isn’t true, but he knows how to play the burnout game and his boss tells him to go home.

Kevin goes and lies on his lonely double bed and realizes that he really isn’t well. At first he feels hot, then cold again. Clammy. In his fever dream he goes to her exhibition, feels diminished by her work.

The next minute he is sitting in his new crane. Carrying out his tasks. Working the controls, pushing the buttons. He moves the hook in and out along the jib, hoisting it up and letting it drop again. He hears violins, the camera zooms out, the city is one big crane ballet. He turns pirouettes on his mast, the rest copy him. Everything moves in sync. And Kevin wants to get out of bed but can’t manage it, as if his spirit wants to leave but his body would rather hallucinate. Then he sees what he has made: a mesh of bars, bent, glowing, a woman’s body.

All at once he is wide awake. Resolved. He takes a cold shower and walks back over to the construction site.

He gets into the lift, his rough silhouette zooms up the green mast. If you saw him standing behind his little window, looking out over the city, with the same bright blue eyes as back then, gliding further and further, you would smile just like he did.

By the time the city wakes and begins to realize what has changed in the night, he is all finished. Apartments have been lifted onto office buildings, schools set down next to ponds. In a parking lot, vertically stacked suv’s form an expensive house of cards. City hall is leaning on the train station, creating an enormous slide. People raise their eyebrows. Children cheer. Kevin glows with pride.