

Crane Man

by Steven McDermott

Inside my high-rise studio apartment there are only three locations where Crane Man can't see me. The bathroom is one—although he watches me go in and he watches me come out. Crane Man does a lot of watching. Sometimes it seems he spends more time looking through his binoculars than he does operating his crane. I suppose it's the nature of his work; all the downtime waiting for trucks to arrive and unload the bundles of re-bar, mixers full of concrete, porta-potties, ducts, pipe, and all that lumber. He's stuck for a ten-hour shift of which three hours max is spent swinging the boom, raising and lowering cabled-loads.

Crane Man spies on me through a picture window, to the left of which is my desk. That's the second location where Crane Man can't see me. But even though I'm hidden from him while working on the computer and surfing the web—ah, the places I go when Crane Man can't see me—I can feel him watching, staring hard into his binoculars, waiting until I'm visible again. I can't leave the desk without risking his gaze.

In the kitchen, on the counter against the wall and across from the refrigerator, is my espresso maker. There's twelve inches between the wall and the picture window he looks through. It's not much, but it's all I have. When I'm standing there making coffee I can't see the crane. I may be wrong in thinking this, but I figure that if I can't see Crane Man, Crane Man can't see me. That's my third place of refuge.

I know—shut the drapes for Christ sakes! And sometimes, when I can't take his gaze any more, I do. But then I feel trapped, a prisoner in my own apartment.

Over time I became as curious about Crane Man as he was about me. I decided to look in on him at *his* home. First I hung out near the construction site and waited for him to climb the ladder down from the crane's cab. I waited across the street, over by the fish-n-chip bar, because I was certain he'd recognize me if I got too close. I followed him two blocks over to the construction worker's parking lot where he got into an old gray jeep, one of those that pre-dated the whole SUV craze. The jeep's rear bumper was rusted and the side panels were splotched with primer. I liked Crane Man better because of his choice of wheels.

The next day, when Crane Man's six-o'clock quitting time came, I followed him home, parked on the next block, grabbed my rucksack and walked up the alley behind his row of houses.

From the alley I could see into several of Crane Man's windows with my binoculars. In the kitchen window a red-haired woman wearing a paisley apron peeled potatoes, shaving the skins into a brown paper bag sitting in the sink. So, Crane Man had himself an Apron Lady! I watched as she worked on the potatoes, her brow sharply fretted, her hands rotating and peeling, rotating and peeling. When she was done she rinsed the potatoes under the tap and carried the pot over to the stove. She left the kitchen then and I panned over to the dining room and watched her set the table.

No sign of Crane Man yet, so I shifted to a spot further up the alley where I could see into the windows along the side of the house. Crane Man was sitting in a black leather recliner with his feet up. In one hand he held a remote controller and in the other a tall tumbler with ice and an amber liquid that looked like whiskey. He wore slippers now instead of work boots, a pair of those tan imitation sheepskins with the white fuzzy turned-over lining. He drank from the tumbler and pointed with the remote, jabbing his thumb at the button. He didn't pause to watch anything; it was just jab jab jab, drink, jab jab jab. After about five minutes of channel surfing he

seemed to call out. A moment later Apron Lady walked up to him and took his glass. As she turned to leave he reached and pinched her rear-end. She jumped, slapped at his hand, laughing, and skedaddled. He leaned his head back and had himself a good laugh, too. Crane Man started jabbing the remote again until the Apron Lady brought him another drink. He set the glass and the remote down on the end table and reached up and pulled her into his lap.

Excited now, I put the binoculars in my rucksack and pulled out the camera case. I attached the telephoto lens and aimed it at Crane Man's window. They were making out. Apron Lady sat crosswise in Crane Man's lap with her legs over the chair's armrest. I zoomed the lens and snapped a picture of their tongues twinning. Apron Lady wiggled her high-heeled shoes. Click. I continued taking pictures as their snogging intensified. Crane Man started caressing her right breast and then, as easily as he controlled his crane, his fingers deftly undid the top buttons of her blouse and pushed the fabric aside. Her bra hooked in the front and Crane Man undid the clasp one-handed and popped the milk-white blue-veined breast out of the bra's cup. His fingertips teased the nipple erect and Apron Lady worked her tongue in Crane Man's mouth. Click. Click. Click.

Half-a-dozen glossy 8x10s and a slightly grainy two-foot by three-foot poster of Apron Lady, her head arched back, neck exposed, and with her nipple tugged taut between Crane Man's teeth. Low in the foreground and blurry were the high-heels, which had been wiggling.

I was up early the next day preparing my surprise for Crane Man. First I spread a black tablecloth over the table. I propped the poster in the middle and flanked it with a couple of the 8x10s. One showed Crane Man unhooking the bra, the other showed him knocking back a tumbler of booze. No shrine would be complete without candles, so I arranged a dozen votives around the pictures. I have to say it even creeped me out a bit.

How to see Crane Man's reaction without him seeing me? Duck hunters use a blind and that seemed a good approach. I made mine on the kitchen counter by loading up the dish rack with every pot and pan I could stack on the thing. Then I placed a chair behind my blind. It was 6:45 AM and Crane Man would be arriving for work soon. I drew open the drapes. From my blind I leaned forward and looked through the binoculars and focused on the crane's cab.

I only had to wait another ten minutes before I saw Crane Man climbing his crane's ladder. He rested for a few seconds on the platform beneath the cab, then scurried up the last rungs. He took off his jacket and sat down in his control chair. He poured a cup of coffee from his thermos and then did what I'd been waiting for—raised his binoculars and began to scan the buildings.

I hunkered down and focused my binoculars on Crane Man with his binoculars. I wanted to see the expression on his face when he saw the poster of himself nibbling Apron Lady's nipple. I watched as he swung toward my building, methodically working his way up and across floors searching for his voyeurism fix.

And then he saw the shrine I'd built for my Crane Man. He lowered the binoculars, seemed to mouth the words *no fucking way*, then refocused. He continued staring through the binoculars, no doubt wondering how I'd gotten those pictures of him. He chewed his lower lip with those same teeth that had tugged Apron Lady's nipple. Then he said something that looked like *who the fuck does this creep think he is*. But he didn't stop looking into my apartment. I could see him making micro focusing adjustments as he scanned the room. For the first time since Crane Man began watching me I felt safe. He'd be checking his rearview mirror on the drive home. He'd pull his drapes. Maybe take a walk up the alley just to make sure I wasn't watching. Would he tell Apron Lady? That's what I wanted to know.

