

ANTHONY TOGNAZZINI

I Want to Drive the Forklift

There were many things, I later learned, that I did not know about the forklift. Would that have stopped me from wanting to drive it? I do not know.

The warehouse was cavernous, with a great arched ceiling and shelves stacked high with supplies for a gardening store. I'd been working the night shift for two months. All night, every night, I paced the aisles with a clipboard, listening to the squeak of my shoes.

Mr. Diberkorn had hired me to take inventory. The supplies, in stacks called "unit loads," were wrapped in stretch plastic "slipsheets." On a clipboard I wrote down how many bags of peat moss we had, how many bags of soil. I tallied seed crates and cases of pest control. I kept track of the trowels and hoes. If I stood in one place too long counting compost tins, my feet went prickly from the pressure.

Each time I rounded a corner at the south end of the warehouse I'd see the forklift by the loading dock, one side concealed in shadow, the other gleaming yellow in the overhead lights. When I asked Mr. Diberkorn if I could take it for a spin, he said if I touched the forklift he'd break my fucking face.

Usually I was alone in the warehouse during my shift, the building dead silent. If I cleared

my throat I'd startle myself. Sometimes my wife called, and we'd talk as I paced the aisles, my voice reverberating off the concrete. My wife was pregnant, and often told me to pick up certain foods from the store.

"On your way home can you get some tater tots? I'm really craving them."

"Okay," I'd say.

"Just the frozen kind in a bag."

"Right," I'd say.

I talked with my head tilted back to hear the echo. The boxes rose up into cavernous space.

"How's it going?" my wife would say. "Well?" I'd say, "Well . . ."

I applied for this job because I thought working at a plant store would be good for my peace of mind. With a baby on the way, I was anxious about finances. I worried about having a family, and the pressures of fatherhood. I thought being surrounded by plants might put me at ease, but I later learned that plants were kept at the main store, and the warehouse, with a few exceptions, was devoted mostly to supply stock. I thought that after work I'd feel tranquil, as though I were floating on a placid lake, but I never felt tranquil. Not once.

Some nights, around 2:00, I'd take a break from inventory, go to the loading dock, and gaze

at the forklift, admiring its tires. If only I could get behind the wheel, I'd think. Instead I filled out order forms or uncoiled a hose to mist the Sakaki ficus. At dawn I'd go home, climb in bed, and shift around on my pillow. I'd toss fitfully until 4:00, have dinner with my wife, watch TV, shower, and go to work again at 9:00.

One night when I arrived Mr. Diberkorn was still in the office, finishing up some paperwork.

"Sit down," he said, and when I did he stood.

"Make sure to double check rows 17-26," he said. He put his papers in a briefcase. Mr. Diberkorn's hands were large, and the texture of raw sausage. His voice was gravelly. "We need to order more biodegradable netting," he said. "And will you count the solar lamps in overstock? I asked you that last night."

"Sure thing," I said.

He was putting on his overcoat.

"Also, when you file the forms, arrange them by inventory number. They're impossible to find otherwise. You can't just put them in willy-nilly. What do you think this is? Romper Room?"

He picked up his keys from the desk. "I'll review your inventory sheets in the morning," he said, and his meaty hand landed on my shoulder. "I'll be in early."

I heard Mr. Diberkorn walk through the warehouse, and push through the exit doors. I was prepping my clipboard when my phone rang. It was my wife.

"You know what I just got a craving for?" she said. "Kimchi. Isn't there a Korean grocery close to the warehouse? I'm pretty sure there is. Near

the dry cleaning place?"

"I think so. Yeah," I said.

"Could you pick some up in the morning on your way home, if it's not too much trouble?"

"Sure," I said.

"It's not too much trouble, is it?"

"No."

"Great," she said. "How's inventory going?"

"Good," I said.

"Okay," my wife said. "I'll call later to check in."

"Right," I said.

I began my inventory where I'd left off the night before. For twenty minutes I tallied the supply of Miracle-Gro, for fifteen I counted Kelp Meal. The small, medium, and tall trellises were not in boxes but stacked atop each other, bound by slipsheets. It was difficult to tell where one trellis began and the other ended and I had to count them twice. That took an hour. Overhead the florescent lights buzzed, and when I got to the south end of a row and rounded the wide corner, I looked in the direction of the loading dock.

While getting trained to take inventory I'd worked several day shifts, and had seen day workers drive the forklift around, picking up palettes stacked high with crates. They worked the pedals and sped around corners. They wore hard hats, key chains, utility belts. They communicated by walky-talky.

It took me an hour to do the row with the perennial kits and the French watering cans. There were nine rows left to inventory that night. The amount of work made me anxious, and to calm

myself I tried to conjure comforting images. I pictured my wife at home in front of the television, a box of pizza balanced on her giant belly. We'd learned we were going to have a son, and I could picture his small, expectant face looking up at me. I saw Mr. Diberkorn's sausagey hands putting papers in a briefcase. These images were not comforting. When I got to the end of the row I moved in the direction of the loading dock.

The forklift's yellow paint job was pristine. The paint seemed like it had been recently applied; there were no chips or scrapes. I'd heard the day-shift workers say the forklift was a class IV Internal Combustion Engine Rider that was counterbalanced and had pneumatic tires. I didn't know what that meant. I'd heard them talk about the crosshead, carriage, and hydraulic systems, but I wasn't sure what those were.

I set my clipboard on the floor.

When Mr. Diberkorn said he'd break my face if I touched the forklift he added that operating one was a tricky business requiring intensive training and certification from Industrial Truck Standards. "You understand?" he said. I did. The need for precautions was clear to me, the necessity of rules. When I become a father, I'll be forced to lay down the law, from time to time, for the safety and well being of my son. A child needs guidance. He must be given the tools to distinguish between right and wrong.

I put my hand on the forklift's overhead guard and hoisted myself into the driver's seat. The ignition, on the far right of the dashboard, was easy enough to find: The key was still inside. I turned

it and the engine roared, pushing smoke from the exhaust pipe. I flipped the switch for the overhead light, and put my foot on the accelerator.

A thrill pushed through me as the forklift moved forward. A thrill filled my chest, legs, and the tips of my toes as I sped out of the loading dock. One of the things I did not know about the forklift was that it had rear-wheel steering, and required minimal pressure for turns, so when I cranked the steering wheel to the right the forklift swerved and collided with a stack of empty shipping containers, which fell to the floor with hollow, drum-like thumps.

I angled left. The flashing overhead light threw red beams against the crates, off the corner mirrors and domed ceiling. This was the best I'd felt in what felt like forever.

My cell phone rang. I snapped it open, steering with one hand.

"Mallomars," my wife said. "I want Mallomars."

"I can't talk right now, honey," I said.

Her voice grew worried. "What's that sound?" she said.

It's surprising how fast a forklift can go. I was speeding too close to the south wall and accidentally hit the time clock, snapping off the forklift's side-view mirror. There was the sound of crunching glass.

"What was that?" my wife said. Her voice had an edge of panic.

"Gotta go, honey" I said, and hung up.

I threw the phone on the floor of the forklift. It started ringing again almost instantly. I was de-

terminated to lift something, so I swerved down an aisle and pile-drove into a stack of boxes, wedging the forks under a palette of potted plants. To the left of the steering wheel I found the lever I assumed would lift the forks and pulled it, sharply. The chain's rattling filled me with glee, and I saw that the plants, stacked five high on cardboard dividers, were miniature geraniums; their purple-white petals looked, beneath the plastic, like a tightly wrapped garden. The lift locked at the top, and the stacked plants wobbled.

Even over the whir of the engine I heard the nervous excitement of my breath. It reminded me of the prenatal breathing exercises I'd been practicing with my wife. "This'll come in handy for our next baby," she'd said. My wife said she wanted at least two children. "Our first should have a little brother or sister," she'd said. I'd waited a minute before answering. "You know. Two kids will be a real handful," I said, and when this got no response I added, "And expensive. You know, doctors? Summer camp? Piano lessons?"

"You'll be making more money by then," my wife had said.

I pulled what I guessed was the gear-shift lever. The transmission fell into reverse with a hard thunk, and I started backing up amid a great thrum of engine. Another thing I did not know about the forklift was that at lifting capacity, with forks raised and a heavy load, speed must be steady to avoid a disastrous tip-over, and as I continued to accelerate backward, swinging into the turn, I instinctively knew this to be true. In the centrifugal force of the turn, the palette pulled

against the forklift, and I watched, wide-eyed, as the tower of geraniums tipped, and the forklift lifted on its two right wheels, causing the engine to rev and the airborne wheels to spin crazily.

The forklift went over. Geraniums burst out the slipsheet and showered down in every direction. The cab smashed hard into one of the shelves, and I heard the crack of pressure being dislodged. I ducked, covering my head with my hands. I saw the immense shelf beside me tilt slowly and go over, and before it happened I knew the shelf would knock into the next shelf, which would knock the shelf behind that, and so on.

In the apocalyptic crash that followed I heard metal and wood collapse. Ceramic shattered on concrete, and the sounds overlapped, like gunfire. Tomato cages and Cortina planters went over. I saw boxes of Slug Guard and Mole Repellent go over. Coils of hose burst from their slipsheets, unspooling in mid-air, and bags of potting soil toppled, exploding when they hit the floor, sending up great clouds. I thought wildly about prenatal breathing, kimchi, Mallomars, and sending my son away to school. I heard my wife say, "A normal, happy family. What's wrong with that?" and Mr. Diberkorn announcing if I did well in the warehouse I might stay on and get a promotion, but he wasn't going to hold his breath.

I exhaled. I heard only tinkling shards of pottery and the strangled whine of the forklift's up-ended motor. The air was rich with the earthy smell of potting soil and fertilizer. My phone was ringing, but I wasn't about to answer it.

I lifted myself out of the forklift, and brushed

the dirt from my pants. I moved slowly down the rows, surveying the destruction. Three shelves had gone over completely, and the stock of a fourth was partially destroyed. Fragments of all the items I'd inventoried lay scattered in a cloud of dust. I could see clear through to the other side of the warehouse now. There was an openness in the room, a sense of space.

The forklift's wheels were still spinning, and

my mind was strangely clear. I didn't want to hear what my wife would say. I didn't want to think what Mr. Diberkorn would do, since it was certain he'd break my fucking face, lecturing me as he did on everything I had not known about the forklift. But that lecture would be too late.

"Well," I said, dusting off my hands. "Now I know." 