

Under the Surface of Glass

Susanne Davis

Jordan Hawkins sat on a metal stool inspecting amber beer bottles as they spun by her lamp. She worked for Glass Container, a manufacturing plant in Killingly, Connecticut. The plant, built out of sky blue sheets of metal and plopped in the middle of a paved lot, offered the highest paying factory jobs in Connecticut's low-income eastern corner. Twenty-four hours a day, florescent lights shone over the lines and the furnace blasted dry heat over the workers, finding moisture and sucking it back up into the air.

Jordan was looking for splitnecks and cherry stones, the two most common defects and as she flipped her blonde ponytail off her neck, she felt a thrill. It hardly ever happened-- a pair of cherrystones spinning down the line together. The inspection lamp caught the imperfections each time the bottles turned, so that they looked like diamonds encased in amber. She kept her eyes on the pair. Beer bottles spun by very fast, a combination of their size and shape, about sixty a minute, but Jordan liked that—she liked to feel that nothing on the line was too much for her to handle, and when they reached her, she knocked them off the conveyor belt down into a hole in the floor. Another belt would carry them back to be fired over again. "Better luck next time, losers," she whispered.

At orientation a month ago, her supervisor, Mr. Tilchek, had showed her and the other new recruits just how much a defect weakened the bottle. He filled a bottle with water and rapped it lightly against a counter. When the bottle popped wide open, revealing a pebble, he joked, "Resistance is futile." No one got the joke, so he explained that every bit of sand had to be melted to make perfect glass.

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At 8:00 p.m., Mr. Tilchek tapped Jordan on the shoulder. He was a short, stout man with straight brown hair that hung over his ears and hid the top of his gold-rimmed glasses. His smile hitched up on one side, apologetic and hesitant. Jordan removed the Styrofoam earplugs from her ears and the roar of the plant filled her head. Tilchek had to shout to be heard.

"You want to work a double?" he asked. "Someone from third just called in."

A double shift meant overtime and the third shift made the most money. She would make \$25 an hour, \$200 extra for the night. Her bank account had \$7,000 before starting at the factory, the total accumulation of her lifetime wages on the family farm. In just a month, she had added another \$2,000.

She plucked a splitneck from the line.

Tilchek smiled, more evenly this time. "I was going to tell you this at the end of your shift, but I might as well tell you now, Jordan. I'm giving you a 7% raise, starting next week."

Without taking her eyes off the line, Jordan thanked him. She knew she should take the double, but if she did, she wouldn't get home until 7:30 in the morning and that meant her father would have to do most of the morning milking alone.

"You have a 97%, Grade A inspection rate," Tilchek added, pushing his glasses up on his nose. The spinning bottles reflected Jordan's profile in the lenses; she was a pretty girl with a compact body and a face like a cat, flat and wide. Green eyes flecked with copper caught and held the light, shifting around the iris with feline alertness. A smattering of freckles on her small flat nose provided a corrective effect against the recent lines that had developed around her mouth, helping her retain the aura of girlhood innocence.

"I've never seen anything like it."

Jordan shrugged. She had been taught to deflect compliments and she knew Tilchek's admiration wasn't just for her bottle inspecting. She kept her head down, glad for the baggy shirt that hid her toned arms and chest.

"I'd like to work the double," she said, "but I can't."

Tilchek touched her arm lightly. "Hey," he said. "I know you've had some bumps in the road. But you're gonna make it."

Three splitnecks came down the line, almost right in a row. Jordan punched them into the gutter.

"Why don't you go take your break? And then go to Line 3 and start packing."

Jordan slid off the stool. "Thanks again for the raise," she said, but Tilchek had already put his earplugs in, which was a good thing because her thanks sounded ambivalent.

About thirty workers crowded the break room, including Tom Brody, Killingly High School's sexy doe-eyed football star with streaked blonde hair and sensuous lips. He sat in the corner at one of the square Formica tables, his lunch box open in front of him. Since graduation, he worked full time at the glass factory --which was no surprise because he wasn't very smart--and lived in a renovated mill apartment in Putnam with the high school Spanish teacher. Jordan flirted with Brody once at a football game, and he responded by asking her to go with him to a party after the game, but she left the party early because his kisses were full of drool. She thought he must of have learned a lot about kissing since then.

The vending machine was in that corner and she was hungry, having already eaten her sandwich on the way to work, so Jordan had no choice but to move in his direction. She pretended to study the money in her wallet as she stood in front of the machine, back to him, and selected a bag of peanuts. She got as far as stuffing the peanuts in the pocket of her jeans, when Brody called to her.

"I'd know that ass anywhere," he grinned. It was part of his success with women; comments that normally offended instead were considered compliments because they came from him. "What are you doing here?" he asked.

She considered telling him she was tormenting him with what he could never have, but she didn't want to get into sexual banter and encourage him further.

"Same as you. Working," she said, flatly. She looked into his lunch box, which held two sandwiches with lettuce and tomato, a package of baby carrots and an apple. In the high school cafeteria he filled his plastic tray with bags of chips and starchy entrées, and the last few months carried it to Room 107 to eat lunch with Mrs. Leary, a cute pixie of a woman in her late twenties, who was married to the owner of a local chain of convenience stores. Jordan hadn't believed the rumors of the affair, but two weeks before the end of school Mrs. Leary was fired and a substitute took over the Spanish classes.

"When did you start working here?"

"Last month." Jordan started to move away before he could ask the inevitable question.

Brody shook his head. "Are you still going to college in the fall?"

Jordan shook her head. "I'm taking a year off."

"That's too bad," Brody said. "I'm--" his eyes slid away. He wasn't good at sincerity, but he was trying. "I'm sorry about your brother. And about school --I know how much it means to you."

"And I'm sorry Mrs. Leary lost her job. I know how much it meant to her."

Brody's face reddened. "You are a bitch," he said.

Jordan whipped her gloves out of her back pocket, moved out of the break room and proceeded to Line #3. Norma Helgans didn't look up to acknowledge her; instead she heaved a box onto the conveyor belt and caught

Jordan in the back with it. She scowled and stepped away from the line without a smile or a word of apology. Jordan didn't expect any. Norma was a lifer and even though Jordan worked at the factory, she wasn't a lifer and every one knew it. The lifers hated the college kids because the college kids came in and made good money to pay their tuition and then they were gone. So, the lifers did what they could during that time to make factory life miserable for the college kids. If they could leave a line backed up with bottles for a college kid coming on, they did. If they could put the college kids working on the lines nearest the furnace, where they fainted like flies, they did. Then they belittled them for being so weak. If lifers found defects that the college kids hadn't caught, they would save them all until the end of the shift and then take them to the shift supervisor. But the lifers hadn't been able to get anything on Jordan. She had the best eyes of the young people on her shift and her life of farm work had made her tough enough so that the heat of the plant, long hours, and heavy boxes didn't faze her. That made people like Norma even madder.

"Hey, Norma? You want to work third shift? Mr. Tilchek asked me, but I can't do it," Jordan called out as she started flipping bottles into boxes.

Norma glared at her, then veered over to where Tilchek watched the lines.

Jordan heard Norma shouting at him. Although she couldn't hear what Norma said, she knew the general content. The rule was that the person with seniority always got the offer to work overtime first.

Tilchek hefted his pants over his belly. He never wore jeans, but navy blue workpants with a crease ironed down the middle. He kept his thumbs inside the waistband; as if he was worried Norma might tear him to pieces. He spoke in a low tone to counter hers. Norma frowned over at Jordan, then spun away toward the break room. Jordan looked at the bottles spinning down the line toward her. They were backing up so that the person at the inspection lamp,

someone she didn't know, didn't care to know, was shouting at her and the empty boxes were falling off the line overhead.

Tilchek came over and started throwing the bottles into boxes. His practiced motions jumpstarted her own. He was pissed. One box. Two boxes. A man from the next line over, someone Jordan had never seen before, tall and wiry, wearing a ponytail of long hair and a Harley tee shirt, came to help. Three boxes. Four. The line started running smoothly.

"You got this?" Tilchek snapped, sore at her betrayal.

Jordan nodded and the two men went off.

The plant's smell of damp sand and wet cement and dry fire and the sweat of hundreds of people filled her lungs as she packed bottles into boxes and heaved them onto the conveyer belt to be carried into the warehouse. The muscles of her forearms flexed over each other and her small hands swelled with blood. She thought about her mother and father at home in bed and she thought about the way her house looked in the moonlight, the white paint taking on a blue hue of the night, so that the house itself looked peaceful. Ever since she had been a little girl, she had a recurring dream that a giant came along and lifted off the roof of the house, to see each of them, her mother, father, brother, herself, huddled in sleep and then the cows in the barn, laying in their stalls, and the calves in their sheds. The giant never scared her, he was just a curious giant and after he had checked on their sleeping, he always went away.

Jordan didn't see the girl faint at the next line, but all of a sudden someone yelled. "Watch out!" She jumped away. The overhead belt bulged with boxes. The girl had fainted as she put a box on, and its corner caught the edge of the guiding rail and jammed solid. A box behind tumbled off and crashed near Jordan, sending shards of glass everywhere. Jordan stepped over them and continued from the backside of her line flipping bottles into boxes and heaving them onto the belt. She didn't want any of them pointing at her, saying she

was weak. She saw the girl being helped up by another supervisor, a short woman with broad shoulders and leather wristbands. The supervisor got an extra to fill in and she led the pale girl to the staff lounge. Jordan could see why they hated the college kids.

As she turned back to her line and reached for the next bottle, her hand touched something soft and furry. She caught the scream in her throat. There on the line lay a rat, its eyes congealed in death, tail stiff, scrawny claws drawn up. She whipped around in time to see Tom Brody and two other men peering out of the warehouse at her. They were laughing, slapping each other on the back, and holding their ribs. Jordan grabbed the rat by its tail and marched to the door of the warehouse, where the boys were too busy enjoying their joke to look up and see her.

"You're so funny, Brody," she said, whipping the rat down at his feet. "This place is just the right speed for you. I can see that."

"Look at Miss High and Mighty. She fell down to Earth. Boo. Hoo."

"Hey. At least I'm not a lifer." Jordan glanced at the line. It was backed up all the way to the flashing fire of the furnace, and the woman supervisor was looking for her. Jordan could get docked for leaving the line unattended. She ran back to it, Brody's words fueling her anger. She pounded bottles into cartons.

"You got a problem in the warehouse?" The supervisor stood next to her, tightening her wristbands. Muscles bulged in her forearms, the byproduct of years of lifting bottles and boxes.

One box. "No." A hypotenuse was the longest side of a right-angled triangle. Two boxes. The theme of Plato's Cave was about shadows and reality and helping others out of the shadows.

"Then don't leave the line. Or, next time I'll write you up."

Three. Willa Cather wrote *My Antonia*, *The Song of the Lark*....

"Do you hear me?" The supervisor put her hand over the box so that Jordan had to stop and acknowledge her.

"Yes," Jordan said, looking the woman full in the eye. She wasn't going to let them defeat her. This week, she had already memorized two pages of T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land." For the next hour, she packed, waving away her five-minute break to the girl who fainted.

The girl came off her line and stopped to thank Jordan. She still looked pale.

"How do you do this?" she asked.

"What?"

"Pack them away like that. You're like a machine. Doesn't this place get to you?"

Jordan breathed in the hot vapors coming off the bottles. "There are worse things," she said.

"I don't think I can take this," the girl said without asking what could be worse. "I thought I could, but I don't think I can." Her voice trailed off as she walked away.

At her last break, Jordan avoided the break room and stood outside with the smokers, the group of older workers in their late fifties and sixties, those who had already raised their children, some of those children working in the factory now. Most lived within thirty miles of the plant and conducted their lives within that radius. The night sky was solid lapis, lit by the high lights around the plant except for the one stream of foggy steam from the smoke stack. The parking lot was filled with American cars and trucks, a few motorcycles and a couple of the guys talking about taking their bikes out on Sunday.

"We could go over to the borough and get a coffee," said one. His name was Merle, stitched on a jacket with a red embroidered patch. He took a silver pocket watch out of his pocket. The plant management forbid workers to

wear jewelry on the line because of the hazard of it getting caught in the machinery. Many of the workers carried pocket watches instead.

The other man looked like a gnome to Jordan. He was small and stooped and his skin had an unhealthy pallor; even in the dead of night she could see that.

“Nice watch,” he said to Merle. “Is it new?”

“My kids gave it to me last weekend for my birthday.”

“That a train etched on there?”

“A barn,” Merle said, rubbing his thumb over the cover before he offered the watch for his friend to see. “My daughter takes jewelry classes and she did it for me after we had to sell my folks’ place.”

Merle’s daughter was a year ahead of Jordan in high school. She had gone away to college and sometimes Jordan saw her around town now, wearing vintage clothes and strange hats.

The gnome-like man shook his head and handed the watch back. “How many acres?”

“Just twenty-five now.” Merle stuffed the watch back in his pocket. “And the barn. They sold the first chunk off when they put my father in the nursing home.”

“That seems to be the way of it,” said the gnome-like man as he stroked his beard and took another puff off his cigarette. Jordan watched the two men pull the nicotine in and hold it in their lungs as if the smoke was a solid word of comfort.

On her way home, Jordan found the accident site between the bridge and the bottom of Gravitational Hill, the place where her brother Clay died in a car wreck not a month ago. In one hand she carried a warm beer and in the other a pack of peanuts. She was on her way home from work, and she wanted to sit a while by the water and listen to it.

The Quanduck was shallow this time of year and the moon made a silver path across its surface. The peanut shells made no sound as they fell away from her hand and floated like tiny boats. She and Clay loved the river, all the kids did.

From down river a sudden light plunged out and shown on the water. Then there was a splash and a bobber surfaced and floated. Often there were fishermen at night shining trout. She wanted to be alone and at the same time it didn’t really matter.

She broke more peanuts and flung the shells in the bushes out of courtesy to the fisherman.

“You stupid ass, Clay.” She removed the long sleeved flannel shirt that she wore at the glass factory to protect her arms from the hot bottles and tossed it aside. The night was warm and the air felt good against her skin. Underneath, she wore a plain white tee shirt, which had come untucked from her jeans. The jeans were stiff and uncomfortable; one of the several pairs she had bought for the factory. She took off her steel-toed work boots and socks, tossed them near the flannel shirt and sunk her toes in the water.

The light of the fisherman had moved closer upstream, but Jordan heard no sound of him until a fish broke the surface with a splash. Then she saw the line play like silver thread being pulled through the water and a moment later a trout arced in the air, gleaming in the light as the fisherman pulled it to shore.

The burn mark from the accident started high up on the trunk of the oak tree, which towered over all the others. There was no undergrowth there; it would have burned away in the fire. A doe stepped into the clearing and seeing Jordan, flicked its tail and leapt away. There was a rustling in the brush where the doe had appeared; Jordan knew it was the buck, who having sent the doe out first to test for danger, would now skirt around the clearing. She watched the spot, hoping to catch a glimpse of it, when the fisherman emerged into the clearing.

"Hey, how you doing? Catchin' anything?" Jordan stood and brushed off her pants.

"Yeah," the guy said. "It's okay."

He had a loose build, broad shoulders and strong legs. A bunch of trout hung on a line looped through his belt, strung through the gills, their dead eyes staring at nothing. He wore a wide-brimmed hat so that she couldn't see his eyes but she knew he was staring at her.

"Want some peanuts?" Jordan held out the few that were left.

The guy took the peanuts. "Figured someone was up here. Saw your peanuts going by."

"Sorry 'bout that. Once I saw your light, I tossed 'em over there." She pointed to the bushes. The empty beer bottle shone in the moonlight, along with the scattered shells.

"You want a cold one?" he asked. "I sunk a six pack near the bridge."

Jordan picked up her shirt, socks, and shoes, and they started toward the bridge.

The man asked, "What brings you out, this time of night?"

What brought her out was none of his business. "That your piece of shit truck up the hill?" Jordan asked. "I saw it coming in."

The guy laughed. "Okay. You got any more lines like that?"

"Maybe."

He shined his light into the water until it caught a silver gleam, then he pulled the six-pack from the water and handed one to her. "You hungry? I'm gonna cook these trout. Only way to eat 'em. Straight from the water."

Jordan nodded. She hadn't eaten anything but the peanuts since her sandwich that afternoon. She followed the guy onto the bridge. He leaned his pole against the cross beam and opened his tackle box. A knife lay on the top tray. He took it and cut a fish from the line, laid it on his tackle box, and whop! The head splashed into the water below.

"You want me take the bones out?" he asked.

"Yeah," she said. "Take those bones."

He sliced down the body, holding it gently between his fingers. His hands weren't clean, but they were thick and strong like the rest of him. He took the point of the knife and lifted the skeleton, peeled it right away from the fish then went down to the river and rinsed his hands and the fish, once, twice, three times. While he did that, Jordan rifled around for some twigs to build a fire. He helped her get the fire going and then he cooked the fish until it turned the color of a toasted nut, lifting it off to put a piece on each of the two tin plates he took from the bottom of his tackle box.

"This is good," Jordan said.

"You eat much trout?" the man asked.

"My brother and I used to fish," Jordan said, taking a mouthful of beer.

"Used to?"

"Yeah."

The man waited.

"He died in a crash here. Last month. Stupid fuck."

The man watched her stab a piece of trout and stuff it in her mouth. "Boys die in car accidents," he said.

"There are so many better ways to die," Jordan said. She drained the can of beer and reached for another.

"My cousin was with him," the man said. "Tim Hatch."

Jordan looked at the man more closely. He was handsome, with a long nose and blue eyes as pale as water. Her girlfriends always teased her she was a sucker for blue eyes. Fine lines curved around his mouth. The beer was giving her a buzz.

"Do you live in town?" she asked. Chapville, Connecticut, had a population of 2000. There weren't many people Jordan didn't know.

His fork glinted as he put another piece of fish in his mouth. "Not anymore. I lived with Tim's parents for a year when I was in high school."

"When was that?" The skin around his eyes was thin like onionskin.

"A long time. Ten, twelve years ago."

"Were you at the funeral?"

"I couldn't make it. But I'm here now, to sort things out."

"I was supposed to leave for college next month. I had a scholarship. But I gave it up to stay home this year and help my dad."

"You okay with that?"

"Yeah, I am," she said, raising the can to her lips.

They drank without speaking, until a faint drum of thunder started in the distance. A jagged line of lightning parted the clouds and another arched up from the ground to meet it.

"Did you see that?" Jordan asked.

The man dipped a shoulder. He looked darker now. A crack of thunder split the silence and another thread of lightning lit the clouds.

"You never told me your name?"

"It's Win."

Jordan laughed.

He did not.

"That's some name."

"Win, for Winthrop." His eyes traveled down her body. "And you?"

"Jordan." She pulled her jacket tight.

"Jordan. That's not too common. We're gonna get a storm, Jordan," he said. "I'm headed for that shelter, just across the bridge."

"Whatever," she said. The dilapidated shack had been a tool shed for loggers in earlier decades when they ran logs down the river to the sawmill, now defunct.

Win kicked some dirt on the fire and collected his gear. They had finished the six-pack.

Jordan stood and brushed herself off. "I've got to get my truck," she said, but she held her boots and shirt and socks in her hands, watching him until the rain hit.

Winthrop offered her his hand, and she took it.

When they reached the shack, Win let Jordan go first. She stumbled and fell to the floor, which was packed dirt. The smell of mold surrounded them. One window let in some light. Win took off his hat and down tumbled his hair, all the way to his shoulders. It was thick, beautiful brown hair. He looked a little wild, his eyes darting over Jordan in a way that made her look at her own body. Her legs were spread; her t-shirt clung to her breasts.

She shivered.

"You're chilled from the rain." His voice sounded husky. He knelt between her legs and put his coat over her shoulders. His body blocked the light. She tried to push herself away, but her back met the wall. She was scared and yet she thought the encounter couldn't be coincidence.

"You don't have to be afraid," he said. "Tell me, what does your name mean?"

She wrapped the coat tight around herself. Her mother had picked the name for the baby girl she dreamed of having long before meeting her father. "It means descending, flowing down."

Even with the coat, her teeth chattered.

"Well, that's real pretty."

"Fuck, it's cold," she said and wondered how she came to be there when she knew better. But knowing better was never a guarantee.

Winthrop started unbuttoning his shirt. He put that over her shoulders too. "If you lay back, I can hold you and warm you up. You can tell me about Clay."

She was scared, but the weight of his voice filled her. She wanted to hear more of it, just not the name of her brother. "I don't want you to say his name."

"Okay." His hand brushed over her face. "Were you crying earlier? I think maybe you like people to think you're tough."

"I don't give a fuck what people think," she said.

He sat back and raised his arms over his head. The t-shirt he wore exposed his stomach, a stomach defined by muscle and a thin line of hair diving below the waist of his pants.

"I don't want to keep you here, if you don't want. We can leave it we just passed through to honor them."

He leaned back to give Jordan more room, and the light came between them again. She didn't move. She thought of Clay. The dark empty space inside her seemed smaller with Win there. She reached for him and he kissed her with such force that she gasped and when she opened her mouth, his tongue darted in, searching her out. His tongue was cold, and it spread like liquid, finding all her hollow spaces. Something came blowing up from a deep part of her and her tongue slid into his mouth too, although not as sure as his. He curled his tongue around her ear, and she said, "Is that all you've got?"

Win raised himself up. "I don't have a condom."

"I'm on the pill." The lie came easy now that she had come this far. She had had sex before, but not much.

Win flowed inside of her like cold silver. She shuddered around him.

The roof leaked and water dripped, dripped, dripped onto her leg.

Win rolled off her. "Was that enough?"

"No."

He stroked her face. "You're all out of lines?" He kissed her cheek. "I got my own demons," he said. "Sometimes they lay still and I think they're dead. But then they surprise me and kick me in the teeth." The shack was so

tiny he had to remain lying down to be next to her. Finally, he stood and adjusted his clothes.

She sat up but when she did, the shack and everything in it slid to the side.

Win pulled his hair around one hand, wrapped it and tucked it up under his hat. His face disappeared again, until he opened the door and light caught his eyes. Whatever he saw in Jordan made him come back to her. He pulled her shirt over her breasts, pants up to her hips, looped behind her ears the wisps of hair that had come loose from her ponytail. Then he took his shirt and jacket back. He held her chin and looked into her eyes. "You keep flowin', Jordan."

Jordan brushed her hair back into the ponytail. "You shouldn't try one-liners," she said. "You're not too good at them."

"Can I walk you back to your truck?" he asked.

"No," Jordan said. "I can find it just fine."

"I'm going to take off while we have a lull in this storm. You stay dry, now."

He smiled down at her and stepped out into the night.

She knelt before she stood, holding the wall for support. The keys. She found them in her pocket and the next thing she knew she was in the car, jamming the key in the ignition, flying down Gravitational Hill. She sped into the fog, thinking, "*I-- am --tough;*" but she held her breath until the tires touched pavement.