

Jolene

I once worked in a factory with a girl named Jolene. We were 17 and I had lied to get hired; we couldn't legally work in the plant for another year. She was white, from somewhere around "Taylor-tucky", a name that mocked the Southern roots of working class whites in the Down River suburbs. I was black; I still am, as a matter of fact, and I lived in Detroit (still do). Without the factory we'd never have met. We were young and shapely then, which now, I'm not; I don't know about Jolene, I haven't seen her since those days in the '70's. She had just been hired at the plant, and – like they say it is, in prison – you depend on those who know the lay of the land, even if it's just a day more than you.

The factory, on a bland industrial stretch off of I-94, was a mechanized hell of extreme temperature, convoluted steel, and people at all levels with power, the wielding of which – for us – never did bode well. Women wore hairnets for "quality control", but mostly to prevent decapitation; the long-haired guys wore them too. I wore old-fashioned braids weaved to my waist; the specter of hair and heads caught in rolling gears was so horrific, we all wore the ugly nets in willing resignation, just one more theft of our outside, normal lives.

Jolene and I circled each other with cat-like territoriality, two girls used to inhabiting the center of any attention. After a while, we relaxed in the knowledge that our appeal could be divvied up without threat – there were plenty of male eyes for the both of us. We became friends, revolving around each other like planets, the type of friendship that burns too hot to last. Jolene was blond, the type of blond that's white in childhood, that leaves a fuzz of white on the arms and brows white as snow – what they call tow-headed. She had high cheekbones from a Nordic ancestor, or maybe some long ago blood of Native America that gave her face high hills and low valleys in the right places. She had a mole near her mouth and perfect teeth and she laughed all the time at everything when she wasn't mad about something. She was as beautiful as the mod girls in my teen magazines and proof that good looks were not exclusive to the rich and high class.

Ours was a work-hours friendship, walking our fast, hip-rolling walk down the cement runways of the packing lines, lithe and nubile. We flaunted our tiny waists and drum-tight thighs and switched past the high seniority ladies with their tired feet and eyes, who had left their younger bodies back in some other lifetime. We ate in the lunch-room, laughed and drove men crazy and pretended we didn't know. We held court with the tradesmen and machinists, flirted our way through the long, hard overtime days. Even so, I was

dead serious, in ceaseless examination of my surreal, steel surroundings – Alice fallen onto the wrong side of the looking glass, wanting to know just where and why I had landed.

I had landed in the blue-collar world of work after my pregnancy at 16 and my hard-headed refusal to return to school – my rebellion against the strictures of formal education, but also, though I'd never admit it, the humiliation of too-young motherhood. Those were the days when there was still shame in such a thing. The prospect of the factory met with the dismay of my businessman father and my mother (whom at that point, had never worked a day in her life except for a brief stint in his employ). Mine had been the first black family on the block in Highland Park, a then prosperous “suburb” in the middle of Detroit. My father was a record shop man amidst white bankers, salesmen, doctors—the solid middle class, in the days when that term didn't apply to blue collar folks, before proletarians had stock options and portfolios. More of “us” moved into the neighborhood, and my Talented Tenth peers were preparing for success, poised for a piece of the professional American pie. The bottom line is - working in a factory was not exactly what was expected of me.

Jolene was a young mother too. Though for me, young and unwed meant abandoning my destiny, for Jolene, from the poor and working class suburbs, it meant not escaping hers. If work in the plant was my fall from grace, it was the height of good fortune for her, key to a future other than trapped in a trailer home.

There were a handful of blacks in the plant, among them Miss Loretta, a bashful, hard-working woman from Down South who called our factory job the “plant-ation”; Indiana, small and yellow, who could work faster than anyone but fell behind on purpose so they couldn't her wear out like the machines. Fast Freddy dressed like a Technicolor pimp before he changed from his dancing clothes into his uniform each day; years later he had a 6-page spread in GQ magazine. There was brown-skinned Edna from Yazoo City, bright and funny, with sad eyes blacked from a husband's fists, before she finally got tired of it and he went to jail. Big, tie-tongued Bob, who never missed work; so soft-hearted that any woman so inclined could take all of his money, which we often did. Fine-as-wine Lynnette, who looked like a movie star and knew it, dreamed to be a flight attendant and leave us behind in the factory (which she eventually did). The Blacks were an island in a sea of suburban whites and they kept their eyes on me, lest I prove to be too smart and fast for my own good or theirs, causing trouble with my brick sh...house body or rebelling against the ways that they'd learned to survive.

At first, I was unaccustomed to the whites of the working class, and I eyed in amazement these folks too – Willadean with a Tennessee twang and black-dyed hair, who knew the most important things one could have were good work shoes and a good man. There were white men born in towns Down South who had aimed dogs and hoses on brown girls like me, bikers in regalia with chains on long wallets holding Zig-Zags and money for weed. There was Theresa from Germany who clucked about and pulled me under her wings, and family men working double-shifts to pay for their American dreams. There were engineers and machinists, exacting and smug in their skills, who more or less looked out for all of us—the people and the machines – and we grudgingly looked up to them, even if they were with supervisors during hunting season. I managed a wary co-existence with all of my new co-workers at first, and then settled into the realization that they were all “just people”. Eventually, I became their leader. But that’s another story.

We wore skin tight, high-waist Levis, denim corsets that noosed our torsos into tight circles small enough for a man’s hands to wrap around and touch fingers front to back. Even childbirth could not destroy our strong, young curves; motherhood only gave us more of what got us in trouble in the first place. Our jeans were threadbare in all the right places that implied rubbing against all the wrong things. We were locked together in beauty and failure and rebellion. We never buttoned our uniforms; the white lab-coat hems flew behind us as we sashayed down cinder block halls. We raced past the women with wisdom and seniority to get to the source of real attention – the guys whom we looked right in the eyes as we smoked cigarettes on the loading docks, letting them think they were smarter than us and might have a chance, never letting on they were wrong on both counts. Bra’s burned on TV and we didn’t wear them, proud that no one could make us, and mostly, because they stood quite nicely on their own. A supervisor, Phil, had his eye on Jolene and me, and when we’d bust into his office to report a mishap on the line, or stomped about some new imposition on our lives he’d sit up, unable to tear his eyes away from breast level, calling us “High Beams” as if he was being original. We’d roll our eyes and swivel back to our machines, letting him know that whatever he was thinking, it was out of the question.

When the line broke down or shut down early, we jumped in cars and hit the gravel road behind the plant, and flew to the bar where we’d we stay ‘til last call. By closing time we’d be knee-deep in beer and Southern Comfort and 7-Up, or Jack Daniels with a Pepsi chaser (this was back in the days when I still ruined my liquor). By closing time we’d be sloshed and stumbling, the bar full of eye-lined, hard-drinkin’ women and

wanna' be cowboys chained to assembly jobs and wives who read Harlequin Romances. Sometimes we'd sing, drunk and off-key:

"You picked a fine time to leave me Lucille...with four hungry children and a crop in the field...I've had some bad times, been through some sad times, But this time the hurt it won't heal...You picked a fine time to leave me Lucille"

The jukebox was full of those Kenny Rodgers songs, and ballads of Elvis and Patsy Cline. Some barmaids could fight you like a man, and, by night's end, saw-dust and sickness lined the bathroom floors. I know that I was watched over by the God that I didn't believe in at the time, on those nights after last call. I'd be driving home, to the Far East Side, cold drunk on a coal black highway, hand slapped over one eye to keep the center line of 1-94 from blurring double. That I didn't die or kill, I now attribute to a force miraculous.

It was June - suddenly summer - and I'd been at the plant for eight months. The weather turned glorious and I left it outside each day while I went in for the afternoon shift at three. Day after day I was missing the summer, getting off work at midnight, or two or three a.m. I should have been graduating high school, going to the prom, and here I was punching a clock every day. In an awful, absurd epiphany, it occurred to me that there was no more "summer vacation" like in school, year after year, since kindergarten. In this new world of work you might get a week off, maybe two, but certainly not a whole summer. This revelation was an awful surprise, and it hit me very hard.

Jolene and I were working in separate departments, and the summer heat combined with the inferno inside turned the whole plant into a sauna. Grease oozed from the gears of the conveyor belts and even up out of the bricks in the floor; both working and walking were a dangerous proposition. We toiled in a steam bath of production quotas, eight, ten, twelve hours a day. Some vomited in the heat, some passed out; the supervisors handed out salt tablets. From the catwalk, you could see waves of heat quavering over our steaming heads; in the flat and flickering fluorescent light, the sweating, moving limbs and machinery were a vision of a different kind of hell. Angry conflicts spit into the air at the smallest provocation or supervisory order. There was talk of a walk-out but no one dared to face the wrath of the company and union both.

Still, out in the parking lot, on breaks and at lunchtime, parties sprang from trunks of cars and the backs of station wagons. Eight-track tapes played Willie Nelson, Bowie, Marvin Gaye; beer and weed hidden from the security guards - who got high among themselves. In this cauldron of heat, rage and music, love

affairs bubbled up among single and married alike; furtive grappling behind storage rooms and stacks of wooden pallets, full-blown trysts during the midnight shift in motels on the way home. The next day was still hot and you still went back to work.

One day, during a break-down on the line, I slipped away. Not far of course, for the line would start up and I'd better be there, or else. I hid behind boxes and machines to furiously read a page or two of Flaubert, Hershey, Hegel. Not just me, for in the plant there were real scholars. Some discuss issues of the day like career diplomats from their designated spots in the lunchroom, while others study in silent, desperate reading, sneaking brief, hungry moments of escape. I looked for the best route to dodge the foreman and slipped through the back of the line, tipping carefully on the oil-slick floors, past the press where a lady had lost two fingers—one in one year and one the next. I slipped past the maintenance tool shed, over a pallet of supplies, past bins of packing boxes, then made it around the hi-lo shack. Finally, drenched in sweat, I reached my destination, the railcar dock.

Away from the suffocating heat in the plant, it was a fine June day of a hot and bright new summer. I blinked in the clean, clear sunlight, and I could smell the hay used to pack equipment, and the blue wildflowers and wheat that grew along the railroad tracks. The plant was on old farmland and there was still a rural beauty to anything that had escaped the industrial maw. The dock was a massive barn, high and open ended so train cars could be maneuvered in and out on tracks embedded in the floors. A car would be uncoupled, unloaded and emptied of raw materials, then days or weeks later, hitched up and rolled away. The train was a mammoth thing, its wheels higher than the top of my head; a sleeping mastodon of steel. Sometimes a car would be bright yellow or red, depending on the cargo, or huge tankers filled with oil or some other liquid commodity. Young guys - restless and trapped in the plant on the hot summer days, when they'd rather be at the beach - would climb up the sides, twenty feet high, and smoke a joint on top of the car, unseen by nosy supervisors or worrisome chicks. I listened closely; I was lucky today, and all alone. I walked the length of the car and snatched off my hairnet, to feel the breeze blow cool through my braids. A beam of sunshine from a vent in the roof made a square on the floor ahead of me, and I watched motes of dust and grain float in a tube of light from the sky to the floor. I walked over and stood in the patch of sun, as if that square of floor-bound light held the last vestige of my life long ago.

Suddenly, reality and self-pity swirled around me like snow in a globe – my ruined life, friends at proms and graduations laughing at summer parties before running off to college, and here was I, a teenager with a child, refusing to let parents or welfare help, now paying the price for my young lust and pride, defiant and rebellious, tying my fate to those who labored. I looked up into the brightness but the sun held no answers. I let the sweet June heat replace the steam-bath that I had left on the line. I saw myself, movie-like, from outside myself; a dark, lonely seraph in a column of defeat and light. After a few minutes, it was time to go back to the line.

Well, I thought, I'll stick it out a little while longer; then I'll decide it's time to tell the plant goodbye.

A dozen summers later I was still there.

I started out telling you about Jolene. It's been three decades since we met, and actually, there's not much more to say; we stayed friends for a while before maybe she was fired, or maybe walked out of her own accord for a job with more pay. Maybe her pretty smile didn't make up for her smart mouth after too many beers or too much anger about a supervisor's order she didn't want to follow. I wonder if she started going with the kind of man you couldn't be with and stay beautiful; you'd have to turn brittle and hard and ready to take a whippin'. I wonder if her face got that punched up look of too many schnapps and bar-fights, if her pretty teeth were gone, if she added many children to that first one, if she met up with drugs.

Or, maybe her life took another wide turn and she ended up a fine lady; with a cultured laugh, high cheekbones, white-blond hair and pearls. In my memories she's still young, and raw and beautiful as the Kentucky hills. I don't know what happened to her after those first few years of seniority. I never saw her again. But even now, when I see a white-blond woman of means – or not – I always think of Jolene.

So maybe I told you about her so that I could tell you about me. For looking back, of course, my life was not near over, my factory days were clearly no defeat. They were just another row of pieces in my life's puzzle, a twelve-year stop in my journey of years. Maybe I just wanted you to know that once I was young with a waist so small a man's hands could fit all around, with thighs like congas and hip-length braids that blew in the wind. Once upon a time I had another life.

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