

## It's All Over Now

Jim is focused. His blonde curly hair is teased out five inches in all directions. It glows red through frayed edges, absorbing the ruby light of the early night parlor. His face, loaded with freckles, is oddly wholesome. He nods as he cooks. We call him Doctor. He is sweating. It is August 11, 1969. His Coors t-shirt is damp, so he pulls it off and tosses it in the corner on the floor, leaving him lank in straight cut Levi's. My lost brother. Fiddling over a small wooden table once owned by Celest Nielson's grandmother, he moves decisively as tiny bursts of light litter the area around the flame heating the bottle cap below.

We are in a large, ramshackle Victorian house on Broadway just blocks north of grey downtown Aurora, Illinois. The house has plenty of rooms with thick carpets, comfortable old furniture. The Nielson sisters rent the house from their father. Celest, who is younger than I am by a few years, has a baby boy. We are children having children. We are here for the party of my life. It began early last night. I turned twenty-one yesterday. I don't like birthdays. The sisters offered to host the event. It is their idea. Ok, I said. I made it, right?

I met Jimmy in fourth grade in Arvada, Colorado. Our hunger for the music of the era pushed us together. The Music Machine, The Standells, The Thirteenth Floor Elevators, The Count Five. Raunchy, snotty proto-punk. Most other kids were still into mop-top cute British Invasion. We sneered at anyone who didn't share our esthetic.

The hours in Jimmy's suburban underground room were spent learning the latest songs on his cheap Kay guitar and drawing. I am the one pushing the drawing. For me it is always a competition. The creek that runs through our world came rushing from the foothills nearby, an area loaded with the snakes and turtles we hunted. We were satisfied by the freedom of riding bikes and swimming at the Jeffco pool. Candy from Rexall's drugstore. We smoked cigarettes in

overgrown fields full of prairie grass and cottonwoods. Jimmy had already cultivated a detached cool I tried to emulate.

Twenty-one-year-old Jim's once bright emotions are snuffed out. In his wake, always a wreckage. He moves rigid, pacing agitated like a gangly Frankenstein. I try to avoid him these days, but sometimes I have needs. At those times I swim out to him and ignite shit, too. Today, we made a pact to jump to the future. I offered to give forty-eight hours to go where only multiple injections of crank will take us. From me to you, he said. Shoot me, I said—the first time ever. My desire is his desire. The devil loves a convert.

Jimmy frowns down into the mix of white cross pills and water. "I'll filter the crap out. It ain't meth, like I used to get back home, but it'll do." Medicine man.

The police back in Arvada have Jimmy's photo on a wall, more than one. That is part of the reason he's living in this crummy industrial town outside of Chicago. Last time he got out, the authorities made it clear he should leave Arvada and not return. They still drop in at local bars, asking his friends about him, just to send a message. His father had a visit, too—infuriating Jimmy more than most anything.

Jimmy's current girlfriend Shyla is pregnant. It is not his child. She was pregnant when they met. It is what attracted Jimmy to her. He is play-acting. She sees right through it and is biding her time. This won't last long. It never does. She will find an opening and land safe.

The house is still packed with people. Teetering around are friends, veering in from all pockets of my life. A bottle of tequila gold is passed to me; it has a flower and ribbon with my name on it. Kind Mick pins the flower to my shirt. I wobble-bow as I take a big gulp and hug the bottle tight. This morning I woke up in one of the upstairs bedrooms after a blackout left me with lifeguard Suzanne on watch last night. We'd been around for a few years. She's a correction beam.

Wading through the crowd to the back bathroom I splash water on my face then fall into the

mirror. I see my black cowboy shirt with red roses on it, an offering from Dianna last year. My fingernails are painted black—chipped. My thin arms rattle with bracelets running up and down my wrists, clanking silver to plastic. Torn, patched jeans and heavy steel-toe boots, just in case. My clothes are now three plus days on and ragged to rank. On my mind is the Interstate headed west, running right through nearby. Just a runaway mile to hitch to it, always calling. I push my hands through my chopped-up hair—greasy—my eyes heavy, bloodshot. I tilt my head and pose in what I imagine is a glamorous style, like the girls I've seen do in here. Then, smeared clear across my face smashes red. Fuck. I can taste her blood again. It's laced with haunting. I say her name out loud and push to stumble out the door fast. *Dianna.*

*You two look alike*, so many told us after we got together when I was sixteen and she was seventeen. *Like brother and sister*, people said. She liked that idea. She left me last month. It's my fault. *It's a shame*, people who don't know better confide. *We all wanted to be like you two*, someone says forty years later. I nod and still hold the hurt inside. *How's your daughter*, some idiot asks. *Great*, I say. *Lost*, I worry. *Found*, I hope. *Waiting*, is the truth.

Tommy's excited—going the distance with me this weekend. He is worried about Anne's parents. They say the authorities are going to get involved. Anne doesn't listen. She runs with a gang of Naperville teenage girls. We are low-rent fun to them, bad side of town. Tommy made sure Anne wasn't here tonight. Some others from her group made it through. Kerri, who is with Robert, of course. Then there is Carla, the leader. The two circle for hours.

Tommy is short and tight-muscled. He has a missing front tooth. His voice is laced with a Sylvester the Cat stuttering lisp. His thick hair is jacked up like a cockatoo. Wearing blue and white thin-stripe coveralls and no shirt, he smells of the toluene he sniffs—flapping and staggering during the short high it induces. His many street fights, already apparent in scars he sports, are the result of his strategic alliance with the local gang the Spanish Skulls, the kings of huffing. The Skulls help us navigate this city where violence is pervasive and much of it is aimed at us from all sides. Tommy is up for shit. He was born into it. Father dead before his arrival. Stepfather always home in bed, lying in a pool of his own booze piss. Tommy's way of facing terror with a grin is his allure until it isn't. The window is small, but Carla is considering it.

The smell from the fluid bubbling in the metal cap is acrid. More crushed pills dissolve further into hot liquid. We stand over it like it's magic amber. Rocket fuel for the bloodstream. The room has lamps with shades covered by thin scarves. I shiver. Two days of alcohol and the short sleep with Suzanne has left me disheveled, shaky. I'm poison.

I imagine Dennis Hopper making *The Last Movie*. The scene where he is shot, over and over, dead, and then gets up and walks away. Often my emotions twirl out of sync with the action before me. I am on a glitchy delay. "What would Dennis do?" I say to steady myself.

Robert's long mane of brown hair frames his large, smiling face. Cigarette smoke blasts through his nostrils. He holds it high. He's still sensible. I keep him close, a buffer. We make runs into Chicago in his MG. Kick it all over, guzzling cheap champagne. We wow and guffaw, in our own world. Robert's fresh exuberance takes me back to when things were possible. He works hard by day at his family-run shop in Aurora, making screen prints. Here he is riding our wave—but he will make the long run. With Kerri, too. They stay way after I leave this world.

We get pills through a low-end dealer whose real name is Dick—but is known as Ugly Bozo. It's a name I gave him after he stole my plush girlfriend when I moved here five years back. *Dodged a bullet*, is all my Dad said when I tried to confide in him, sad. Ugly Bozo has scratchy hair that sticks up in red-blond Brillo Pad piles. He is tall, skinny, tiny head, possum face, pockmarks, big flat feet. Ugly Bozo has no friends, not even his brother and sister. He sells dope. "Watch out, Bozo follows the worst path presented," his younger sisters confides.

Earlier, when Jimmy and I discussed a quick source for the speed, I hated to say it, but I had no choice.

*Ugly Bozo—really—no—yeah—only one around now—no—no—OK—call—OK*

He arrived in less than fifteen minutes, careening up the driveway too fast in a piece of shit car. We don't have much, but we take our cars seriously. He got out slow, unfolding his clown legs,

stepping to the ground then popping up sudden idiotic springy like on two pogo sticks. Tommy held out a beer, as if to offer it—then poured it all out to the ground at Ugly Bozo’s feet, splashing his hideous elephant bell jeans. Jimmy began ticking, wound tight. He took stock, scanning, noting everything. He’s gone straight.

“I have bags. Hundred lots in each,” Ugly Bozo said. The words rushed through his pinched face. There was a small bulge in his back pocket. He reeked of weak scum. Tommy clutched the empty beer bottle by the neck. “We’ll buy four and you toss one in,” Tommy said. We knew this is it, or things go bad. Ugly Bozo suddenly knew it too. Imagine the long silence.

“You *cowboys* obviously need it.” The insult didn’t land. After a pause, Tommy stepped forward to make the transaction. Four tens. It could still go wrong. Ugly Bozo took the cash and handed over five bags. Tommy stared up at him with his big, brown cow-eyes wide, blinking coy, eyelashes fluttering. He pursed his thick lips and made a loud smooch sound. Ugly Bozo froze. Jimmy stood, arms now crossed, mouth crooked, still not convinced. Jimmy has one tattoo—on his upper arm. Handmade with ink and needle, bad, prison-like. It is a cross with the word MOTHER in the middle.

Six years ago, Jimmy pushed his mother down the basement stairs. He was lush-drunk and high. It was three in the morning. We were trying to sneak through the back door when she grabbed him hard, screaming. He calmly made a slow solid push. Down she tumbled. He quietly walked to his room and locked the door. We heard her crying, his father consoling her. I imagined crying too but knew better. Jimmy sucked up a hit of blotter acid he kept for special occasions and laid back to listen to The Who. The next evening, his father drove us to a party. He told us to be careful and then gave us condoms. Walking to the door, Jimmy said, proud, “That’s my Dad.”

“Don’t come back—unless I whistle,” said Tom as he sashayed away, holding the bags of pills out like a purse, mimicking the drag queens we admire who work at The Baton in Chicago. Ugly Bozo carefully backed down the driveway, then accelerated loud once he was on the street. He considered his father’s shotgun. His father died last year, brought down by a heart attack when just over fifty, at the time well-known popular voice on local radio. Dick avoids the grave.

In the house, in the living room, four women sit cross-legged on an overstuffed couch, listening to music, talking. They wear little makeup; proudly pursuing various forms of new female. Suzanne beams through fetching slit eyelids. She's sparkles smart. Visits the museum at the Chicago Art Institute often—goes *aw* gazing at her future. “New Mexico,” Celest says, willing her way out of here. A prophecy. Go West. She will. Celest wears a blue and red tie-dye apron shirt that Dianna made. Dianna is a black swan so elsewhere.

On the table, the water bubbles up in the cap above the flame. The liquid turns pearl. The smell stronger. Excitement mounts. We hover over Jimmy. Marlene walks in. She is back, fresh from yesterday, and stares straight into me. She is brown and lean in her summer uniform—cut-offs, short top, no shoes. Marlene came from Wisconsin, tagging along with an older, shaggy boyfriend and his gang. He is over thirty. We never see them anywhere but their place. Strange scene there, she never explains. I don't pry. Marlene has a wide mouth of perfect white horse teeth and jade eyes. She slides her hands into my back pockets. I back away and point to the water in the cap, boiling up. *See*, I say.

“Oh yeah?” she pouts. She absently picks up my trim, unadorned black leather jacket that sits on a stool. She slips it on. We work together in the recreation department at a place for people with developmental disabilities. There, we pretend to be a thing. We leave it there. *Maybe*, she thinks. She is always eager to be smothered by sky all day and night. I focus on the hypodermic needle, now in Jimmy's hands. He holds it up to the light. I have had enough tequila and beer to numb me stupid. Jimmy draws liquid through the cotton with precision. He holds it up and finds the raised vein in the middle of my right arm. In slips the needle, through the skin, right into place. Blood blooms. Surging through me, I feel it detonate my brain, piece by piece. Ping, ping, ping. Everything blossoms, ecstatic, all at once. I am gushing, in overdrive.

The needle slides out, my arm leaks. He refills the syringe and fixes. Tommy's next. Our fluids mix, our communion. Robert says *no* to the needle. Smart move. Instead, he settles on swallowing the pills. Too many for his own good. Marlene is a firm no—she's just here for the ride, a witness to collapse. My eyes spark, focused on her perfect glassine lips as she close-talks.

She slithers nearer and says something rich coated with syrup. Her face moves blurry across mine, glazing my lips with each word. I am vibrating. Cotton mouth. The dead air rushes in, wild, alive, abuzz with breaking particles.

Suddenly, my mouth opens—the words gush out. Marlene jumps back at the pandora. Her eyes open up wide. Her pupils are black mirrors as she twitches. I leap past her to find Roxy Music's *For Your Pleasure* in the stack of records. Got it. Got it here. I place the record quick on the turntable. The arm lowers. The sound roars over us all.

*It's a new sensation.....*Bryan Ferry screams. *Do the Straaaaaand.....*

I grab Robert and yank him down to a crouch. *Listen. Listen. Listen. Do you hear it, man? Jesus, man, that's us. US. He says soooo.* I tell him. I plead pulling on Marlene too. *Listen, listen, listen, listen there, let's go. Can we go there. Remember?* I plummet to her knees. She leans down and presses the side of her head to my chest. I write her name a hundred thousand times and stuff it inside my head as it gashes open.

In comes Dianna, her alabaster skin and blue eyes. In comes Dianna, sleeping as I watch her, perfect, curled on the bed in the Oak Ave apartment. Dianna comes high above in the backroom third floor where we decided to conceive sunshine. Dianna: magnetic, spectral, forever.

I pull Marlene to me and hold her close for life. She broke her mother's heart when she left the church behind, but here she recalls some kind of divinity to deliver me for just once. I run my fingers through her velvet hair. Over and over. All I feel is Dianna.

The gauzy clock above us calculates the hours ahead. Our aches need to be fed. Robert wrangles Kerri with new joy. They paw at each other in the corner. The silver spray in her black hair shines. Dr. Jimmy nods to no one, now slumped in a chair cold alone. His body deflates as his moment passes. Hunger sets in again as he pulls back the curtain to see if cops are coming. Just a matter of time. He twirls the lone needle like a weapon. Tommy punches the wall, busting open scabbed knuckles. He turns and reveals this to red Carol, proof that he knows she is his, flaming

forever. She nods.

Down the road, dawn slams into the small train station, my father's joint. It brought us here. He is gone now, but he left behind these myriad tracks. They go in all directions to everywhere. Ahead there's shattering. I push deep into the open wound. It's pulsing through every part of me. I am on fire, a broke transmitter. This is our connection. Can't you feel it?

Dianna runs out of time. Gone for good.