

Jesse lived in suburbia, in a town with confused values. Like many girls in her town, she was sheltered in middle class privilege. Now seventeen, she'd thought about college; her parents both college grads, but it didn't seem to be coming her way. She'd negotiated her way around studies and social life, especially during the final two years of school, but not to her best advantage. She chose to slide in academics to gain acceptance of cooler, less studious classmates. Now it was the end of June, 1969, and she didn't mind going to work.

Guys either went to college for S-2 status, filed papers to assert conscientious objection, left for Canada, or for Vietnam. Troops had begun to return home that spring, but an eighteen-year-old who left school in junior year wasn't among them. He was killed in action, and it Jesse's town hard.

What could go wrong? Her New York City-raised mom let herself believe there could be no danger to her only child in this small town. She chose to cultivate a comfortable lack of awareness of her daughter's interests or whereabouts, and rarely restricted her. Her father's work and temperament kept him distant.

Jesse's routine was to drive home from her job as a nurse's aide, change from her white uniform into frayed bell-bottoms, embroidered shirt and fringed moccasins, and brush out her long, straight, brown hair. Without saying much, she often left the house before dinner, walked to the deli and ordered a ham and cheese and a Yoo-Hoo. She waited for other kids to show up, smoke and talk about nothing much.

Sometimes Rich would show up alone. Friendly and intelligent, Jesse thought of him. Reserved. He kept his sandy hair shorter than many guys did, and wore heavy-framed glasses. He was pale, if not unhealthy, about six feet tall with big shoulders. At eighteen, he was neither working nor in school: a bad combination if you hoped to avoid the draft.

Jesse and Rich's crowd loitered as long as they could, until patrol pulled up to chat, when they left for someone's house by car or foot. They might walk to his house, a mile from their hang out-five blocks from her house. His parents both worked, and watched TV in the living room after dinner. They never said more than a "Hi" to Rich and Jesse when they walked in the front door and headed upstairs to Rich's bedroom at the rear of the large colonial.

Rich passed a joint to Jesse in front of his open bedroom window. Then they lounged on the wall-to-wall and played records on his portable turntable that resembled a small suitcase. Stacks of vinyl to choose from, Stones and Beatles were favorites—"Their Satanic Majesties Request" and "The White Album," especially Paul's voice on "Helter-Skelter." Confusion: To them, it didn't matter if the songs made sense. Nothing made sense, anyway, it seemed to them. Jesse played at DJ, while Rich lay back with his hands behind his head and listened with his eyes closed. His parents didn't seem to object to the music's volume, or that he was alone in his room with a young girl. Jesse felt comfortable with Rich because he didn't touch her. He was a quiet friend she could be herself with. They hung out and waited with each other. They didn't know what it was they waited for, but when there was something else to do, they went along.

Rich had a plain old beige Dodge. They would sometimes drive out of town and get high, play the eight-track he had hooked up to little rear speakers. One night, he said, "I got invited to a party in the Village. Go with me." It sounded cool to her, so Rich drove them over the Bridge and downtown with the music turned up.

Dread hit Jesse in her gut when he squeezed into a spot on a choked East Village street. She

followed him up cement steps to the door of a narrow walk-up, and into a filthy stairway. Several flights up, his pale knuckles tapped a grubby door. Her heart pumped hard. A girl with scraggly long hair, wearing an Indian print skirt and an oversized man's t-shirt opened to Rich's knock, and knew his name. The greasy odor of open chip bags, stench of stale ashtrays, sour beer and soda cans, cigarette smoke, and remnants of take-out mingled with sweat, weed and squalor in the dim living room. A few people greeted the newcomers with a nod. Jesse glanced nervously around at young men and women in shabby dress and demeanor seated on an overstuffed couch and random chairs. Rich had on a buttoned short-sleeved tattersall shirt and Wranglers; Jesse, a tan fringed vest over a loose-fitting white poet's shirt and purple hip-huggers. He sat tall on an up-turned milk carton, and motioned to Jesse to sit next to him on a folding chair.

Without music, the room lacked the tone of any party Jesse had been to. As she accepted a pipe, she noticed Rich pass money. In exchange, he took a tiny twisted plastic bag of white powder, and stuck it in his shirt pocket. A guy with bad teeth on the couch picked up a kitchen spoon from the coffee table and tapped white powder from a glassine envelope into it. Jesse felt weak. He squirted water from a glass syringe into the spoon, and held it over the lit candle butt that stood in a jar top. Rich tied a thick elastic band, like Jesse often saw at the hospital, around his left arm. The junkie passed Rich the syringe, and asked Jesse if she wanted some. She shook her head quickly, "No, thanks!" and turned away, trying not to show her horror. When she looked at Rich again he smiled. He became talkative. After about an hour of fear and tension, her look said, "please," and Rich said, "O.K., let's go."

Down at the curb, Rich said, "You have to drive." "So that's why you brought me here," she whispered when she understood his invitation, and adrenalin shot through her when he replied by putting his keys in her hand. She gripped the wheel all the way up the West Side Drive, while Rich dozed. She had never driven in the City, only knew a couple of trains. Over George Washington Bridge, onto Route 4, and the tape player stayed off. It was one a.m., over two hours since her friend took her up to a shooting gallery and shot dope in front of her. How many times had he done that, she wondered? He had pulled the tourniquet tight with his teeth like he'd done it before.

Off at River Road and back to their quiet Mayberry. She stopped under the streetlamp at her corner and said goodbye without expression. She walked down the block to her house without looking back at his Dodge, and it slowly pulled away.

She never saw Rich again. Jesse avoided their hang-out, and never returned to play records with him on his bedroom floor. In a few weeks she left for Aspen with new friends. That August, the musical explosion of music highlighted a peaceful dream of universal brotherhood, but the draft was still on. The anti-war movement would peak that November, with massive demonstrations. The lottery would follow under Nixon. Confusion, indeed, the year Jesse graduated.

She'd had a taste of the betrayal that comes so easily to an addict, someone she had trusted, but about whom she knew nothing. He had taken advantage of her kindness and naiveté. When she heard, a year later that Rich had overdosed in his parents' bathroom, Jesse concluded, "rather than face death in the Mekong Delta."

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