

He's So Heavy

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It was a late night in 1983, Killing Joke was on the radio, and my brother Jimmy was spread out across the backseat of my Chevy singing along to the tune. Although, “singing” isn’t exactly the appropriate word to use as he was barely on key and the only intelligible thing I could make out from his sloshed slurring was the word “requiem” which he ended up just repeating over and over. Earlier that night, he had phoned me telling me to pick him up from his friend Richard’s house. I didn’t ask him what he and Richard were up to; I already had a pretty good idea. Either way, I dragged myself out of bed, groggy as hell, and had to explain to my pissed off mother that Jimmy wasn’t home because he fell off his bike and broke his arm, so I had to pick him up at the hospital. She bought it, of course, and went back to bed.

Now, instead of thanking me for my efforts, here he was singing backseat show tunes, and badly at that, while I drove him ten miles back to Downey. I had half a mind to throw him out on the curb the way mom used to do with us when we were being annoying little shits in her car. I thought she was just being a capital B back then, but I couldn’t help but sympathize with the poor woman’s plight when I was the one who had to contend with the problem child.

I changed the station hoping to find one that was playing a song Jimmy didn’t know the words to. After a few turns of the dial, I landed on a station playing “Superstar.” I figured they were probably playing it as a tribute to Karen Carpenter who had just recently died then. I relaxed as I remembered how he always hated the Carpenters. Back when we were kids, mom would always play their songs on her turntable. Karen’s voice filled the house and Jimmy would run to mom telling her to turn it off, which she never did. Now, I was never much of a fan of them either, but Jimmy harbored a real hatred for them. I remember one day mom was listening to “Top of the World.” Jimmy complained to her saying he wanted to hear the Alfred E. Neuman record his dad had given him, his favorite at that time. She told him the Alfred record was for waterheads, and listening to it would turn him into one, so she put it on the top of the refrigerator which, unless he turned into Stretch Armstrong, was way out of his six-year-old-boy arm reach. A day later, he stole and smashed her Carpenters album.

I thanked God that no station would ever play that stupid Alfred record, otherwise I would hear Jimmy belching in sync with “It’s a Gas.” Unfortunately, a few of those Carpenter’s songs must’ve stuck in his head without him, or me, knowing because he started singing along to the radio. Again, he just kept repeating a single word over and over, this time it was “baby.”

“At least sing the songs correctly!” I told him.

“Oh, don’t worry, Stephen, I will.” He cleared his throat and began to belt out his version of the chorus: *“Stephen, Stephen, Stephen, Stephen, oh Stephen. Fuck you. You’re such a douche.”*

He laughed and I would’ve joined him if I weren’t so pissed. Instead, I said “Why don’t you just shut the fuck up, Jimmy.”

“Why don’t you come back here and make me.”

“Do I really have to do that? Can’t you just be quiet for once in your life?”

“I don’t know. You tell me.”

“I did tell you. I told you to shut the fuck up, didn’t I?”

“And I told you to come back here and make me. If you got the stones, boy,” he said in a gruffer voice.

“What, you think I won’t?”

“I know you won’t. Goody two shoes. Pencil dick. Asshole.”

I stopped the car in the parking lot of a Thrifty, got out, opened the left-side door that Jimmy’s head was resting against and proceeded to reintroduce him to ol’ love and hate. I scored a few hits to his head before he curled up into a ball against the right-side door. I crawled into the car trying to get close enough to him to land a few more hits. He started kicking me in retaliation, looking like he was riding an invisible bicycle while I looked like I was swatting at bees. He began laughing, acting as if we were engaged in some sort of childhood playfighting, which, I guess, we sort of were.

Though all those buttery nipple shots he indulged in earlier should’ve made any attempt by him to land a kick in any specific part of my face unlikely, he got lucky and managed to plant one right on my nose and mush it under his Dr Martens boot. I crawled back and out of the car and felt a river flowing out of both nostrils. I was able to cup my hand over the lower half of my face before any blood trickled down to my shirt. “Oh shit. Did I hit you?” he said, still laughing. I pulled the car keys out of my pocket with my free hand and threw them at him, “Drive yourself home, asshole!” Part of me hoped he would and end up plowing into a lamppost or something. Part of me knew he would never be stupid enough to do so.

I fought back tears as I stomped my way towards the Thrifty, making a conscious effort not to look back at Jimmy no matter how many times he yelled he was sorry. Once inside, I asked the guy at the counter for the key to their restroom and rushed over to it, still covering my face with my hand. In the restroom, I pulled four sheets of brown paper towels out of the dispenser, wet them under the sink’s faucet, and shoved two sheets into each one of my nostrils. I washed and dried my hands then stared at myself in the scratched-up mirror, reading all the slurs people wrote on it, noticing how it almost looked like they were referring to me.

Examining my bloodied, wet visage, I got to thinking about how long

it has been since someone had fucked up my nose. The last time I remember it happening was back in '72 when I was eleven years old. It was the day mom took Jimmy's Alfred record. I remembered him crying near the fridge. I asked him what his deal was, and he pointed to the record sitting on top of it. Being taller than the little tyke, I was able to stand on my tippy toes and snatch the record back for him. Later on, mom caught us listening to it in the living room and correctly assumed that I was the one who swiped it. She chased me around the house holding Jimmy's dad's belt, probably trying to emulate his style of punishment. After a while of running, I ended up back in the living room where I slipped on the shag carpet and hit the hardwood floor nose first, then I was the one crying. Jimmy just stared helplessly as mom stood over me and said proudly, "You see that? That's what you get."

Before heading out of the restroom, I shoved a few more paper towels into my pocket and wiped the blood stains near my mouth. I exited the store and walked back to my Chevy. When I got there, I found the engine already turned on and Jimmy sitting in the front passenger seat listening to "Goodbye to love." Maybe it was just the light of the lamppost giving me a better look at him, but I noticed his hair was more disheveled and his face more flushed than it was just a few minutes earlier.

"I threw up," he said.

"Clearly."

I drove out onto the freeway with the windows open, letting the cold February air hit our faces as we made our way back to Downey. Jimmy looked at me with eyes that resembled a puppy's right after it had just pissed on the rug.

"How you feeling?" he said.

I looked at him, mouth ajar, as paper towels plugged up my nose, "Fine, and you?"

He looked at me, mouth also ajar, with red dots around his lower eyelids, "Me? Alright, I guess."

"That's good. Mom's gonna be pissed at us, you know."

"Pissed at me, you mean. Why would she be pissed at you? You didn't do anything except what I told you. Thanks for that, by the way."

We both turned our attention to the road moving toward us and sat silently for a while listening to the end of "Top of the World." It was towards the end of the song that Jimmy decided to speak again.

"Hey, you wanna know something?"

"What is it?"

"You remember when we were kids and mom was listening to that song? Remember how I smashed her album? You must've thought I really hated the Carpenters, huh."

"Well, you did. Didn't you?"

"No. I didn't. Not at all. I loved them. Still do."

"Well, if you loved them, why'd you smash the album?"

"I don't know. Guess I was just pissed off. But I love them, Stephen. I think Karen is – was fucking amazing," his voice cracked as he said it. "Richard likes them too, you know. My Richard, that is (not Richard Carpenter). He played some of their songs on his guitar for me. He's real good, you know. Might make it big someday."

"Yeah, about him. You know you got to stop seeing him, right?"

"I know," he sighed. "But I won't. You know I won't."

"Yeah, guess I do. But I can't keep covering for you."

"Pretty soon, maybe you won't have to."

"What do you mean?"

"I'll tell you tomorrow."

"No, tell me now. What do you mean?" He looked away from me. "Are you leaving?"

"Like I said, I'll tell you tomorrow."

"Look, Jimmy, if you're leaving, I got to make sure you know what you're doing."

"I do."

"What makes you so sure?"

"I got a place I could go to. Richard's parents don't care. School, well, that's pretty much a bust, so forget about all that. Everything else will come up roses. I play drums as good as Bonham now, and you can't tell me that's not true because Mr. Adrien, the music teacher, told me the exact same thing and you know he knows his shit. I can sing, too. So, you figure the rest out."

"And mom?"

"What's she got to do with it?"

He correctly assumed I'd understand what he meant by that question, so, I didn't try to answer him. Still, I had many things I wanted to tell him, but nothing would come out of my mouth. He seemed dead set, and I almost wanted to congratulate him for showing the kind of bravery I lacked. I could've, but I didn't.

Another Carpenters song came on the radio: "I Won't Last a Day Without You." "You know something, Jimmy?" I said, "I think they're alright, too." I cranked up the volume and his face lit up. I told him to show me if he's as good as he thinks he is and he began to sing along, properly this time.