Karen Carpenter and I Hang Out at the Old Elementary School

Karen Carpenter and I hang out at the old elementary school on weeknights. We lean against the chain link fence, hitting our feet against it until we can hear dogs start to bark. We walk around the baseball diamond counter-clockwise, tracing crop circles in the dirt. She says she used to be a hell of a pitcher when she was a kid.

“I really was something,” she says.

I tell her she still is Something, and she grins in the dark, but I don’t think she knows what I mean. I don’t think I know what I mean. I’ve seen her name in my parents’ CD collection, which is never a good sign. I know she must have been pretty famous at one point, because when we met, she introduced herself in that carefully humble, apologetic way of people who never have to say their own names. Sometimes I think about digging up her records and listening to them, but I am too worried that I won’t like her music. I couldn’t stand to be disappointed in her. I get along with Karen Carpenter better than anyone I’ve ever known. We are great friends.

We met in the summer. My high school band was playing for the elementary school’s fundraiser, bleating out football-game songs from the hot folding chairs we had set up on the field, and she was in the crowd of middle-aged parents. I play the trumpet, so I could see her tapping her foot and nodding the whole time from where I sat, dead center, behind the French horns. She was wearing one of those 1950’s dresses buttoned up to the neck, white with enormous sleeves.

She came up to me when we were packing up to leave. I was folding up my music stand when she tapped me on the shoulder.

“Excuse me,” she said, a wide smile eating up half her face. “I want to tell you how much I enjoyed your playing.”

I stopped what I was doing. “My playing?”

“Yes,” she said. “I think you are a very good trumpet player.”

“Well thanks,” I said. “But it must have been Jimmy that you heard. I’m only second chair.”
“No no no!” She shook her head and laid a hand on my arm. “I heard you. What’s your name?”

“Richard.”

Her smile widened benevolently. “Richard. Another Richard, huh.”

We looked at each other without moving for some time, like two pictures, until I stuck out my hand and asked who she was. Her mouth opened in surprise.


That was the only time I saw her in the daylight. I thought about her for days after. I live in a small suburb, and I had never heard of a Karen Carpenter before. No one has moved here for years, and she is too old to be boarding at the private school across the river. And who buys tickets to high school band charity concerts? I thought that maybe she had been visiting; maybe she was someone’s cousin or aunt. I figured I would never see her again. But one night, I was walking home past the old elementary school and she was standing on the jungle gym, waving her hand at me. The skirt of her dress fell down to her ankles. It billowed like a sail.

“Richard!” she yelled, her voice sharp and bright like a knife. “How is your trumpet playing?”

Whenever I pass the old elementary school, Karen Carpenter is there, and we hang out almost every night now. Sometimes I steal a bottle of whiskey and we sit on the monkey bars and pass it back and forth. The night blooms big above us. Our legs dangle and swim in the air. Karen Carpenter laughs like a grandfather clock; every hush of her breath is the clear sound of a bell. When she smiles, her face is like a tambourine. Her teeth glint in the yellow streetlight. When I look at her, I feel as though I’ve struck gold.

I don’t know if she is a ghost or what. I don’t know if ghosts can get drunk on whiskey. I find out from my mother that Karen Carpenter was born in 1950 and that she is most certainly and definitely dead. I try not to let it matter.

We never talk about her strange situation, but she seems to have realized that she is no longer in her time. She accepts that I had never heard of her before our meeting, that
I don’t own vinyl records. We ignore our differences. We talk about things that are timeless.

We talk about The Beatles. My favorite is John, and her favorite is Paul, but she will always have a soft spot for Ringo. She tells me that this is because she is also a drummer – even though she is mostly known as a singer. She talks about her band, proudly and shyly. I ask her how hard it really is to play the drums and sing at the same time. She laughs and says, “Very hard!”

We break into a classroom one night and find a tiny xylophone behind the teacher’s desk. We sit cross-legged with it on the floor.

“I always hated these,” she says, hitting the tiny keys with her fingernail. “They tried to make me play the glockenspiel in high school.” She picks up the mallets anyway, as if she can’t help it, and taps out a rhythm on the side of the box. Her face, so familiar to me now, seems to melt. Her eyebrows go up, making ripples in her forehead, and I imagine that this is what she must look like when she sings. I wait, oddly still, expecting her to launch into a song, but she stops completely instead, and talks to me.

“I hate the piano too, hate playing it at least. My brother – my older brother – he plays the piano.”

“In your band?”

“That’s right.” She grins at me in that classic Karen Carpenter way, grinning with her whole face. “His name is Richard,” she says, “Just like you.”

There is something sad in Karen Carpenter’s voice, even when she is smiling with all her teeth showing, even when she is talking about Christmas in California or playing softball with her grade school friends. It is in the low tones, something deep in her throat that colors everything she says. Her voice is the sound of being alone. Her voice is the sound of the night – infinite and timeless and cold. Listening to Karen Carpenter speak is like lying under the bed and listening to yourself breathe. It is like hearing someone laughing underwater.

I wonder if her voice is the same way singing. I wonder what it is that makes her so sad. I have been meeting Karen Carpenter at the elementary school for three months
now, and she seems to have aged. When we met in the summer, she looked about twenty-three. Now the nights are colder and darker and she must be close to thirty. The nights seem inconsolably long. I worry that she is growing smaller, thinner. Her skin stretches tight over her face, like that of a drum.

I start to wonder and how long I can keep seeing her like this, walking around the elementary school for hours. I worry that I am in love with Karen Carpenter, with her tambourine face, her Christmas-tree way of smiling, and I worry that she is not real, that she will leave one night, disappear the way she came, back to nowhere, thin air, nothing.

I do my best to cheer her up, although I have never been good at being a friend. I make snow angels for her in the sandbox. I bring my trumpet and play her every cheap line I know. Sometimes she recognizes the song and hums along. More often, she shuts her eyes and turns away from me. Every movement she makes seems to cause her great pain. One night, she stops me with a raised finger.

“Richard,” she asks, “Have you ever felt that no matter how good you become at one thing, you will never be Enough?”

“Sure,” I say slowly. “I feel like that all the time. Except I don’t think I’ve ever been good enough at anything to know what you mean.”

“You’re a good trumpet player,” she says, rapping her knuckles on my knee.

“No I’m not,” I tell her honestly. “I’m not even a trumpet player really. I’ve never actually cared about a piece of music my entire life.”

“I don’t believe that,” she laughs weakly. “Not for a second.”

“It’s the truth, Karen Carpenter.” I shrug.

We are quiet for some time. She looks at me intently, her cheekbones high enough to cast shadows. It is getting close to midnight, the time I usually leave her.

I don’t know why, but I suddenly decide that this is our last night together. I’m not going to stick around to see Karen Carpenter waste away into nothing. Maybe it finally occurs to me that she is just as hollow as a drum. Maybe I am afraid of being that kind of empty myself. Maybe I figure that if she really is dead, then she’s gone through this process already, and should have learned from it the first time around. People are always complaining about never being good enough for themselves. It seems a stupid thing to die for, and she’s already died for it. I should never have worried so much about
trying to preserve my high opinion of her. She is already, and has long been, inherently disappointing.

More than anything, I am sorry for Karen Carpenter. I am sorry that she is dying while already dead. I am sorry that she is dead at all.

I look at the ground. “You are more than enough, Karen Carpenter,” I tell her. “I don’t know anything, but I know that you are more than enough.”

She inclines her head gently, as if receiving applause. I put down my trumpet. I pull her close to me, hold her bird-wing’s frame as if it were a delicate instrument, a rice-paper kite. She is warm and breathing. Her heart is so loud I can feel it through her dress. I can tell from her face that she will start to cry soon, but instead of comforting her, I grab my trumpet, hook my free hand into the chain-link fence, and climb over it. I leave her there, the streetlight casting diamonds over her face. I run all the way home, and I do not go to back to the elementary school at night.

I don’t sleep on weeknights anymore. I stay up drinking pots of coffee and give myself throbbing headaches. I lie awake listening to my heart pumping in my temples, and I think about Karen Carpenter’s heart, so loud in her small ribcage, too fast. I think about her sitting cross-legged in the classroom, tapping out rhythms on the floor. How she stood on the pitcher’s mound as a girl, proud and young, wound up, reader to deliver.

It is December now, and my high school band is getting ready to play another charity concert for the elementary school. The director throws up his hands at our version of “Merry Christmas Darling.”

“I’m going to play you a song,” he says one rehearsal, stepping off the podium and flipping on the stereo. “I want you to listen to this woman’s voice.”

I know even before the singing starts that it’s her. Karen Carpenter fills the entire room. Her voice is strong, warm, swelling clean and thick and perfect. It is a golden voice, deep and velvet, the sound of her habit of smiling with all of her face. I hear that same sadness, that deep tone in her throat that I loved in her speaking voice. I see her teeth glinting in the night. I see her reflection in open mouths of the French horns in front of me.
My heart breaks for Karen Carpenter. It cracks open like an egg and leaks all over my face, long after the director has shut off the stereo. He raises his baton, and I come in a hair before everyone else. I play my trumpet as I have never played before, with all the warmth she must have heard that day at the old elementary school. I play as if every note is a word she spoke to me, as if every phrase was a line as fragile as her skeleton. I spend all my breath, push every line up from my diaphragm, from my heart – and even though I still know nothing, I know I have absorbed some piece of Karen Carpenter. I can feel her here drumming out through my pores, and I try to keep up with her. I hold my memory of her like a bird’s nest. I play my trumpet as though I am blowing glass, and I feel as though I’ve struck gold.