



Sugar

"Helpless"

Copper Blue

09/1992

Rykodisc / Creation

On "Helpless" by Sugar

Kate Gehan

On a summer evening when the sun is reluctant to set, I flee the house—fighting children, frustrated husband—and drive to the nearest church parking lot. It's empty there and no one will bother me. Proximity to holiness might be a salve. *Another time, time after time/You make me feel so helpless.*

I am pitiful and petulant, and I do not want anyone else's snotty tears on my shoulder. I want things to be easy. Listening to "Helpless" very loudly in the car, knowing I am driving away only to circle back, is a comfort. It is a 3:05 minute release from feeling lost inside the terrible realization that having mostly everything I ever wanted can still feel like not enough. *And now you find as time goes by/You're left with nothing meaning much.* It is permission to let a thrumming chaos move through me. It is my anthem for adulthood.

When I first heard *Copper Blue* in the early 1990s I wasn't aurally prepared for Sugar's complex drone, how the melodies can be subtle, like gasps of air from the relentless engine of bass and drums. But I have submerged into the album, and it's like swimming on a muggy night in a pool on a city rooftop, the chords vibrating the water, the high notes twinkling through my eyes stinging with chlorine. Over the years, some songs have accompanied fast-paced runs and others have opened space for pillow punching and crying. Last year I loaded the disc into my car and I play it all the way through at least once a week.

Running away is a satisfying notion, but only as fantasy; the void of life without the people I most love would subsume me. I will always return home. *We've got to go to places/Somewhere I don't mind it's special.* The repeating melody's last piercing note underscores my teenagery angst. I will take a deep breath and drive back home once my dependency abates. But still: *You make me feel so helpless.*

As I settle into middle age, I wonder how I've wasted all this time. I feel a pull to my youth where a similar uncertainty gnawed at me. Back then I gave myself permission to not worry so much, and that lack of concern is what I yearn to channel. To choose pathways without deep worry about losing my way because there is so much time to wander. Middle age means narrowing options, consequences, and inescapable responsibilities. *I always tried to tell you/Someday it'd seem so special.*

"Helpless" is not a terribly complicated power pop love song, but on the album recording, about halfway through a tambourine shakes in double time over the layered guitars and relentless drumming to get you there, up and over any (impossible) energy lag you may experience while listening. When I sing along—and I always sing along—sometimes I direct the words towards a specific person I'm having trouble understanding: *what's on your mind?* But sometimes I am the object of my own disappointment: *you never tried what's on your mind.* Sometimes the *you* in the song is the universe, and it is existential, and I offer the words as a reflexive prayer towards everything I don't comprehend: *the meaning I will have to try.*

When I'm buzzing with angst, or weird misunderstandings create tension between me and my sons or with my husband, I find an excuse to drive with "Helpless." (I'll get the pizza!) *You're left alone with something/and I hope for you it's one thing/that you and*

yours can hold. Even though I accept my frustrations about friendships, marriage, motherhood, career, even my figuring out my purpose in life are packages I will always carry along the journey, I need those 3:05 minutes to rock out when they seem more like problems I can solve.

And here's the thing: "Helpless" is not a slow, weepy lament. Screaming about vulnerability on repeat at tinnitus-enhancing volume is quite different than sinking into melancholy. *I wish that I could help you/But you seem less than helpless.* It's the song's thrashing energy and sense of possibility that draws me to it. *I wish that I could help you.* What if the mercy in living arrives when we acknowledge our agency, despite the routine bouts of hopelessness?

You seem less than helpless.