



Eurythmics

“Thorn In My Side”

Revenge

06/1986

RCA Records

On “Thorn In My Side” by Eurythmics

Jess Morgan

The muscles at the top of my stomach start to pull intermittently. My skin feels baby-sensitive. I’m like a ticklish child who sees from the corner of their eye, the older sibling creeping—with flingers splayed. In the university library, with headphones on, my finger hovers above the play button. I hear the swoosh of the dust particles spiralling, as rapt student brains fizz. A photocopier hums, computer keys tip-tap and pages of books gently flick over. The song is about to start. I feel as though I am about have a fit.

Mum drove in a big pair of auburn sunglasses with a plastic twist over the nose. She drove nervously when we were small. We weren’t supposed to talk to her while we were on the M25, when she needed to *concentrate*. But the car was loaded up with a canon of story tapes and synth pop. She stretched her neck against the headrest and rung out the tension in her shoulders in small circles. She kept two hands on the wheel, and sunlight though the windscreen bounced off her cheekbones.

The song starts out bright—super bright—with bags of extra treble on the acoustic guitar. It might be a twelve string. It gets a couple of bars on its own, tells us to buckle in—this is going to be pacey. Mum loves Eurythmics in the car—and this is a great song for driving. My sister and I get only a few seconds to find each other’s faces, to buzz together in a moment of shared excitement—this is it—this is *the one*. Luckily we are sitting right next to each other in the back seat. From behind the sunglasses I can see the skin around the edge of Mum’s left eye crinkle. She knows it too.

The first line of the song:

“YEAH!”

Annie’s voice—double, tripled maybe. It’s confirmation. Yes it is.

It’s *Thorn In My Side*. It’s everybody’s favourite. Drums crash in. Bass. The chug of—something—underneath too that pulls it along. You can trust a Eurythmics track to come kitted with a driving rhythm that never lets a song lag. This is true even when pulling off what I always think is a fantastic party-trick for a pop-song—the speaky spoken bit. A lot of folks will save this for the middle eight or at least a twist on a second verse—Dolly Parton does this in her original version of *I Will Always Love You*, and *Quadrophenia*’s Phil Daniels narrates the verses in Blur’s *Parklife* giving it contrast with the chorus. Cher’s half spoken monologue in *Fires of Eden* gives the song its *Fire*. It’s cinematic. Annie Lennox delivers her speech in a film-ish American Accent. She puts on the airs of glamorous secretary on the telephone, or the sort of character Audrey Hepburn might play, perhaps even Cher doing her Mrs. Flax in *Mermaids*.

“You gave me such a bad time. Tried to hurt me. But now I know.”

My sister and I piss ourselves. We love this bit.

We desperately want Mum to rewind the tape so we can hear it again, so we can act it out again, so we can put on the American Accent, the pearls, the long cigarette, polka dot dress... as long as we aren’t on the motorway Mum usually does us let us have a couple of goes.

Then it's the verse proper, and in with Annie Lennox's strong, vocal punch. It's pitched up where it's throaty. I can feel it now when I sing along. In my adult woman's body it really feels like I'm actually singing out of my guts. My body loves this song. Stadium drums, straight-forward bass and plenty of sax keep the feeling muscular. They invite chins to jut rhythmically and for the dancing to lead with shoulder, in and back, the way a boxer moves.

The song tells a story—a snapshot—of a lover who can't seem to separate themselves from somebody else, who seems to be nothing but a reoccurring source of trouble. We've all been there. The line is perfect for it:

"I was feeling complicated, I was feeling low."

You start to bend back through memories when you listen. Times when you've called them. You've got drunk, scrolled through your phone and reeling with temporary lack of inhibition, sent them a sexy message—maybe you've full on got back together with them, woken up next to them.... The thorns, the sides. The next morning, you sit with your head in your hands wondering what came over you. Annie has the answer—you were just feeling *complicated*. It's okay to feel complicated every once in a while. Chin up.

"Ooh wuh ooh wuh ooh wuh ooh wuh..."

I can imagine Dave Stewart and Annie Lennox writing this and scratching their heads. The song has got to get to its chorus somehow, which involves a massive key change and a shift in tone. It has to go from the narrative in the verse, to a repetitive refrain. It needs its something in between.

Maybe they boiled the kettle and made a couple of cups of builder's tea in dirty brown-bottomed studio mugs, with the milk on the turn. Nevertheless, someone comes up with this. It's a sort of hooting—dropping down over four pitches. It's brawny like the rest of the song, but it's all in the lips. It's a work-out for the lips, in fact. The song is full of 'you's, 'do's, 'better's and 'but's. It's a song full of short phrases and open vowels which make it impossible not to sing along. That's why my heart clenches up as my finger pauses for a moment above play. It takes its own breath because it knows—this is the reason it's pumping all this blood. This is what it's all for.

The album cover for *Revenge*, which is where this song sits in at track two, features an illustration of the pairing. Dave has a fantastic ringlet spilling mullet with highlights which he teams with some sparkly earrings and a neatly buttoned collar. Annie has her signature crop, white blonde. The curve of her eyebrow is sharp and eye make-up striking. Her lips are red and full.

My lips are red too. I'm biting down hard. I'm pressing down. I've made my lips thin and firm. My teeth are clenched. My stomach pulls and I scrunch up my eyes. Chin into chest, trying to hide my face from view. I haven't hit play yet—but I'm already cracking up. It takes me straight back to the old Ford Fiesta, and driving out past the war memorial, through the thick pines and deep greens with Thetford Forest on all sides. My sister is cracking up too. She throws her head back, mouth full of wonky teeth wide open. On this trip she'll teach me about lipstick, and sex, and how to remember the names of the planets. Grandma will—by mistake—start talking to a waxwork at Madame Tussauds and I'll try pizza for the first time.

Mum's mascara runs a little at the edges when she laughs a lot. We'll see a smudge of grey behind her shades.