

(Narrator)

Superman is Dead by Weeks. From the Short Story Collection, UP ALL
NIGHT

(Justin)

My mother said she'd give me a hundred bucks to baby-sit my little brother, as long as I promise not to tell my dad that she left us alone overnight.

(Narrator)

The mother is at a conference in Westchester and won't be back until the following morning.

(Narrator)

The parents are divorced. The kind of divorce where they can't stand to be in the same room together, or talk on the phone without hng a huge fight.

(Justin)

I can remember when they used to like each other. That was before Joe was born, and before my father met Brenda. She's my stepmother now and Mom and I both hate her guts.

(Joe)

Justin?

(Justin)

I'm on the phone with my friend Nick when my little brother calls me from the other room. I ignore him.

(Narrator)

Joe comes into the living room and stands in front of Justin. He's holding a small metal cage in his arms.

(JOE)

There's something wrong with Superman.

(Justin)

I'm on the phone, Joe.

(Narrator)

Joe closes his eyes and squeezes out two fat tears, which catch in his lashes for a second then drag race down his pale cheeks.

(Justin)

(sighs) I'll call you back, Nick.

(JOE)

Something's wrong with Superman. See?

(Narrator)

Superman is Joe's pet mouse.

(Justin)

It was my mother's idea to buy a mouse for Joe. She thought if she did, maybe he'd stop bugging her about getting a dog. Not only did it not work, but now in addition to hng to share a room with my little brother, I have to share a room with a stinking mouse.

(Narrator)

Literally stinking. The first time Nick came over after they got the mouse, he couldn't believe it.

(NICK)

What's that reek?

(Justin)

I don't know, but it's foul, isn't it? We clean the cage and two seconds later it stinks again.

(NICK)

Let's Google it.

(Narrator)

They type in "Why does my pet mouse reek?" and find a site called "Know Your Mouse." That's where they learn that the problem is Superman's feet.

(Justin)

Apparently male mice have scent glands in the pads of their feet so that they can leave love trails for interested females to follow if they're feeling in the mood.

(Narrator)

Instinct was prevailing over common sense and Superman was laying down his trail in the exercise wheel in his cage, each rotation sending horny mouse musk wafting up into the atmosphere.

(Justin)

And here I thought he ran because he was bored.

(JOE)

(concerned) What's wrong with Superman? Why is he shaking like that?

(Narrator)

Superman is pressed into the corner of the cage, trembling.

(Narrator)

Justin opens the little door, and reaches into the cage. Normally the mouse would scamper away, but he doesn't move. Scooping him up, Justin gently places him in the exercise wheel, but the tiny mouse just sits there trembling. Joe whimpers.

(JOE)

I want Mommy.

(Narrator)

This is not good. Justin already has plans for that hundred bucks and he knows if his mother hears Joe crying she'll get in the car and drive home. She's a total sucker for his tears, especially since the divorce.

(Justin)

Let's let Superman rest for a while. Maybe he's just tired. I'll read you a book or something, okay?

(JOE)

The book?

(Narrator)

Justin knows which book he means.

(Justin)

(asking Joe) How about Curious George instead?

(Narrator)

Joe shakes his head. He wants Justin to read his baby book, the one their mother made for him when he was born.

(Justin)

Aren't you tired of hearing that stuff yet? It's so boring and sappy.

(Narrator)

Joe's eyes start to fill.

(Justin)

Fine. Go get it.

(Narrator)

They sit on the couch and Justin reads Joe's baby book to him even though it's so corny it hurts.

(Narrator)

They wade through pages of Joe's milestones, each one punctuated with an exclamation point, sometimes two.

(Narrator)

Today you turned over!

(Narrator)

You said your first word, *duck!*"

(Narrator)

"You know where your tongue is!"

(Narrator)

Joe's heard it all a million times before, but he can't get enough.

(JOE)

Read the part about my favorite foods!

(Narrator)

Justin turns to the section called BABY'S LIKES AND DISLIKES.

(Justin)

(reading) You like peaches and bananas and raisins, which you call ree-rees. You do NOT like olives.

(JOE)

More.

(Justin)

Okay, here's a good one. While you were sleeping tonight Daddy told me he's in love with some bimbo named Brenda and doesn't want to be married to me anymore. I cried and threw a frying pan at his head.

(Narrator)

Joe grabs the book away.

(JOE)

It does not say that. You made that up.

(Justin)

I can feel that hundred dollar bill slipping right through my fingers.

(to Joe) Calm down, Jo-Jo. I was just kidding. Can't you take a joke?

(JOE)

(sullen) I want juice. And my Honey. *Now.*

(Narrator)

Honey is Joe's blanket. Or what's left of it. He's five, but he still sleeps with it every night. He sucks his thumb too, which is why his teeth are messed up.

(Narrator)

Joe curls up on the couch with his blanket and a cup of juice.

(JOE)

Did Mommy really throw a frying pan at Daddy?

(Justin)

No. But they did fight a lot.

(JOE)

I know.

(Justin)

No you don't. You were too little to remember.

(JOE)

I feel like I remember.

(Narrator)

Justin makes Joe brush his teeth and pee and then he stands behind him while he climbs up the ladder and crawls under his covers. They share a bunk bed because their room is too small for two real beds.

(Justin)

My dad and Brenda have a much bigger place. Joe stays there sometimes on weekends, but not me.

(Narrator)

Justin doesn't want to be anywhere near them. Especially now that Brenda's pregnant.

(Justin)

My mother cried so hard when she found out I thought she was going to break in half.

(Narrator)

Justin turns out the light and goes back out into the living room. That's when he hears the weird sound. Shht-shht-shht. Like a broom sweeping, or a dead leaf blowing along the sidewalk.

(Narrator)

He stands still and waits for it to happen again.

(Narrator)

Shht shht shht, it's coming from the cage.

(Narrator)

Something is not right. Superman is dragging himself slowly along the edge of the cage. Shht-shht-shht.

(Justin)

I speed dial Nick. (to Nick) It's the weirdest thing I ever saw. Like somebody blew him up.

(NICK)

Blew up as in exploded?

(Justin)

No, blew up like a balloon.

(Narrator)

Superman's body is about three times its normal size. If it wasn't so freaky it might be comical. His pointy face looks like a tiny mask stuck on the front of a black fur ball, like a puffer fish with whiskers and a long tail.

(Narrator)

The reason he's dragging himself is because his stomach is so distended his feet no longer touch the ground. He has to roll over onto one side, like a listing ship and push himself along the bottom of the cage –

ALL

shht shht shht.

(NICK)

Maybe it's gas.

(Justin)

Do mice get gas?

(NICK)

Hell if I know. Squeeze him and see if he toots.

(Narrator)

Superman barely fits through the small wire door in the cage when Justin takes him out. He holds him, tail end pointing away, closes his eyes and gently squeezes. Nothing happens.

(Justin)

Now what?

(NICK)

Got any TUMS?

(Narrator)

Justin gets the bottle of TUMS out of the medicine cabinet.

(Justin)

What flavor do you think?

(NICK)

I don't know. Cheese?

(Narrator)

Justin takes a green TUM and holds it under Superman's nose. To his surprise the mouse starts to nibble on it.

(NICK)

Is it working?

(Justin)

Not yet. The bottle says 'fast acting relief' but it doesn't say how fast.

(Narrator)

Justin hears a beep. There's another call coming in.

(Narrator)

It's his father calling from the hospital.

(DAD)

Sorry to call so late. But I thought you'd want to know. You have a new little brother.

(Justin)

Half brother, you mean.

(DAD)

We've named him Harrison.

(Justin)

Okay.

(DAD)

Brenda's doing fine. Fourteen hours of labor though. She had a pretty tough time.

(Justin)

I resist the urge to say *good*.

(DAD)

Do me a favor. Let your mother know, will you?

(Narrator)

Oh, great, thinks Justin. Thanks for letting me be the one to deliver the happy news.”

(Justin)

I don't say anything.

(DAD)

You okay?

(Justin)

Yeah. Just tired. Plus Superman is sick.

(DAD)

Superman?

(Justin)

Joe's mouse.

(DAD)

Oh, right, your mother's idea of a pet.

(Justin)

Yeah well anyway, he's sick. Really sick.

(DAD)

I had a guinea pig once when I was a kid and when it got sick the vet told my mother to put it in a plastic bag and stick it in the freezer for five minutes.

(Justin)

Grandma did that?

(DAD)

Most humane thing you can do with a small animal. No point in letting it suffer.

(Justin)

Right.

(Narrator)

There was an awkward pause.

(DAD)

Anyway, I need to get back to Brenda. I just thought you'd want to know about the baby.

(Narrator)

After Justin hangs up, he goes to check on Superman. He doesn't look good. There's something foamy leaking from his mouth. It's pretty clear he's not going to make it.

(Justin)

I have tried to stay up all night twice in my life. Once at a sleepover party on Nick's birthday and once on New Year's Eve. Both times I ended up giving in and falling asleep. I am wide awake now. And I've decided that

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no matter how long it takes, I'm going to stay up with Superman until it's over.