



Facing the Music by LISA M.B. SIMONS

Billy Joel *The Stranger*

The best part of my bedroom was the location: in the basement on the far side of the house. I could escape my parents and three younger brothers and, among other things, listen to my own music. While I hummed and worked, delicate pink rosebuds on ivory wallpaper, twin beds with rose blankets, and antique furniture kept me company. Though feminine, my room was not girlish for a freshman in high school, 1985.

Duran Duran, Billy Idol, the Scorpions, and Pat Benatar rebelled through the speakers as I sat on the floor with my studies. Then Billy Joel's voice rocked into my room, and my head bobbed with the beat. I had never heard the song before and didn't pay attention to the words until the chorus:

Only the good die young

That's what I said

Only the good die young...

When I shut off the radio, silence clamored in my room. I called the station.

"How can you play that song?" I asked the deejay.

"Which song? Billy Joel's?"

"My dad died when he was only 30 years old," I said, sobbing, "and he was a good man."

"I'm sure Billy Joel didn't even know your dad," replied the deejay in a soft voice.

I knew this was true, but my grief muffled any logic.

"But my dad died when he was young. Billy Joel shouldn't write those things."

I liked Billy Joel. I staged jabs and jerks with my body to "Pressure." "It's Still Rock and Roll to Me" also invited me to dance. "Piano Man" made me want to throw my arms around my friends and sway to the tune. I thought if I ever had a boyfriend, I would play him "Just the Way You Are" and gaze into his eyes. In the "Uptown Girl" video, I watched Christie Brinkley strut around the garage while mechanic Billy Joel sang to her. I wanted to sing, "Go ahead with your own life and leave me alone" to my stepdad.

The deejay tried his best to convince me it was just a song. He never laughed or played back our conversation over the airwaves, but I have to wonder if he simply shook his head when he hung up or got off the phone, twirled his pointer finger at his head, and thought, What a head case that girl was. Anytime I heard that song begin, I immediately changed the station and thought of the deejay who consoled a girl in grief.

As years passed, I learned my father was indeed not perfect, that bills and jobs and children throw such chaos in the chords that a freshman in high school could not have possibly understood the stress on her stepdad. Almost two decades later, I finally learned what "Only the Good Die Young" was really about.

"Catholic girls," a classmate said.

"Catholic girls?" I repeated, dumbfounded.

I don't turn the station anymore.

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Readers are invited to submit short essays on the one album that made a difference -- perhaps all the difference. To contribute, send your essay to jtougas@chartermi.net