

let's be together today | Matthew Novak

My cousin Jeff and I were sitting on a couch at opposite ends in Schroeder-Lauer Funeral Home. He had an old maroon cardigan on that was too small for him. His black, thick-rimmed glasses were inching down his nose, and I could see him looking around the room with curious eyes. People had been coming in and out all afternoon to grab a coffee or chomp a bagel that had been sitting out since morning. I kept looking past them, randomly recognizing faces and smelling old ladies' perfume. But I always gave a half-assed smile whenever one of them smiled at me. I was wearing the same clothes I wore to my eighth-grade confirmation back when I was fourteen: a long-sleeve almond shirt tucked into forest green dress pants with Payless dress shoes. Some of my relatives remembered the outfit and would stop in front of me on their way out, offering their sympathy before bringing up the clothes' two-year-old past.

No one had come in for about five minutes or so—a good thing, considering how small the room was—when I heard the crinkling of paper. I looked over at Jeff as he lifted a square, brown paper bag from the side of the couch and handed it to me. He was still looking forward, his face sad and simple, his black beard and whiskers snaking through his cheeks.

Running my palms along the side of it, I could tell it was a record, but I wanted to play dumb. “What’s this?” I asked him.

“It’s Mister Rogers’ second album. He got really introspective on this one,” he said as I slid the record out of the bag. I threw the balled-up brown paper on the carpet and stared at the record sleeve. It was Mister Rogers, all right; his young, makeup-caked face smiling within a circle surrounded by yellow silhouettes of children holding hands. Around them, it said *Let’s Be Together Today*.

“I got it at Goodwill,” said Jeff. “I know how much you used to like watching him, even if this record cover is kind of creepy.”

And it *was* creepy. Below Mister Rogers’ smiling head on the front, it said in bold type: SONGS AND THOUGHTS ON GROWING FOR CHILDREN AND THEIR FAMILIES. There was a circular yellow sticker in the top right-hand corner that

told the buyer of a full-color poster inside. There wasn’t a full-color poster inside anymore. The actual record was cracked in places, but I knew it was still playable. The back of the sleeve was black and white. It felt better to look at than the neon green of the front.

“I can’t even look at your dad,” said Jeff, lifting himself from the couch and walking over to the coffeemaker on the small table by the window. He pulled a white Styrofoam cup from the stack and poured himself some coffee.

“You can’t?” I asked. “I never thought *you* would be afraid of a dead body.”

“It’s not that I’m afraid of dead bodies. I’m just afraid of your *dad’s* dead body.”

I thought of my mom downstairs, standing by the open casket.

“I don’t like how it smells when I get closer to him,” I said. “And dealing with all these people. Did you see Josh, Megan, and Katie downstairs? They’re dressed like it’s a golf tournament. They didn’t come say sorry or anything.”

“So I take it your dad was the only normal one on his side of the family?”

“Yep. That’s how it always was. And now that he’s dead, things are going to get even more annoying with them.”

“I’m sorry,” said Jeff. “I know it’s not much, but I hope that Mister Rogers makes up for them.”

“I’m sure he will,” I said. I began to look at the song titles on the back of the record. As I was skimming the lyrics, I noticed a song called “Parents Were Little Once Too.” I read the last two verses:

*My Daddy seems so big right now
He must have grown a lot
Imagine how he felt one day
When he was just a tot.*

*It’s great for me to remember
As I put away my toys,
That Mothers were all little girls one time
And Fathers were all little boys.*

The line about toys made me think of my dad as a child, playing with toys. I thought of my parents as kids. I wondered how my dad would have reacted if his dad, my grandpa, passed away when he was my age. It was strange to me. My dad was downstairs dead. I set the record on my lap and cried for the first time in three days.