

WEEKEND *MEMORIES*

PERSONAL ESSAY

To bridge the gap*My mom and I have sent songs back and forth every day for two years.*

// BY LILY SCHECKNER

When I was in the womb, my mom performed ultrasounds with music. Rather than smoothing echo gel over her stomach, she mapped my heartbeats with her fingers, tapping a gentle pattern against her skin. I like to think that in my own, barely sentient way, I was tapping right back.

Then I was born and every aspect of my life was built on music. Sleeping? Only alongside Iron & Wine's "The Trapeze Swinger." Car ride? Only if I could listen to "1234" by Feist over and over again. Before I could speak, music was the winking, subtle language I shared with my mom. Staring up at her in the hazy smoke of song, we held a mutual understanding that went beyond words.

Now, in college 18 years later, I no longer live in my mom's womb or in her house. It's only from within the walls of my dorm or on the way to class that I call to give her innocuous updates. Yes, the weather is getting colder. No, I haven't done my laundry this week. Our relationship is much more complicated now. It's marked by the bumps and bruises of teenagehood and divorce. Sometimes we talk as easily as best friends. Other times, we snipe at each other to the point of tears. Yet, again and again, we've returned to a long familiar chorus.

My mom has sent me a song every day since September 2023. The first was "Girl Anachronism" by the Dresden Dolls — a sharp, deranged ode to female rage — but the tunes have been endlessly diverse. From

"Between the Bars" to "Edge of Seventeen," each song met the demands of the day it was sent: Elliott Smith for a rain-soaked depression and Stevie Nicks for a birthday eve. Every day, I reciprocated with my favorites: Mazzy Star's "Blue Light," Hozier's "Wasteland, Baby!" and Big Thief's "Shark Smile."

The best part of this ritual was how our preferences bled into each other. My favorite artist, Sufjan Stevens, became my mom's rocking chair go-to. Likewise, Radiohead and The Shins are carried over from my mom, whether in text or in utero. And, in turn, she now adores Lana Del Rey, Ethel Cain and boygenius. In the car, we scream along to the lyrics of any genre with equal enthusiasm. On the couch at home, we record our favorites with her on guitar, my sister and I harmonizing on aux. My mom and sister are both in actual bands, by the way — but I like to think we're all in one of our own, too.

Unfortunately, the beginning of college was a busy time. In the hustle and bustle of club applications and class schedules, my mom and I had forgotten to send our song of the day since June. After a three month hiatus, my mom broke the dry spell a week ago. It felt like seeing an old, familiar friend. A jolt of homesickness hit me for the first time since arriving at Yale in August. It urged me to scroll back through my texts, glancing over each song that my mom had sent me for



ILLUSTRATION BY SEBASTIAN WOODS

the past two years.

As I write this article, I'm listening to a playlist that I made from those very tunes. The Magnetic Fields' "All My Little Words" are filtering through my airpods, and it feels almost like my mom is standing at my side. Despite our imperfections, she is offering me edits — which I might pettily reject — and holding my hand. She is loaning me jeans and lip liner, smuggling up with me to watch "The West Wing" and snapping at me to do the dishes. In a time when we all, inevitably, drift

away from our parents both geographically and emotionally, my mom and I are tied together. A guitar string stretches between us — 18 years and 300 miles long — endlessly strumming.

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PERSONAL ESSAY

Road trips through war zones are a good idea, right?

// BY MARIEM IQBAL

My grandfather is the most fearless person I've ever met.

I don't mean that he's fearless in the inciting-global-change way of the Malala Yousafzais of the world. I mean fearless in the literal sense. He lacks any and all fear.

Case in point: the time he traveled through a civil war zone for a vacation.

It was 1993, and my grandfather, Sohail Rabbani, whom I call Nana, was taking a break from his obligations in Birmingham, Alabama and visiting family in Karachi. Ann, his American friend whom he had met while backpacking through Scotland — a story for another day — had ventured across the Atlantic to explore Pakistan. Coincidentally, so had a cousin of Nana's half-sister's cousin-in-law — Pakistani family trees are complicated, y'all — named Mehmooda. Mehmooda had grown up in England and was on an Eat, Pray, Love "reconnecting with my roots" trip in Pakistan. The three of them met up and quickly became a dynamic trio, exploring beaches together in Karachi. But the sun and sand bored them and they grew restless, itching for another, greater adventure.

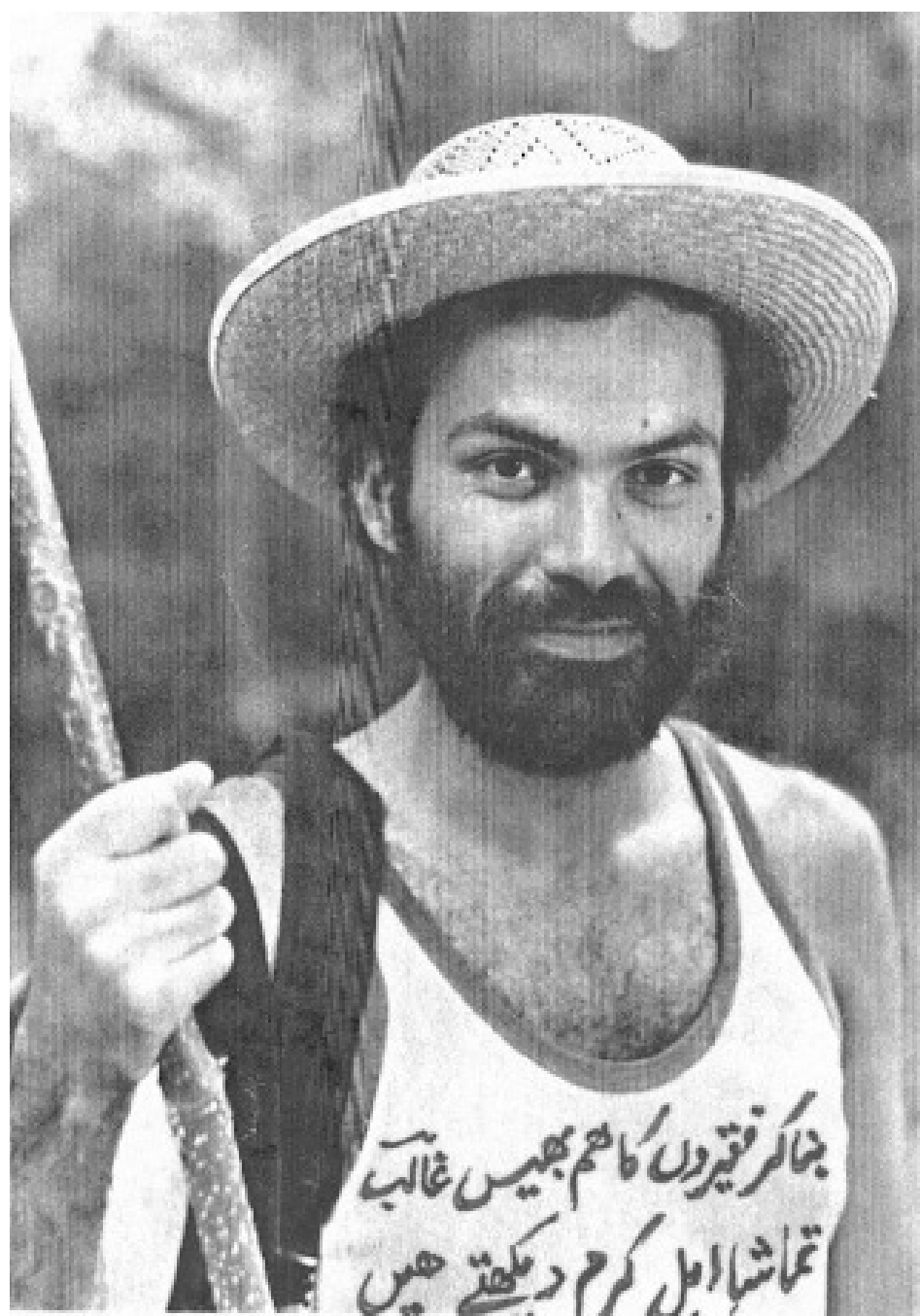
Nana resolved on going to Chitral, a city in the extreme northwest corner of Pakistan, right next to the border with Afghanistan. It was perfect, he reasoned: they could see the towering mountains and clear lakes, affectionately dubbed the "Swiss Alps of Pakistan," and he could act as a guide and protector for his foreign female companions, who couldn't go by themselves.

They formulated a plan: they would drive to Peshawar, a major city in the north of Pakistan, and take a flight to Chitral from there. They thought it was perfect, foolproof even.

Yet, as often happens, nothing went according to plan. No sooner had they arrived in Peshawar than they learned that every flight had been cancelled due to the inclement weather in the mountains. Never one to give up without a fight, Nana began searching for a route through the treacherous mountains. No dice. Not only would it have been incredibly challenging even without the weather, but all of the roads were blocked. There was no path to Chitral from anywhere in Pakistan that they could feasibly get to.

Now, a normal person at this point would have cut his losses, said "sayonara" to his plans and booked it back to Karachi to soak up the sun. But not Sohail Rabbani, the most fearless man I know. As often accompanies fearlessness, he is also, and I say this with so much love, the most cuckoo person I know.

Hell-bent on going to Chitral, he decided to call up and ask the advice of an old teacher of his who lived in Chitral: Major Geoffrey Langlands. Langlands, who passed away in 2019, was a retired British major who resided in Pakistan long after colonial rule ended in 1947 and



COURTESY OF MARIEM IQBAL

Sohail Rabbani, circa 1984, during a UAB cultural club camping trip in the Pisgah National Forest in North Carolina, one of his many adventures. The Urdu verse was later written on the hard copy prior to its digitization.

dedicated his life to teaching Pakistani schoolchildren. He was a beloved, valued member of the community, so much so that when he heard Nana's plight, he put him in touch with a contact who could get him to Chitral. The only catch? They would have to detour through Afghanistan, while it was in the middle of the Afghan Civil War, in a smuggler's caravan.

Naturally, he said yes. Do you see where the cuckoo of it all comes in now?

He made the arrangements, and by 4 a.m. the next morning, Nana, Ann and Mehmooda were in a van on their way. The girls, who were bundled up and had most of their faces

covered, were sitting in the front with the driver, while Nana sat in the back with 11 other people, mostly smugglers and refugees.

Thus, they began their 18-hour journey. Nana, a social butterfly by nature, slowly broke through the silence and got to talking with the people in the van. They asked him questions about medicine, history and his life in America. He learned about their hardships and joys, their troubles and triumphs.

Their hours-long conversation was cut short by the Mujahideen, an Afghan militant group that represented one side in the civil war. The van was on a thin, barely two-lane mountain road when the military

truck drove up to them from the opposite direction. On their left lay a ravine with no guardrails and the promise of a quick death if they were to fall, and on their right, the threat of military capture. Everyone caught their breath, barely daring to move as the van slowly rolled past the truck, mere inches between the vehicles. When the military truck was in the distance and they were home free, everyone let out a collective sigh of relief. Everyone, that is, except Nana, who had never been worried about the imminent threat of capture in the first place.

Aside from the appearance of another Mujahideen truck, the next few hours passed without any issues. Then, they stumbled upon the Kunar River. The river itself was not so bad: knee-height water, only about 50 feet across. Only, there was no bridge. Nana and all of the backseat passengers exited while only the driver and the women carefully navigated through the river in the van, whispering prayers that the rocks wouldn't damage the tires. Nana and the others had to trudge through the river, shivering from the glacial water and hoping their thick clothes would dry out in time for their arrival.

The van's dip in the river wasn't enough to negate the blistering heat of a summer sun, and they were forced to stop and air out the van only a few hours later. While the passengers chatted, Nana spotted the driver pacing restlessly and muttering to himself while glancing at the sun, which was beginning its descent. Abruptly, he yelled at everyone to get back in the van because "safety is not guaranteed after sunset." The driver put the pedal to the metal, and they crossed back into northern Pakistan just as the sun disappeared from the horizon.

Nana and his companions spent many days in Chitral, meeting Major Langland for tea and exploring the three major valleys in the area. "The scenery was so beautiful — meadows and crystal clear lakes everywhere," he told me. I, still gobsmacked after hearing the story, had nothing to say. I always knew he was adventurous, but this set even my heart racing, and I wasn't even there. I asked him if he was scared. As nonchalant as ever, he responded in the smooth tone I know is his patented grandfather voice, "There's no sense in being afraid of things you can't control. You have to do the things you want to do." Still dumbfounded, I responded, asking what possessed him to travel through a civil war for something as trivial as a vacation.

He smiled, shrugged and uttered the most simple, stupid, genius, cuckoo-crazy response possible: "Why not?"

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