WEEKEND *CULTURE*

PERSONAL ESSAY

The hymn of home

// BY RIYA NADKARNI



ILLUSTRATION BY STEPHANIE ALTSCHUL

My earliest childhood memory starts here: I am wearing a colorful Indian suit, running around with my cousins and my uncle is singing at a jagran — a full night devotional where the music never ceases. He is not the only musician in the family; my grandfather also led jagrans and my mother is a singer and sitar player. My summers in India passed with these jagran nights where the whole community gathered together to worship, to tell stories and to celebrate.

I spent most of my developmental years engulfed in music. I picked up the guitar, sang in the choir, danced and sat with my mom in the kitchen while she hummed. She told me how bhajans, or devotional songs, reminded her of her father, and I told her that Rihanna reminded me of her. I would strum mindlessly on my guitar and she would come up with a melody in the background. When I didn't understand her culture, or she mine, I understood her music and she mine.

When I started at Yale last year, I found myself turning to old Indian music like Lata Mangeshkar or Jagjit Singh when I felt stressed. I have always felt slightly detached from my Indianness. I had my summers in India growing up, and I was familiar with traditions and customs, but it always felt like I was trying to borrow from an identity that wasn't mine instead of inhabiting it. I spent so long trying to diminish my cultural identity that it seemed foreign by the time I recognized it. But in those spare moments of freshman year, I felt belonging despite being thousands of miles from home, and for the first time, I truly felt that Indianness was a part of me.

A recent study shows that connection to music is actually linked to genetic pathways. Over hundreds of years, humans have evolved so that our affinity for music is woven into our DNA, so that our stories connect us through generations. My ancestors told their histories through bhajans, a form of storytelling that survived famines, colonization and the throes of time. I don't consider myself a religious person, but I do feel a connection to something much larger than my own life when I hear the sitar.

Although I never met my grandfather and grew up in Seattle instead of Chandigarh, his music has shaped my life. It's present in the car with my mother on the way to school, it's in packing up my childhood room to move to Texas, it's in my mother's hands as she does my hair for prom and it's here in this piece. Therein lies my Indianness; it's the story that persists and builds on itself in every generation.

Every jagran ends with a shared meal: chole (chickpea curry) and puri (flatbread). When I go home, I'll sit in my mother's kitchen while she makes the same dish and hums the same bhajans her father once sang. And beside me will sit my grandfather, my parents, the generations before them and my Indianness.

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PERSONAL ESSAY

Call your mom: An undercover investigation into the Yale Parents Facebook group

// BY ERIN MUSE



ILLUSTRATION BY CLARIS SHIN

My name is Nicole Ann Johnson. I am the proud mother of a Yale first year. My profile picture is tasteful but approachable. I am concerned about my child.

Of course, none of this is true.

Nicole is my secret identity, my alter ego, my fake Facebook account I have kept tucked away for occasions requiring a middle-aged woman on the internet. She is the maker of artisanal candles, a drinker of pumpkin spice lattes and, as of last week, the mother of a Yale student. With Family Weekend approaching, Nicole had been called upon for her most important assignment yet — infiltrating the Yale Parents Facebook group.

I had heard rumors about the group, seen the screenshots that occasionally escaped containment. Somewhere out there, beyond the reach of Yale students, our parents were talking about us. They were worried about our diets. Our laundry. Our winter coats. Whether we were sleeping. Why we weren't calling them.

Once on the inside, however, I discovered something disappointing: Yale parents were, for the most part, behaving themselves. I had expected a panopticon of parental anxiety: mothers monitoring dining hall menus, fathers tracking New Haven temperatures, families comparing how many consecutive hours their children had gone without responding to a text. Instead, I found advertisements.

Lots of advertisements.

Tutors. Storage companies. Moving services. Family Weekend promotions. Posts that seemed to have been generated by artificial intelligence for the sole purpose of being liked by six other artificial intelligences. If the Yale Parents Facebook group was going to reveal something profound about the relationship between parents and their newly independent children, I would first have to excavate it from several layers of digital sediment.

For a while, my investigation began to feel less like an exposé on helicopter parenting and more like evidence for the Dead Internet Theory — a cultural concept and former fringe conspiracy theory which asserts that the internet no longer features meaningful human activity, having been taken over entirely by bots, automated content and algorithmic curation. But the parents were there. Every so often, between the ads and algorithmic debris, someone would ask a real question:

"Has anyone heard of 'soiling the nest'?"

"Why hasn't my daughter received my letters?"

"Is laundry detergent provided?"

"How many outlets are in an L-Dub common room?"

There were questions about homesickness and winter coats, move-in-day photos and embarrassing childhood pictures. Taken together, the posts offered a strange portrait of Yale from the outside. Our parents knew about the big things: move-in, classes, Family Weekend, but seemed preoccupied with the little ones. The mail. The outlets. The cold. Whether we were adjusting.

At first, I found the mundanity funny. But the longer I scrolled, the more I realized that these were exactly the kinds of things our parents used to know without asking. For most of our lives they didn't need Facebook to find out whether we were sick or homesick, whether we had enough outlets or enough friends. They knew what we ate because they watched us eat it. They knew when we were sick because they heard us coughing down the hall. They knew who our friends were because those friends appeared in their kitchens and left shoes by their doors.

Then we went to college.

Suddenly, all of that information disappeared. Our parents knew what we chose to tell them, which, judging by the Facebook group, was not much. A life they once witnessed in its most boring detail now came in fragments. A FaceTime dorm tour. A 15-minute phone call. A "fine" in response to "How are classes?"

For us, "fine" is often a complete answer. It means that nothing has gone sufficiently wrong to warrant a report home. It can encompass an entire week — the midterm we bombed, the person we met, the cold we got over the weekend, the argument with a roommate, the Tuesday afternoon that was unexpectedly wonderful — and flatten it into four letters. For the person on the other end of the phone, those four letters may be nearly everything they know.

I had gone into the Facebook group looking for parents who knew too much about their children's lives. Slowly, I began to realize I had found the opposite, and that realization felt strangely familiar. I had spent days scrolling past advertisements, promotions and digital detritus, trying to find the real parents underneath it all while they were doing the same, looking through screens for us.

Maybe that's why the questions are all so mundane.

A winter coat is a problem with an answer. So is an airport shuttle. So is where to buy cold medicine. Harder questions cannot be crowdsourced to Facebook.

Is my kid happy?

Have they found their people?

Do they still need me?

Are they really fine?

So parents ask about the coat.

With Family Weekend upon us, those questions will, briefly, become easier to answer. Parents will arrive in New Haven and see the rooms they have glimpsed over FaceTime. Friends who previously existed only as names will acquire faces. Dining halls, libraries and courtyards will become real places instead of details in stories told over the phone.

Then, they will go home. And once again, they will have texts and photographs and phone calls and whatever pieces of our lives we decide to send back with them.

The Dead Internet Theory argues, essentially, that behind much of what we encounter online, there may no longer be a real person at all. After a week undercover in the Yale Parents Facebook group, I had become convinced of almost the opposite. Behind the ads and AI slop and unanswered questions were real people trying to reach other real people.

Unfortunately for them, those people are 18 years old and keep saying they're fine.

Call your mom.

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WEEKEND RECOMMENDS:

CARPOOL KARAOKE