PERSONAL ESSAY

My mom was cooler than me at 18

// BY EMA BEKIC



ILLUSTRATION BY MAIA WILSON

My mom grew up in brutalist 1990s Serbia: gray apartment buildings, thick smog settling over the city, soot and cracked pavement everywhere. She tells me it was "an absolutely crazy time; when the country was at war, everybody was poor and the kids were out of control."

When she was 14, my mom moved alone to Belgrade to follow her dream of becoming a doctor. A major aspect of her newfound independence was getting her own place. If there's one thing that's a constant throughout all of her stories, it's her apartment.

Located about five minutes away from her high school, her apartment quickly became the 'spot.' Her friends basically moved in after a few weeks; they were over there constantly — no warning call, nothing. My mom would wake up in the morning and pad into her small kitchen to find a few friends already sitting there, chattering over cups of coffee. She loves to mention how, after four years living there, over 30 people had copies of the key to the flat.

This apartment was about 46 square meters, just enough room for a small kitchen, living room, bedroom and a bathroom — but somehow big enough to host 200 people for her 18th birthday. They spilled out onto the balcony, into the hallway and down the stairs. Music blasted throughout the building; the smell of alcohol lingered on the curtains and carpet for days after.

Her younger brother, about 15 at the time and who had moved in with her a few months prior, somehow managed to fall asleep on the couch amid all the commotion. After midnight, he woke up and started shouting.

"U pičku materinu!" (A much more vulgar version of f--- off). "Everybody go home! I want to sleep!"

I always ask my mom how they didn't get shut down by the cops — didn't a neighbor snitch on them? But she got lucky: her neighbours knew it was her birthday, and they all agreed to let her celebrate. After all, you only turn 18 once. It's funny how the strangest part of all of these stories isn't their occurrence; it's that I could never imagine her doing them. As kids, we meet our parents fully-formed. We make the mistake of taking the middle of their lives as the beginning. My mother has always been my mother, but I made the error of not learning earlier about the real person inside.

The real person had a close friend group of seven girls, who turned that apartment into a mix of "Friends" and "Sex and the City." The real person drank Turkish coffee and read fortunes from the grounds, learning astrology as a side hustle. The real person was the type to leave in the middle of class, declaring, "I am so bored, I have to get out." The real person loved spiked peach juice, dancing and prank calling — especially during sleepovers.

One time, my mom and her friends discovered the telephone number of the man in their building who owned the best car around: a new, pristine BMW. After plotting for a few minutes, they decided, at 2 a.m., to call him.

"Hello?" he asked, clearly having just awoken. My mom put on her best customer-service voice. "Hello, sir, do you own a black BMW?" "Yes, why?" "Well, you don't anymore."

And she would hang up, giggling, the seven of them crowding around the tiny windowsill to watch the man run outside to frantically check if his car was really there.

My favorite story of hers is the one I hear over Thanksgiving dinner and Christmas breakfast, the one that causes the whole table to erupt in laughter.

When she and her brother were living together, the lightbulbs slowly started burning out one by one until, eventually, they were left with just one. Rather than do the reasonable thing and buy new ones, they decided to carry around that single lightbulb as needed.

You needed the bathroom? Unscrew it from the kitchen and carry it over, tossing it from hand to hand to avoid burning yourself. As soon as you're done, bring it right back.

When I ask her why she didn't just buy a new one, the answer's always the same: She doesn't know. Or if I ask why she went straight from the club to her morning classes, she says, "Everybody else did it."

It makes me wonder why we really do any of the things we do; the best stories she's told me came from being young and doing stupid s---, only later turning them into stories.

I celebrated my 18th birthday here on campus during move-in week. After playing shock potato for about two hours, my friends and suitemates dragged me outside to sing "Happy Birthday." The chanting voices got louder and louder as we counted down from 10, marking the exact second it turned midnight. Later that night, we hosted our own little party. Of course, it was tame compared to my mom's wild 200 guests, but we tried to follow in her footsteps by cramming as many people as possible into our suite.

Since I got here, I've been collecting what I call "mini-lore": a bunch of small stories that don't seem particularly interesting until they finally add up into something interesting. I look back at this month and think, damn, maybe Yale hasn't been all studying and libraries.

The night after I called my mom to have her tell me these stories again, I found myself at a party. I stood in the middle of the throng of people, one guy's sweaty back pressed against mine, two of my friends dancing in front of me. Everything was moving in fewer frames per second, the speaker was suddenly right next to my ear. I looked up into the low branches hanging over the string lights. Everything felt so beautiful. I wondered if that's how my mom felt, if that was what she thought of when her eyes got distant. I wondered if she still heard the music, remembered the boys she danced with, the things she laughed over. I wondered if part of her was left behind in those hallways, in those lawless nights.

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PERSONAL ESSAY

The stranger side of Yale courses

// BY EMA BEKIC



ILLUSTRATION BY SUDARSHAN KRISHNAN

As the registration deadline for next semester approaches, perhaps you've found yourself scrolling endlessly through heaps of classes, trying to fulfill that last social science credit or, in the rare case you're able to experiment with your curricular obligations, to find an easy, amusing class for you and all of your friends to take. It can be daunting; who knew over 1,800 classes were being offered by Yale College alone next semester? Lucky for you, there are all the more unique classes that might just be that perfect fit. Here are the craziest, most interesting, and most "out there" courses that I could find through my extensive search on Yale Course Search.

Some classes assign homework you might already be doing at 1 a.m. In "Hallyu: The Korean Wave Through K-Pop and K-Dramas," each student joins a team that watches an entire K-Drama, then moves onto weekly playlists of music videos and, finally, Korean webtoons. You could be learning about things you already watch on TikTok.

Or maybe true crime is more your speed: is there a podcast or video essay you've been putting off for months? Or maybe binging in your little free time? In "Trials of the 20th Century," you can finally get credit for your hours of extracurricular dedication. Through a review of cases and conspiracies such as the Lindbergh kidnapping case, the Chicago Seven conspiracy case, the O. J. Simpson and Emmett Till murder trials and the impeachment trial of President Bill Clinton LAW '73, you can put those video essays and TikTok series to work.

If you're tired of studying the same textbooks and assigned books, maybe you'll feel more excited about rereading "A Song of Ice and Fire" by George R.R. Martin, the inspiration behind the "Game of Thrones" TV show. In "Game of Thrones and the Theory of Sovereignty," your most recent binge-watch ties into German history and connects history, theory and fiction. Finally, your perfect recall of seasons one through eight will come in handy.

For some of us, learning from the same textbook PDFs and slides isn't an issue of boredom, but it's just not enough: we have to be immersed — perhaps in our liked songs? Luckily, for all of our budding Soundcloud rappers who want to take their DJ career to the next level, we have "Laptop Ensemble: Study and Performance," where you can finally learn to use a platform other than GarageBand and even perform in an end-of-term concert!

For those embarking on their "winter arcs" next semester, there's a class that might help you stick to it. In "Buddhist Monastic Experience," students take an 8-week-long monastic life project, where they give themselves daily rules to live by, as well as meditation and weekly communal meals with their study group. As they say, there's no better way to learn something than by living through it. And, perhaps, doing it for a grade.

In "Occult Technologies," take a turn and start looking between the lines of the spiritual and the physical. The tools for this class are more than just the standard texts; you'll be working with tarot cards, spirit photography, astrological charts and more. Discover the history behind the technology, how it relates the human quest for knowledge and how that led to the occult fad of WitchTok.

For those of you on the other side of social media, maybe you'll relate more to this sentence: "Is Ignoring the Foids while munting and mogging Moids more useful then SMV chadfishing in the club?" (Twitter Post, @Chromeheart600). That is the first sentence to describe "Gender, Embodiment, and Technology." Find out about looksmaxxing and its underlying themes: how technology constructs our perception of bodies and of each other.

Maybe you've noticed an increase in dark-eyed juncos or have been an avid bird-watcher since birth. Maybe you're just really into chickens. Either way, "The Human History of Birds" has you covered. From poultry farming to the use of feathers in fashion to medieval falconry, this class looks at the relationship between humans and birds from prehistoric to current times. And that's not all: you can even take excursions to a local bird sanctuary.

Finally, for all the coffee lovers out there, or those of us who walk into our common rooms and find seven dead vapes and just as many empty Zyn tins, let the gateway drugs introduce you to a class just as addictive. From coffee to beer to prescriptions to even more illegal ones, "The History of Drugs in America" looks at drugs and their perception in society. Why is it more acceptable to drink than to smoke? Why can I drink coffee before class but not wine? Surely we've all wondered, so it's time to find out.

Before we all start defaulting to our 400-person lectures, fulfilling major requirements and getting distributional credits squared away, remember that you have the beautiful choice of spending a semester on drugs, spirit communication or true crime — maybe your future self will thank you.

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WEEKEND RECOMMENDS:

DOING IT FOR THE BIT