

## **The Night is Yours Alone**

*Creative Nonfiction by Renée K. Nicholson*

The camera lingers just a moment after the final chords of the song, and a small smile spreads across the lead singer's face. Not the wide grin of self-satisfaction, hers a shier and perhaps truer one, born from the shared purpose that comes with playing music together for the first time after months of separation. It's mid-March 2021, and I am listening to West Virginia-based band Hello June's cover R.E.M.'s "Everybody Hurts." It feels like the song of our times.

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The year before the pandemic, my brother Nate died. The refrain and hook. *Nate died*. Then the whole world turned in a way none of us could imagine. Before and after took on new meaning, and through these changes I wrote about songs. The songs, I've come to see, are signpost and catalogs, the focus on remakes because my obsession became cover songs. Like most things, it's not just about the songs. I, too, am a remake. But I'm not yet sure of my new voice.

To believe in a remake asks you to grab onto a trembling hope. It marks a place where past and present converge. The rhythm: *Nate died*. Da-dum. A beat not of my choosing, the repetition in all my writing, and as I write about each song, it's also a desperate grasp for who I will become in his absence.

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In 1993, among grungy hits like Nirvana's "All Apologies," Soul Asylum's "Runaway Train," and Blind Melon's "No Rain"—the last including a video of a ten-year old in a bee costume that I still associate with the 1990s even now—R.E.M. seemed like the staid older brothers to these post-punk flannel boys. Is *rueful* the right word, the one I'm looking for? Not quite. Late '92 when *Automatic for the People* came out, the album felt nostalgic for an alternative scene that had since crested into the aggressive-if-murky sound of the early 90s. In '93, when "Everybody Hurts" hit the charts, the underpinning

of soul diffused this ballad wedged itself alongside the sonic “meh-thos” of Gen X. Soul felt overtly connected to emotions, but I counted myself among the collective shrug of my generation, anti-sanguine to a fault with practiced ambivalence to spare. Yet, in *Automatic for the People* songs like “Everybody Hurts” and, to my ear, its cousin, “Nightswimming,” every moody tendency of early adulthood had found its perfect soundtrack. It was my angsty-self’s lullaby. I’d fallen headlong for *Out of Time*, despite the overwhelming commercial success of “Losing My Religion,” which I loved and still love even if loving it makes me a sellout. The music boys I knew in those younger years would try to convince me that being a sellout was the worst transgression of listening.

Dudes, you’re so wrong.

In the ‘90s, R.E.M. anchored many of my listening habits, shifting my teenaged obsessions from the older efforts—*Life’s Rich Pageant* and *Document*, in particular—to those early 90s albums. I can see how R.E.M.’s music dovetailed neatly into the narrative I constructed about myself as a young person. We let music imprint on us and we appropriate it into our self-story because somehow music penetrates our sense of reason with pure sonic emotion. I grafted my young hopes on R.E.M. songs, wanting so much to be a particular kind of off-kilter cool, for the mystery of their often-obscure lyrics to apply to me. But to be young and female was also to tamp down these wishes, shoehorning all my hopes, ambitions, and self-creation into a disaffected long sigh and a gulp of Diet Coke.

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Sarah Rudy cut her hair super short, which somehow suits the rich alto of her voice. I can’t quite tell if the word “hurts” catches in her voice, or if it’s just the timbre, or if the moment just overwhelms, but whatever the case, it works. Seeing her with her band creates an ache in me for live music, embers from a long-gone youth. We’ve been locked away from one another for so long that seeing musicians on screen playing together approximates a return to “normal,” like watching a movie from a bygone era.

I desire, as I think many do, to make sense of our chaos. Specifically, the COVID-chaos, the thing that might just define our current era forever forward. The thing about chaos? It resists sense-making.

As we emerge from this lonely, sad time, maybe a song like “Everybody Hurts,” a sonic postcard from an earlier time, works now as a survivor’s anthem. We tend toward metaphors of battle—enemies and victories and losses. Our current moment isn’t about victory. It’s about how we persist, one day after another, until one day a shy relieved smile spreads across a singer’s face, and suddenly, it’s as though the only way I have ever heard this song performed is by Hello June, the insistently intoned *hold on* both lyric and directive, because we have not, in fact, had too much of this life, and though tired, we’re aware of how much we simply want to live as we once had.

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Fear lives as a constant in me these days. Despite the early optimism, Covid isn’t thwarted. I live with rheumatoid arthritis, an auto-immune disease, and it feels like daily I’m told how much more danger the immune-compromised face because of the pandemic. My self-talk, often directed toward telling me, “It’s going to be okay” in a more abstract sense, feels sharp and pulled into focus. Have my vaccines worked well enough for me to gather with other people, people I desperately miss? When do I mask, when don’t I? Is it safe for me to return to a workplace where others have chosen not to be vaccinated, failing to protect themselves and me? When will a variant emerge for which our vaccines prove useless?

It feels like a big pile of hurt.

I am already haunted by feelings of being left out, left behind, not belonging. I have often been told that I seem confident, but I wear confidence like a costume. Mostly, I feel inadequate, like I never quite fit in. Discounted. Most of all, lonely.

My loneliness is complicated. Often, I want some alone time—time I fill with reading, writing, and music. In these solitary moments I’m attended by solace. The lonely feelings happen as often when I’m around other people as when I’m by myself. That has shifted a bit during the pandemic when there were so few options to be around others, when connection happened screen to screen, a voice on my phone, an email, text. The exile imposed on us by this virus came accompanied by a collective crush of solitude that wasn’t solace but a hunkered-down fear of the thing we couldn’t see but all hoped to avoid. Quiet, lurking.

As things open back up, I still hold back.

*What would be safe?* The question haunts me as I creep back into a semblance of my former existence, masked, worried, vaccinated, scared. Immune-compromised. Brotherless.

I imagine many people share these sentiments. I am not the only immunosuppressed. I know people are losing their family members, their loved ones, in droves every single day. My own brother will never know the pandemic. He will never be a patient with cancer through fraught times. I will never send him the link to Hello June playing “Everybody Hurts.” The night is his alone.

Still, I like to think he’d appreciate this cover. The YouTube video has a kind of late-80s-early-90s feel to it, colors like a developing Polaroid, a faint strobe-light effect. Around her neck, Sarah sports a navy bandana. She sways as she sings and strums, as if comforting her guitar, and by extension us.

The song confronts melancholy, hints at a hard-earned sense of joy, not euphoric, but a simple, quiet variety. Like a balm, the lyrics remind us that we can still take comfort in our friends, and that this hurt is not, in fact, something we experience alone. In fact, it’s one way we are connected, part of the human condition. Still, we hunt for intimacy.

Perhaps the lingering aftereffect of COVID is exactly that: everybody hurts—sometimes.

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I’m a list-maker; it gives order and structure to my world. I don’t know if this is a Gen-X thing, a personal habit and coping mechanism, or a writer’s tendency. Trauma piled on trauma—in 2019 Nate went on hospice and died, and I wasn’t given time or space to grieve. Rather, I was asked to take on significant work responsibilities. As winter slumped into a wet, muddy spring, the world snapped into its pandemic place. During the whole of this COVID crisis, I’ve thought a lot about 1987, a time that was happier, and filled with discovering music. R.E.M.’s *Document*. Prince’s *Sign O’ The Times*. U2’s *The Joshua Tree*. 10,000 Maniacs, *In My Tribe*. The Cure’s *Kiss Me, Kiss Me, Kiss Me*. The Smith’s *Strangeways, Here We Come*. Depeche Mode’s *Music for the Masses*.

Public Enemy's *Yo! Bum Rush The Show*. The Replacements' *Pleased to Meet Me*. Suzanne Vega's *Solitude Standing*.

Maybe everyone has a certain year in which music works on them in an almost magical way, and for me, that year was 1987. Just old enough to start picking my way through the music I would choose as mine, '87 imprinted itself on my listening habits in a way few other years have before or since. Even a song from 1993 takes me back to 1987, to when I discovered the band that sung it.

There's more: in 1987, Aretha Franklin became the first woman inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. The Beastie Boys became the first band to be censored by *American Bandstand*. Bon Jovi's "Livin' on a Prayer" became a big, worldwide hit. U2 shot "Where the Streets Have No Name" on an LA rooftop. Guns-N-Roses' *Appetite for Destruction* starts slow and then became the best-selling debut album to date. Fugazi played their first gig ever. George Michael's *Faith* won the Grammy for Album of the Year. I rocked out at my first concert, *The Joshua Tree*, in early in December, and soon after, I turned fifteen years old. I picked my way through a heady mix of music.

Sonic Youth's *Sister*. Echo & The Bunnymen's eponymous album. The Jesus and Mary Chain's *Darklands*. Siouxsie and the Banshees' *Through the Looking Glass*. The Housemartins' *The People Who Grinned Themselves to Death*. Red Hot Chili Peppers' *The Uplift Mofo Party Plan*.

I think about 1987 quite a bit, how young and naive I was and how I looked to the future more wide-eyed than I cared to admit. I balled up lots of conflicting feelings and channeled them into a burgeoning interest in music, but I was afraid to see myself as someone really in-the-know. The music itself felt rich and thrilling, throbbing in my ears, often through headphones attached to a bright yellow Sony Sports Walkman that was always with me. I lost myself in listening, the music a current carried through my bloodstream by the steady drumbeat of the bands I queued up. I made mixtapes, listened to cassettes, always on the go, always just slightly distracted.

Ramones, *Halfway to Sanity*. The Lemonheads, *Hate Your Friends*. Indigo Girls, *Strange Fire*. David Bowie's *Never Let Me Down*.

But of them all, the top two albums in my collection were easily Prince's *Sign O' The Times* and R.E.M.'s *Document*. Both Prince and R.E.M would stay in my regular

rotations long after 1987. Before my brother would die from metastatic colon cancer, he and I would go to the reunion tour for *The Joshua Tree*, where I would joke that The Edge looked exactly the same as he did in 1987. For whatever reason, it's *the* year. A few things endure.

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I will not be able to send Nate the link to Hello June playing "Everybody Hurts." He's dead. There are so many dead. It's a particular sadness that grips me when I think he only had 42 years, especially as I careen towards 50. Our current crisis isn't our first nor will it be our last. Somehow, "Everybody Hurts" reminds me how we survive despite turmoil of one kind or another.

The song confronts melancholy, and hints at a hard-earned sense of joy, not euphoric but a simple, quiet variety. Calming, like a balm, the lyrics remind us that we can still take comfort in our friends, and that this hurt we experience is not, in fact, something we do alone. The idea that everybody hurts can be seen as a way we are connected, both heartening and saddening. Hurt, we understand, is part of the human condition, and I wonder if sorrow and joy might attend one another. I don't know if it's the mix of female voices in the Hello June version, the timing of when I first heard it, my early connection to R.E.M in general, but the song hits that sweet spot. I cried a little, stray slow tears that slid down my cheek. A bittersweet release of all I had pent up.

*Hang on, they sing. What else can we do?*

I listened to the song over and over, re-queuing it as it ended. I don't remember what else was going on during the particular day when Sarah sent me her DM. But as I listened, it turned out that the night was Hello June's, except I was allowed entrée. Listening is that most powerful and underused skill available to us all, vital and real moments, full of compassion. I hold them up to the night sky, the twinkling stars and equally shining space junk, our imperfect world we keep mucking up and destroying. Our cloudy future doesn't look anything like the one of that girl who discovered music in 1987. But also not *not* like the future she imagined. My Hello June gift. And so, the night is mine. I remember a past self who discovered something in the music that spoke to her. Turns out, that's the part that never went away.