



Ben Folds Five

"Don't Change Your Plans"

The Unauthorized Biography of Reinhold Messner

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550 Music - Epic

Don't Change Your Plans

Levi Andrew Noe

Driving under a canopy of redwoods through snaking mountain roads, Kristine turned the volume up until the speakers crackled. A low, droning hum—a violin?—swelled slowly into a soft crash with Ben Folds' signature, bouncy, upbeat piano verse. Kristine and I would wait, perched on a cliff of anticipation for that first line. Most of the time we would be early, coming in a bar too soon and laughing at our mistake even though we had sung along to "Don't Change Your Plans" a dozen times. But no matter how off-key and out of tempo we would always catch up and sing/shout: "Sometimes I get the feeling that I won't be on this planet for very long. I really like it here, I'm quite attached to it, I hope I'm wrong."

If songs were prophecy, Ben Folds would be Nostradamus. Kristine was not long for this planet. But we were immortal then, and even if some harbinger of the future had showed me the police report, or her casket, I wouldn't have believed it.

"All I know is I gotta be where my heart says I ought to be." The refrain came in and we would belt it out with the windows down, on our way to Santa Cruz. Kristine's long brown hair would float around her like she was underwater. Her sharp, searching coffee eyes never seemed to notice her wild locks, she just stayed focused on the road and the euphony.

We were living at a yoga community, Mount Madonna, taking part in a work, trade program. We'd go into Santa Cruz, about an hour and a half away, for milkshakes and fries when the yogic vegetarian diet got old. I was supposed to be going back to college, but I took the semester off because I was having an early-twenties existential crisis. Kristine was there to stare down her life's biggest questions and see who blinked first. We were both looking for answers in the ancient school of yoga, under the tutelage of yogis, philosophers and devotees of Sri Baba Hari Das, the silent monk.

Babaji, as his followers affectionately called him, had taken a vow of silence in 1952. We didn't know how he would take to our raucous singing, so we tended to be a good way from Mount Madonna before turning on our theme song. Babaji's silence was permeable, a real visceral thing that hovered around him like a holy force field. Sure, he seemed pretty enlightened (like I was any kind of judge) and silence had given him some perks, as he wrote: "First, to conserve life energy. Second, to silence the mind. And third, to develop non-attachment to desires." But I was in no place for lifelong vows and austerities. I just thought that it was sad that Babaji couldn't sing along with us. I bet he really would have enjoyed it.

The bridge came in and we made trumpet sounds with our mouths. Kristine laughed so hard she almost swerved off the mountain. "All I really want to say, you're the reason I want to stay." We sang to ourselves and to each other.

"You have made me smile again, in fact I might be sore from it. It's been awhile." I had come on this pilgrimage fleeing depression, purposelessness, and a black hole in the center of my being. Kristine was tighter lipped about her past, but she had battles with herself; you could see it in the distances her eyes would retreat to. None of that was present as long as this song was playing and we were coming down the mountain into seas of strawberry fields.

Sometimes you want memory to be untouched, pristine, crystal clear. Sometimes memory serves better polished, revised. I chose to leave Kristine in her bliss at Mount Madonna. The Kristine that I would meet two years later, when she offered me a job tending her marijuana farm was another person who took another path. Somewhere, the Kristine I keep in memory is still singing along. "I know we've been together many times before I'll see you on the other side."

Life's music is rarely as fluently composed as a pop song, and who would want it to be? If I had gone to her funeral, it would have been too late to sing the coda. But on that road between the mountains and the coast, we got to finish the song, crooning out the windows to the sweet, soupy California sky.

"I love you, goodbye."