

Dear Young Rocker,

So you're in middle school. I'm so sorry that you have to go through this time, particularly for the huge drop in self-esteem that hits kids at your age especially girls plus just how straight up weird everyone acts toward each other in middle school. Unfortunately, it's technically natural and normal. And I promise that after middle school, most people gradually become less confusing and difficult to interact with as they get older. But although I am glad I never have to experience the singular horror of a middle school lunchroom ever again I do truly envy where you are for one reason. You're about to fall in love, hard. This is a love that will last you a lifetime. A love that will always be there for you no matter who else is or isn't and will bring you comfort through heartaches, career failures, grief, lost friendships and all the other problems that wait for you on the other side of middle school. But nothing beats the rush of love at first sight of opening up that box and plucking that very first note on your first bass. I'm tearing up just thinking about how much I love that silver Squier. And that reminds me - I really need to get her back from that ex of mine...

Trigger warning for body image issues. PS young rocker your fingers hurt so bad because that old guitar has incredibly high string tension. But those finger muscles are going to make you a truly excellent bass player.

Theme Song

I sit down on the fancy in the nice living room. The one with the fireplace and no TV. I pick up the super old Harmony acoustic guitar I got for my birthday and put it on my lap. It smells like old books and it's yellow on the front and dark brown on the back. I'd seen acoustic guitars but never one like this. I run my finger along the headstock part. It's a cool curvy shape more like on an electric guitar. The first time I picked it up and looked down at the strings I didn't know how I'd learn to play anything at all. But somehow I knew I would because I wanted to SOO bad. My dad didn't want to get me a brand new guitar when I asked for one in case I didn't stick with it. This one came from my grandparents house. I put all the tab printouts with all the X's and dashes on the coffee table in front of me. I found this website that has all the tabs to all the Smashing Pumpkins songs ever and I have the whole long url memorized. Tabs are way easier than the music book that I got with the guitar. Once you know how to put your finger down and pluck a note you can figure out the whole song. I pick a song and see that I have to play the 11th

fret on the top string. I count up to it and pluck the note (doot). Ok the next one is one string down on the 11th fret again. I try those two in a row (doot doot). It's kind of like the game Simon, you have to remember the pattern (sound of Simon game). I keep trying it and after a while I can play the beginning notes of the song. (doot doot doot) It's harder when there's multiple notes at once, which means a chord. If I just find one note at a time and try my fingers in different combinations I can get them eventually. After an hour I look at my fingertips. They're black and blue with a deep line in the middle like I split them open. Its funny I never

notice how bad they hurt when I'm playing only when I stop. I kind of like the big calluses on my fingers, it's something to pick at when I'm in school. Seventh grade sucks.

-Transition Cue -

I always knew I liked music, I remember being really little sitting in the backseat of my mom's car with the radio playing and looking out the window up at the trees. Sometimes a song would make me have these super strong feelings that I'd never felt before in real life – It wasn't the words but the music that made me feel that way – the rhythm and the chords. (Landslide starts playing) I didn't have to know what the song was about even. (radio changes to classical station). Sometimes classical music with no words at all made me have the strongest ones.

Even

if it was a sad feeling I longed for more of it. It felt like some kind of craving for someone or

someplace like I had a past life I could almost remember, but it disappeared as soon as I stopped listening.

I still didn't know how to play anything yet when I started sixth grade and we had to sign up for either choir or band or this music survey class. My parents said I should do choir because I could

go on school trips and stuff and they wouldn't have to buy me an instrument. I did it for a while but I didn't like it very much. It was all girls and they all wanted to be a star (diva "ahhhheeehaahhh") and sing in these stupid high pitched voices along to these cheesey songs from musicals ("five hundred twenty-five thousand six hundred minutes"). Watching these girls made me want to throw up. I purposely sang in the lowest voice I could ("Oh sayyy can you seeee"). And the dumb choir lady gave me weird looks. I knew I needed to get out of there so I switched to the music class halfway through the year. I called it music for dummies because all we did was read from a text book and put on headphones and play around with the keyboards (random keyboard drum sound effects and trying to play part of a song).

That fall I also went to the field hockey tryouts even though I didn't know what field hockey really was. But I knew I was in when I learned I could be the goalie and strap these huge pads on my body and put on a helmet so no one could see me. I could become this big monster who dove on the ground and destroyed the dreams of girls trying to score a goal (AHH COME ON!) I got to be mostly invisible but become the hero a few times during the game. (Cheering nice save!) Perfect. I felt invincible inside my goalie pads. The rock hard ball came flying at my chest and my arms and legs and I loved the feeling of not being afraid and standing straight up as the hard smack hit my body. (Thump) I also loved the rule that the goalie was the only one who could touch other players – I could push girls out of the way if they were getting too close to my goal and kick their sticks so hard they trip ("get outta my goal!") It felt good to be a big monster. It's a pretty good release for the angry feeling I always have. But still, nothing's as good as loud music (metal guitar sound).

At my birthday party that year I got a Linkin Park CD – which I wanted and someone else gave me Now That's What I call Music, which I didn't really want and thought was cheesey pop stuff.

I played both of them at my birthday party. Everyone danced to Britney Spears and Backstreet Boys on the Now CD. No one really liked the Linkin Park except me. It's a metal band everyone thought it was too loud. ("uhhh turn that down"). Even though when I found "real" rock music I started hating Linkin Park and now I'm embarrassed I ever owned it, at the time I liked the lyrics about feeling angry and it was the heaviest guitar riffs I'd ever heard. It felt like my insides which are always ready to explode. Sometimes after I got that album I put my cd player in my sweatshirt pocket, put my hood over my headphones and walked out to the edge of the woods in the backyard and closed my eyes. I stood there not caring how cold I got. It felt like I was screaming through the singer and my anger was making the guitar riffs instead of just making me sick like it usually did. I breathed the sound in and out (guitar sound).

That birthday party was six people and it was the last one I ever had. They were sort of misfits – the kind of awkward girls that yelled dorky movie quotes in the cafeteria and acted like little

kids even though we were in middle school now. Our lunch table spot was next to some of the popular boys who would stare whenever one of the girls started singing or yelling or just laughing way too loud in a really nerdy way (nerdy laugh). One of them was already six feet tall and she was the loudest she really belted it out. ("The hills are alive with the sound of musiiiiic"). Another in the group was my best friend Colby. She also dressed in baggy boys clothes. Teachers mixed us up sometimes, but she acted nuts too. She would fall off the table backwards when she was laughing and I'd stare at the chocolate chip peanut butter sandwich she ate everyday all smushed in her braces. I felt super embarrassed by it. And one time after lunch when we were walking down the stairs to class she ran full speed with her baggy pants and long hair flapping behind her and crashed spread eagle into the wall at the bottom and then fell over like a cartoon and people had to step over her. I wanted to die and ran to my classroom pretending I hadn't seen it. I prayed please god let no one associate that with me. At lunch I'd put my sweatshirt hood on and put head down at the table to show the normal kids I wasn't a part of the antics. I tried to turn my head and see if we were getting looked at, and we always were. Being looked at that way was the worst feeling in the entire world. I hated the other girls for making me look so stupid, so I stopped sitting with them but I still saw my best friend Colby after school when it didn't matter how dorky we were. We'd been best friends since second grade after all.

She'd moved to the circle we lived on after first grade. The first time she saw me I was playing with model airplanes in the front yard with my dad. I had a short haircut and was wearing my karate uniform. (Hi-yah!) She thought I was a boy. The first time I saw her she was riding around on her scooter wearing a vest that flapped open in the breeze with no shirt underneath. So I thought she might be a boy too. I guess we were friends because we were both different, sort of weirdos, but I really wanted to be the cool kind of different and Colby didn't care about being a huge dork. Although I didn't either when no one was looking. We spent hours after school and almost all summer in the woods behind my house (nature sounds). We walked down to the stream where a giant old tree had been hit by lightning and had cracked in the middle. The top half was bent over at a right angle and made this awesome bridge we could walk across

over the stream to the horse farm on the other side. It was our Narnia or Terebithia or

whatever. And we made up stories about what might be in the woods. There were big piles of rocks and I thought they might be Indian burial grounds (“oooooh”). Sometimes we played chariot. I’d get in a wheelbarrow and hold one end of a rope ladder and Colby would put the other end around her waist and pull me around. I really hope no one ever saw that.

(Musical transition).

Colby’s who I started my first band with. I don’t really wanna call it a band because it was just us playing three chords on bass and guitar and yelling stuff in my bedroom stuff like (guitar and bass playing without much rhythm while I sing “yeah dude man yeahh, yeah dude man yeahh”). But it was good because I was at least playing with someone else. I wouldn’t have even started playing anything though if it weren’t for the smashing pumpkins... (11:46)

Musical Transition

So the summer after sixth grade my mom took me to this music store called Jelly’s. I felt really overwhelmed looking at the thousands of used CD’s. It was way bigger than the CD store in the mall. My mom told me to pick out one thing for myself and I went to look around. I didn’t know too many band names off the top of my head but I didn’t want to like like, uncool, so I pretended to know what I was doing and flipped through the CDs. Eventually I got to the S’s and stopped at the Smashing Pumpkins. I said it aloud to myself. (Smash-ing pump-kins). And I liked how the words had a smush and pop just like if you were to smash a pumpkin. I knew I had heard their songs on the radio even if I didn’t know what any of them were called. Standing there the smell of stale cigarettes came into my mind. And I suddenly remembered being 8 or 9 and standing in the kitchen at Joanna’s house. She was my my best friend when I was really little and her dad smoked inside a lot. Her cool older sister was there and asked me what my favorite band was. I said the Smashing Pumpkins cause it was the only bandname that came into my mind and I don’t even know how I knew it. I just knew it was a cool band teenagers liked and I wanted to be cool already, even at 8. Maybe she was even the one that told me about them. I don’t know. But when I saw that name at Jelly’s I decided I’d give it a listen. I picked a CD that had two little girls on the cover and a heart. It was called Siamese Dream. Another nice sounding name. It felt like it was meant to be. When we got to the counter my mom asked me – “Why do you want that?”

“I just want it” I said.

Back home, I put the CD in my perfectly round CD player and put on my headphones. I hadn’t heard music like it before. I skipped through each track and they were all the same to me. Just loud guitars or quiet guitars. (Clips of beginning of each song on the CD as I skip through it). There wasn’t any catchy melodies right in the first few seconds of the song like Blink 182 or the other CD’s I had. Sometimes the singing didn’t even come in for a few minutes. I didn’t think I’d listen to it again. Fast forward to the beginning of seventh grade though and I am obsessed with the Smashing Pumpkins. I don’t know how to explain it but it was like all the stuff I needed I finally had when I was listening to their music. Like being in love, I think. IT was even more intense than when I was little listening to the radio in the car. What I realized was that this kind of music you needed to actually sit down and close your eyes and let it take you away. You don’t just immediately get it, like Linkin Park or pop-punk. And it was so much better than any music with catchy singing. Sometimes when no one was home, I’d put one of my CD’s on the

stereo and lay on the couch with the lights off and close my eyes. (Smashing Pumpkins song Soma starts playing, mellow melanchollie sound) I imagined I was floating through the music. The fuzzy tone of the rhythm guitars felt warm. And the bass notes pulled me down deeper and deeper like I was sinking through the couch. I felt like I became different colors with each chord change. Some songs had a lot of blue or green and some were all red and black. Eventually I wasn't conscious of myself as a separate being. I wasn't a body , just something floating inside of the music. I never wanted to ever leave. Ever. I thought, maybe this is what religious people feel like when they say they feel the spirit or whatever. I wanted to get closer to this feeling and be even more inside of it. Instead of praying though, I wanted to play guitar.

Colby got an electric guitar for Christmas a little after I had gotten my acoustic one. I think she had asked for a bass but her parents didn't know the difference or something. I was jealous because at first I thought I'd be a guitar player. But I really wanted to play along with someone.

So I asked my parents for a bass later that year. Since the old guitar they gave me was free anyway, and I had proved I would keep playing. They kept asking if I was sure that I wanted a bass. And I kept begging. The more I thought about it, the more I WAS sure. It was the heavy thick low notes I liked best when I listened to music (bass playing comes in). When I learn songs I always get the rhythms faster than the notes. I always knew I was a rhythm player. Plus, I had spent a lot of time looking at pictures of the Smashing Pumpkins bass players. D'arcy Wretzkey and Melissa Auf Der Maur both looked so cool when they were playing the big instrument. It's like they're commanding the whole band even though they aren't in the front. And from watching MTV and VH1 I knew bass players were the cool quiet ones. They weren't just trying to get attention the whole time like the singer or guitar player ("yeahh babyyy" annoying singing and whiny guitar note). But unlike the drummer, you could still see them out front, and wonder what they were singing. Melissa even had a sparkly silver bass. That's exactly what I wanted because silver is my favorite color. We got a catalogue of instruments in the mail and when I turned the pages for the basses and saw a sparkly silver one that wasn't even expensive,

my heart started racing (*heartbeat sound*). It was the coolest thing I had ever seeeeeen. ("uuahhhh"). All the metal parts like the knobs were black, even the big round tuning keys on the top. Black and silver is totally badass. When the box finally came in the mail, I felt like I was gonna' pee my pants, seriously. I had to hold it in but I couldn't stop to go to the bathroom until I had taken off every bit of foam and plastic. It smelled so new and fresh unlike the old crummy acoustic guitar I had been playing. The new smell was like a chance at a new life, a new cool life

without the dorky kids I ate lunch with. Maybe I could stop being invisible if I could be as cool as this bass. Maybe I could walk up to anyone and talk to them and they'd want to be my friend, maybe I'd grow a few inches and get skinny and tall and start wearing cool punk clothes, I know it doesn't make sense but that's what it smelled like: a new perfect cool life. I just ran my hands over it for a long time before I even plucked a note. I was in love.

Music is so good because other life kind of sucks. The life I imagined when I looked at my new bass was the total opposite of what it's really like. Like I said my parents got divorced when I was pretty little but my dad still comes over everyday. I guess they're trying to be "normal".

They're both nurses. My dad works during the day and my mom works at night. So I just have dinner with him sometimes but when it's both of them it drives me nuts. They don't really fight or anything like other people's divorced parents so I don't really want to complain. I know a lot of other kids have it way worse. They talk about nurse stuff so loud I can't hear the TV. Sometimes I imagine having a cool twin to talk to when they're just talking at each other. Maybe we could even have a band together. I just tune out my parents because it sounds like a big jumble to me ("ER ICU FLOAT POOL WE HAD TO INTUBATE, THIS PER-DIEM, SHARON SAYS

TO ME, UP TO THE CATH LAB...") I never know what they're talking about but it never sounds very nice and it makes me eat really really fast. A lot of the time it sounds like they are having two different conversations. And I imagine two people on tiny far away planets trying to yell at each other across the universe in different languages (*imaginary alien conversation with two different dialects yelling across space). I don't say much. I try to just watch TV but everytime a person comes on one of my parents has to comment on what they look like and I can't even tell what's going on. (montage of parent voices "Look at that outfit yuck, what's with the cleavage on these newscasters? You can tell he's a short guy from how big his head looks next to his

arms. He probably puts those heel risers in his shoes. You can tell these two women are more than friends.") It annoyed me but I didn't want to yell over them so I just shoved more French fries down than I wanted to to settle my stomach. We usually eat take out and I like it but I know it's making me fat.

After I eat I go online. The dial up sound is always exciting and I bounce up and down on the computer bench when it starts. (*modem sound). I look at Smashing Pumpkins fan websites and forums. I talk about my favorite albums on there or just whatever I'm thinking about and try to get people to comment on my posts or have an AIM conversation with me since I don't really talk to anyone at school. I just still feel embarrassed even though I stopped sitting with the weirdos at lunch. Now I just sit with these two girls named Sara and Sarah. I think they might be from Worcester because they have these thick accents and dress more 'ghetto'. They wear thongs and have their hair in these super tight hair-gelled buns that I usually see on Worcester girls. They don't really seem to care that I dress totally different than them and they don't draw any attention to themselves or seem to want anything to do with anyone else. Plus, they sit on the end of the cafeteria where there's no one. But still I have this body I cant deal with. I still hate my hips which only get bigger all the time. The last thing I want is to stand out but since Ive been cursed by my body shape and I can't get myself to exercise enough to fix it I figure I might as well get myself to look at the stuff I can control. So I dyed blue streaks in my hair – or ok my mom brought me to the hairdresser to do it so I won't "ruin my hair". And I wear dozens of bracelets halfway up each arm. (jingly of jewelry) But even with my big huge JNCO jeans hiding my lower body I feel like some fat lady cartoon character with a big huge butt swinging back and forth when I walk through the halls. Walking has started to hurt even cause I'm trying not to let my butt move. My legs get all achey after school cause of this. I dread even walking from the lunch table to throw out my trash. It's like my legs are asleep or something. You know those dreams when you try to run but it's like you're underwater or your legs are all heavy or they don't work right? That's how it feels. As soon as I go home it goes

away. I don't get it but for some reason the more I think about it the worse it is. Sometimes I even feel like one of my legs is longer than the other and it's like im hobbling. I try to relax and walk around normally but I end up clenching my teeth and holding my breath (clenched breath sound). I wish I could just breathe normally. That's another problem. A lot of the time I think I won't keep breathing if I don't think about it. (Breathe in ahh breathe out ahhh) And I feel like my throat is always clenched tight and I can't even relax it no matter how hard I try. Its extra bad when I try to go to sleep. It's always taken me a few hours to fall asleep anyway. Even when I was little I used to try to name every person I ever met a bunch of times in a row. ("mom dad Joanna Colby, Roya...colby's mom...") At sleepovers I always stayed up the whole night and usually walked around the kid's parents house but I was really quiet so I never got caught. AT home sometimes I'd go out into the hall and sit on the top of the stairs for a long time and watch the shadows at the bottom because if I listened close enough I swore I could hear something moving around down there. (*faint swooshing noise*) I try not to do that anymore but sometimes I still get out of bed twenty times in a row and try to make sure the door's locked. And each time I to unlock it and open the door and lock it and check by twisting the knob on the other side if it's really locked and then I close the door and lock it again. When I finally drift off sometimes I wake up gasping and my heart is racing super duper fast because I

actually did stop breathing. I still can't fall asleep but now instead of naming all the people I know I lay there and imagine a special machine with these knobs on it I could use to dial down the fat and dial up the muscle on my body (knob clicking sounds). And I tense all my muscles over and over again imagining it working. At least now I have the Smashing Pumpkins with me when I am trying to sleep. I can just put on my headphones and drift into the music for an album or two and forget I even have a body. Guitars and basses and drums are all I need. I don't

know if I'll ever get in one but being in a real band must be the best thing in the world. (smashing pumpkins epic emotional guitar solo swells and builds).

Dear Young rocker

We need to talk about social skills but first I need to let you down a little. Walking around the house at night is just your life, sorry to say but your insomnia is just part of having a very active brain. And for you sleeping pills just make you depressed on top of tired. Its just how your brain is wired I guess and part of the anxiety which is deep in your DNA. The best you can do is not worry about not sleeping, because it's just how you are and try to write down all of those incredible ideas that come to you at night. You'll actually get some cool song ideas out of your insomnia. Easier said than done, I know. But acceptance of anxiety is kind of the best thing you can do for it. When you say ok this is just me your anxiety actually loses its power a little. The more you try to fight it by attempting to force yourself to relax and sleep the more it will fight back. So get out of bed, work on that song or that story and maybe you'll feel good enough about your work to go back to bed.

Now for the body stuff. Let's talk about that awful feeling when you walk around with those heavy tense legs that won't relax? Yup that's also anxiety. Eating

too much when you're around your loud talking parents? Yup anxiety. None of this is in your control it's your nervous system driving your body. Please don't beat yourself up for gaining some weight or not exercising enough. You play field hockey and snowboard and horseback ride. You're perfectly active enough. It's totally normal for a body to change shapes in all directions especially in middle school. And the stress you experience at home raises your stress hormone levels in your body which can cause your metabolism to do weird things like hold on to more weight or constantly crave carbs and fat which is what it does for you. That's why you eat so many bowls of cereal a day and to be honest your cereal addiction is something you will fight your whole life. -- For others with anxiety they might not be able to hardly eat anything or gain any weight even if they want to. It's not just your body changing though - your brain is changing too, which is why all of this is so confusing.

Puberty does super strange and uncomfortable things to us and you're still in the beginning stages of the mess. Hold on tight kid, things are only gonna get weirder for a bit. I know you gonna feel bad about your not cool curvy body shape. Well guess what? Here I am in the future and I see ads for exercise programs and jeans and even surgery that women want to make their butts look BIGGER. Although somehow simultaneously be skinny everywhere else. It doesn't make any sense. You can't look to current trends to judge your own body, they constantly change and are usually un-obtainable for just about anyone. That's the whole point- to make everyone feel bad so they buy more stuff. I know you want to look punk and you think that means skinny but the real punk thing to do with your body is to say screw all that I don't care what image I am supposed to have - you can all deal with me the way I am. Your cellulite is just as punk as Johnny Ramone's weird face.

There are so many cool as hell and not at all skinny rockers and I can't wait til you discover those heroes so you can stop comparing yourself to the plastic people on MTV.

We'll talk more about bodies next time though. But let's talk about friends.

As much as you were embarrassed by your sixth grade lunch table companions – you'll find out that the dorks of the world – the people who aren't worried about looking cool – that's who you actually want to be and be around as an adult. People who are loyal to their friends and don't care about what the cooler people think of them. You'll find out there's actually no one more intolerable and un-cool than a grownup who's still trying to be cool.

Coolness isn't actually currency that matters, even though it feels like the most important thing in the world to you right now. But that's just because you're lonely and think you'll be more attractive to other kids as a friend if you dress and act a certain way. And that might have something to do with your parents picking apart people's appearance and outfits on TV and when you're out in public. I promise most people aren't judging each other so harshly – they're mostly worried about if THEY look good or not – just like you. Those super critical opinions are why you feel so embarrassed by your friends too. You do actually like them because they are goofy and creative just like you are. Because of these lame opinions you've inherited you're

actually further isolating yourself by trying too hard. I understand though – you're insecure about how you look and know you're different and it feels impossible to connect with other kids without measuring up on this extreme attractiveness scale.

You don't yet realize that being nice and genuine works just as good, actually better, because you've never had that modeled for you. Your parents don't say nice things to each other or about each other or about anyone else. Neither of them dates or has friends. And you don't have any siblings to bring friends over to meet or see them interact with either. You grew up with a lot less people in your life than the average person. So you haven't had any training in social skills. Plus, everyone in middle school is super self-conscious too. Even those popular kids are probably worried about how they look.

So here's the tough love part- let's go back to that moment in the cafeteria when you felt embarrassed by your friends, you could have simply laughed off the antics of your lunch gang and talked to other kids you wanted to be friends with instead of putting your head down on the table and looking aggravated. Because dissing other people definitely doesn't make you look like good friend material either. You were just too focused on how supposedly bad they were making you look. I know that your ego comes from your insecurity, but you're gonna' have to let it go anyway. You think you have to have some super funny or cool thing to say, or look a certain way to be accepted. But honestly, it would have been as simple as turning to the kid on your right and saying "Jeeze this lunch is outta control huh? Did you start that history project yet?"

When you're older you'll find out that it's actually a pretty big relief when you stop trying to dress and talk and act a certain way to make people think of you as cool. Just putting on whatever boring normal clothes your mom bought you and being nice to everyone will leave you feeling a lot lighter than when you were strapped with the heavy burden of coolness. You'll actually even revel in not looking like someone who plays rock music someday, and feel drawn to the others who just do their own thing too. You're gonna struggle with this for many many many more years to be honest. But, once you realize that friends you have to be cool enough for or that working to be part of the cool kid club isn't worth it and that you enjoy the company of one person more than a group – you'll make peace with being the solitary cat loving only child you've always been. Being nice to yourself and others will take you where coolness never will. And trust me you're already cool as heck. Cool enough to be in a band for sure. But, I won't spoil the next chapter.

Love you kid.

PS we don't call indigenous people Indians anymore in 2018 but you're in 2001 so it's OK

Next time on DYR....young Chelsea attends a band practice... but it doesn't quite go like how she imagined.