

Episode 3 - Claw Marks and Blood

Dear Young Rocker,

You're about to have a pretty transformative experience that you'll remember for the rest of your life. It's your first ever of many many VFW shows to come and it's where you'll be touched for the first time by your greatest love. I'm talking about the bass of course. The less important romantic stuff will come later but this moment is key to who becoming who you are.

You have an extremely deep connection to music mentally and emotionally and even physically. You'll find many of your needs and cravings for connection fulfilled in a thing that is a lot less likely to be confusing or dangerous than if you were looking for it in other people. You're independent and creative and so you look inside yourself and to music for these things instead. That's a good thing, mostly. Connecting with other human beings is of course still important and that will happen too. Soon enough those who want *you* to fulfill *their* needs are going to seek you out and some innocence will be lost. A lot of amazing discoveries and incredible mistakes are about to be made. I'm probably still making them now and maybe old lady Chelsea will tell me about them someday. Watch out for Dear Old Rocker in 2060. Anyways, go out there in the world and fail kid over and over because as I like to say you only learn how to do it right by doing it wrong a hundred times first.

I was staring out the back window into the dark abyss between the trees as Jillian's mom drove us out to North Brookfield. (Car Tires on asphalt sound comes up) It's in the "boonies" as my mom would say – basically western Mass. We drive down a really long road up and down hills and around curves with nothing but deep woods on each side and occasionally a house. We pass the one and only gas pump. We're going to see some bands play at the old VFW there. One of the bands is friends with Jillian's older brother, I think. She has a bunch of siblings unlike me and they all seem to be way older or way younger.

Jill and I used to be really good friends before she changed schools. I liked how her house seemed to always have kids running wild getting dirty and making all kinds of messy projects. (kids) My house is just one adult and me and it's usually pretty quiet and boring.(crickets)

We pull up to the center of North Brookfield in front of the VFW building and it looks like we're in the 60's - all the buildings are brick or white and the two stores have old yellow signs. We go in and upstairs to a wood-paneled room with fluorescent lights. The floor is sticky, and the room smells like bad breath. I kinda' look around but mostly at the floor. I'm afraid of making eye contact with kids I don't know. Or really with like anyone.

I go in the bathroom for a while to be alone. There's toilet paper all over the floor, but none on the roll so I'm glad I didn't really have to pee.

I come out and watch some kids talking to one of the bands, asking them where they're from as they unpack some drum stuff. I think I hear them say they're from Virginia. Or maybe it's Vermont I want to hear but don't want to get close enough to be in the way. I kinda' want

them to know I play bass but I'm too shy to say it. I'm impressed by the idea that they're "on tour." I had no idea touring bands played VFW's in the middle of nowhere. Packing up amps and drums and instruments in a car and driving for hours with your friends to play for people you don't know sounds like a dream. I imagine telling people "I'm going on tour with my band" and how cool I'd look.

After a while the room gets really packed. It starts to smell more like bad breath, I wish they could open a window. I end up getting squished right next to the bass amp facing the drummer. There's a table behind me so I can't back up, my hips are only about two feet from the band and the music.

The band starts to play and they're a lot better than I expected. It's like a real band. I really like the groove the bass and drums are creating. Because I'm standing so close, the reverberations from the bass drum and bass amp travel through the floor into my feet and up into my lower body. Bass frequencies hit low on the body, in the gut and the hips. I feel the bass notes touching me in a way I've never felt before. My breathing gets all tight like when I'm nervous, but it's not a bad feeling.

The bass player is tall and broad chested. He has reddish facial hair, almost a beard. I liked how he looks. He's playing slowly and tastefully, letting each note fill up a space in the air and one inside me. My body begs for each next note. My legs start to feel achy and I lean back against the table behind me.

I close my eyes and I see, and somehow feel, the color black. A deep sticky darkness takes me over. The bass notes creates this pressure like an invisible body against my own. I try to make my movements imperceptible as I rocked my hips toward the sound. My head starts to feel light like I am going to pass out, but it's a nice feeling, not scary. I don't really know what's happening to me but I think I like it. I let it take me away.

I need to get in a band. A real one. I'm in 9th grade now and there's thousands more people at my high school and probably more kids who play music but since I don't know how to talk to anyone I don't know how it's ever going to happen.

My only friends right now are Colby and Roya. I don't really see either of them a ton because we have different classes and since the high school has like 2,000 kids there's four different lunch times and ours almost never line up. I see Roya more often but just like Colby embarrassed me in middle school Roya is starting to do that too but for different reasons. She's just really into boys and trying to get attention from them. One day I was walking down the hall and Roya came running at me with her giant silver back pack bouncing up and down on her back. "I have a boyfriend, Chelsea I have a boyfriend!" I thought to myself *isn't this the exact opposite of how you're supposed to act if you get a boyfriend? How uncool.* Mostly though I just hated that she was drawing attention to me. I had been doing so well at not being noticed.

I had a boyfriend too for like 3 days but I didn't even want one – this kid named Tony in my science class who played guitar asked me out on AIM. He was super emo – he combed his hair over his eyes and wore tight girls jeans and even had a messenger bag. I didn't really think he was cute or funny or even smart but he liked me and I had found someone who played music. We went to see the movie School of Rock together and we held hands during it. It just felt sweaty and weird. The next day at school we were in the hall with Roya when the bell rang and

she said “kiss your boyfriend goodbye” I said I didn’t want to cause I just ate Cheetos so it would be gross, and also in front of someone else seemed weird. I was mostly just afraid I’d do it wrong since I’ve still never kissed anyone. Soon enough Tony found a cooler girl who knew how to make out – and they did - in front of me - all the time. After our big break up we were still friends and I even got my mom to drive the three of us to a concert the two of them wanted to go to and they just stuck their tongues down each other’s throat in my line of vision while I was trying to watch the band. When Tony called had me to say he was going out with Mel now I told him to watch out cause I’d write a song about him. I was kinda mad but I wasn’t heartbroken or anything since I never even had a crush on him in the first place. I tried to make myself cry because that’s what you’re supposed to do when you get dumped but it didn’t work. His face was covered in zits anyway. There’s no way I’d ever be able to talk to someone I *really* liked.

And that was pretty much the only time anyone ever noticed me.

Not being noticed is kind of my greatest skill. I use it during lunch. Here’s today for example:

I walked into the huge room with all the 6 person circular tables. I looked around without turning my head to see if there was someone I knew but I’m so afraid of making eye contact that I don’t look directly at anyone so I might have missed someone. I thought I saw some kids from my health class and I almost stopped for a second but I couldn’t think of a cool or funny thing to say to them and I didn’t want to just sit down quietly like a weirdo so I just tried to look like I was headed somewhere else and kept walking. I gave looking for people after that and just did my invisible thing. I made an effort to draw my energy in. I shrugged my shoulders up and imagined my presence (shrinking sound) so that no one would have to see me at all. You know that feeling that someone behind you is looking at you even though you didn’t even know they were there? Whatever it is that makes other people sense you -- I think I have the ability to turn that off. When I do it no one even looks at me. I did it today so well that a kid walked right into me face first. I really am invisible.

After I found a table with no one at it I picked at my gross circular pizza. I thought about how my invisible skill is one part of it but I’ve also changed how I dress since middle school. I make sure what I wear doesn’t draw attention to me or put me in any particular group. When I get dressed in the morning I usually go through about five shirts before I pick one (drawer opening, ruffling through shirts) and I imagine what people would think --- *If I choose the polo shirt the kids that play in bands will think I’m preppy and stuck up, but if I pick that black band t-shirt the normal kids will think I’m trying to look goth.* I don’t want people to think I’m trying to be to be in any particular group because it’s weak it – it’s a cop out - it means you can’t think for yourself so you just put on the uniform of whatever clique you want to belong to and say what you’re supposed to say. I’m above all that. Fashion is so phony it’s just people copying each other to try to look cool. It’s just as lame as those boring families that go on family walks holding hands around our neighborhood and have family game night and stuff. Me and my dad always say “family walk family walk” when we see them going by our house. It’s almost as bad as going to Church YUCK. Bunch of stupid sheep people if you actually love God so much why do you have

to go any where? They just want to be in a dumb gossip group like the cliques at my school. Pathetic.

MUSIC TRANSITION

After lunch on the way back to class the annoying thing happened again. I don't tell anyone about this because it's totally bizarre, but I can't stop it from happening. So I walked out of the cafeteria and down the hall toward my history class. It's like a mile walk seriously. I was in the corridor alone because I always run out of lunch as soon as I possibly can. I saw a classroom door up on my right. I could hear that there were students in there rustling around – they were probably about to be dismissed for the next lunch block. I knew that they'd probably start coming out of the room when I walked by. *It's about to happen and I can't stop it*, I thought. As I approached the door a kid slowly walked out while looking back for his friends, and my body shook as if a screaming man with a gun had just jumped out in front of me. Even though I heard the kids before and KNEW they were coming out when I walked by I couldn't stop my body from reacting this way. Sometimes I even had to stop myself from peeing my pants or throwing up. The most embarrassing part is that I gasp REALLY loudly and I cannot help it. I try to shut my mouth beforehand but it still happens. The worst was the elevator. I could hear it coming and hear the ding of the bell and know it was about to open but if I walked by while it happened all the muscles in my body would contract so hard it actually kind of hurt especially my ab muscles. Maybe it's a workout at least.

I lost some of the weight I gained in middle school but not really I still feel fat. My mom says “10 more pounds and you'll be perfect.” Once I lose it – somehow -- I'll probably be more OK with wearing more interesting outfits and being less invisible.

Real people scare me but I'm pretty good at talking to people on the internet though. So that's where I tried to find a band in 8th grade, but it kind of backfired. One day after school I went online (internet noise) and clicked onto to the Smashing Pumpkins fan forum like I always do and I was reading a thread where people were saying where they live. I saw someone said they were in Worcester and I couldn't believe it. gasp He said he played guitar too. I didn't think anyone else around here knew the Smashing Pumpkins – well besides Colby but just cause I showed them to her. I immediately sent him a message and said I lived right near Worcester and I told him I wanted to talk on AIM. My AIM window was already open – my name's SilverBass18. Soon a new window popped up (AIM window pop up sound) – it was him. I started feeling sweaty. (typing) He said his name is Dave and we talked about our favorite Smashing Pumpkins songs. He was in 10th grade but I was still in 8th. I lied and told him I was supposed to be in 10th but I had to stay back a year because I failed art class. I knew I didn't talk like an 8th grader so maybe he wouldn't know. Then we just talked about whatever – TV shows and other bands and what we ate for dinner and what we were wearing and stuff like that. He had to go after a while but I was smiling so much. After that first one I waited every day after school on AIM for him to come on and I said hi immediately. Since I didn't want to look desperate I said hi first sometimes.

Eventually he told me he wanted to get a band together to play a battle of the bands at his school. I immediately said I'd play bass – of course. I said I even knew a drummer which was sort of true – I knew a kid in my grade played drums but I had never talked to him. I told him the drummer was in 8th grade still and he said that was kinda' young. My heart sank. I knew it wasn't gonna work out but I dreamed about it anyway. I imagined him coming over my house and us playing along to some of my favorite songs together. We'd decide to be best friends. Then I imagined hugging him goodbye. I imagined how amazing it would feel just to be close to someone who gets it.

The next day in science class I told my friend Roya all about Dave. I was kind of bragging. (blah blah internet boyfriend) I said we were gonna hang out and play music. He was going to come pick me up in his car. I just wanted to impress her cause I knew she was boy crazy. I really was interested in Dave because of the music but I knew she'd be impressed that I got the attention of a 10th grade guy.

When I got home both my parents were there.

"Who is Dave?" My mom asked. She looked serious. My dad usually goofed around with me but he looked serious too. At first I pretended not to know.

Oh yeah... that guy I started. I told my parents I found someone to be in a band with and I asked if he could come over to meet them first so they wouldn't have to worry when they said Dave could be anyone he could be an old creepy man pretending to be young. I told them how old he ACTUALLY is and they said no way. "That's like driving age!" my dad said. They didn't get it – I'd never ever find another smashing pumpkins fan around here plus I'm way more mature than most stupid 8th graders. Obviously I wouldn't fall for some stupid internet pedophile he never asked me to send a picture or anything so for all he knew I was an old man too. I was so mad I felt like I was going to rip myself in half. I realized my stupid science teacher must have called them when she heard me telling Roya about my "online boyfriend." It felt like my one chance to have a real friend and a band was ripped away. (RIPPING GUITAR SOUND PICK SLIDE)

I kept making excuses to Dave about why we couldn't get together and eventually I stopped seeing him log onto AIM. Right after that I got an email asking for entries to a poetry contest. It didn't seem real but I wrote a poem for it anyway "No one to hold/No one to be held by/ I'm so sad I can't even cry" and hit send. They sent me a printed copy in the mail and my mom read it. She asked why I wrote it and I said it was just a dumb poem and it was a made up story, it wasn't real.

I was sad and mad at my parents again when I found out that Billy Corgan the leader of the Smashing Pumpkins had started a new band called Zwan. I found out they were playing in Boston in a couple weeks and I saw tickets online. I BEGGED my parents to let me and Roya or Colby go. They said a parent would have to go with us because I was 13 and Roya and Colby were still 12 but neither of them wanted to be the chaperone. Roya and Colby's parents didn't want to go either. I worried that band would break up just like the Smashing Pumpkins. And they did. That was the only time they came to Boston. I figured my life was never going to start

all I wanted to do was go to shows and be in a band and make cool friends who liked the same music and clearly none of it would ever happen.

I do know OF some people who play music. At the end of 8th grade I went on a school music field trip with the string orchestra. I started playing the cello in 7th grade right before I got my bass because I liked classical music too and I thought cello looked pretty cool. I like my cello teacher. He's from Georgia which I didn't know was a country and when he takes my crappy kid size cello and plays it to show me a part he's so good that I feel like I am going to cry. On the bus ride home I sat next to another cello player Ricky. He's really really skinny and was always interrupting teachers and talking really loud about crazy ideas I didn't know if he was talking about real stuff or making up stories. When we both pulled out our CD players we decided to trade – he gave me his Jimi Hendrix and I gave him my Smashing Pumpkins. I liked the Jimi Hendrix but it sounded kind of like old people music a little bit. He said he was learning guitar and I told him I played bass. He's not in the orchestra this year so he must have quit cello I guess.

The closest I've got to seeing what it's like to be in a band was when I went to this band practice. Roya had started hanging out with the smokers at the bottom of the hill before school. She told me I should join her cause it was a good place to make friends but I had heard that sometimes kids smoked pot there and I was worried someone would ask me to try and then my parents would find out and murder me. Since they're nurses they're constantly afraid I'm going to die and have told me all kinds of scary stories of kids my age they've in the hospital who are brain dead from drinking or doing drugs so I'm afraid to get anywhere near kids who do that stuff. Roya doesn't seem to be afraid of bad kids I think she actually wants them to like her. But anyway some of the kids in that group have this band called beware of the dog. They're junior guys which means they are like 2 feet taller than us. I knew who they were from seeing them in the hallway. They always seemed to be yelling or throwing stuff at each other like they ruled the school (haha hey butt head) I remembered seeing one of them pushing a girl against a locker and shoving his tongue in her mouth. couldn't remember ever seeing one with a backpack or textbooks. Anyway, somehow Roya got herself invited to the bassplayer John's house and I went along too. Roya said I should bring my bass to show John and maybe I'd get to play his amp.

When we got there I realized it was just a normal band practice and we were there to watch. Like stupid idiot groupies – aka the last thing in the entire world I want to look like. Roya had even put on her low cut shirt and shoes with heels cause she said they made her legs look longer since she's really short and worried about looking stumpy. No one noticed my bass. I felt really embarrassed to have it and awkwardly fit it into a slot in the guitar stand. The parents weren't home it was just us and these enormous guys. I didn't like how the band played or how it sounded at all. The guitar distortion wasn't warm and fuzzy and thick like I liked it was sharp and thin, like a nu metal style. The drum kit was enormous with two bass drums and all these extra cymbals and a bunch of them were broken on purpose to sound extra horrible. It was like he was playing a dumpster and trash cans. The music did nothing for me, the rythm didn't make me want to move. We sat on the edge of the bed as they played. I looked around at the wallpaper. It was a pattern of Victorian looking sketches of naked women with their legs

spread. I kept my knees tightly together and my eyes on the floor. I barely moved except I tapped my foot to the beat to kind of show I knew what was going on in the music but in between songs when they talked about their amps or guitars or the song parts they looked away from us like we wouldn't understand. I felt stupid. They were using music to make a wall between them and us as if it was some magical ability they had because they were cool guys. At home I felt totally in control and powerful when I played. I used music to feel good about myself. These guys were using it to show off and intimidate us. I wanted to scream at them all "I'm a musician not just some dumb girl!"

After the band was done practicing John took his shirt off to show the band the clawmarks on his back. He said they were from some freshman girl he had had over I knew what that meant. We were freshmen. Then the drummer pulled a towel out of his bass drum to rearrange it and pointed to the spot that had blood stains from having sex with his girlfriend on her period on top of it. So during this conversation I remembered there weren't any parents home and we were in a sound proof-ish basement with four big tall older guys. I went into the bathroom to try to breathe normally. My chest was really tight and my palms were kinda sweaty. I tried to think of what I'd say if someone tried to make out with me or something but I had no idea. I imagined that I'd get so nervous I wouldn't say anything and it would be my claw marks next.

"Johhnn are you home? Johhhhnn can you help me with something?"

Sigh. Thank god.

When I came out the other band members had gone home so it was just John and me and Roya. John picked up my bass and played a slap funk bassline on it. I can't play that kind of bass line yet. I felt like I suddenly knew I wasn't half as good as I thought I was. If I was going to be in a band with guys I knew I would have to be better than all of them so I wouldn't look like a stupid girl. I'm worried it will take me a long time to be good enough. John did ask me if I wanted to try out his amp but there was no way I was going to play in front of him after all that. No uh no thanks... no

I guess it's not a big deal that I didn't play in front of him, it would be different with a band I think. But then again every time there's a chance of other people seeing me play i've totally blown it. Like when I went to a Greenday show with Roya at the Centrum Center in October. First New Found Glory opened when they came on stage the chubby bassplayer took his shirt off and jumped up and down and they all just looked so dorky. I hated the singers whiny voice so much so I decided to protest their terrible music. I hid in the bathroom the whole time they played and pushed my hands over my ears.

Greenday started their set by playing songs from their new album American Idiot. I hated all of those cheesy songs too so I stayed in my seat while everyone else stood up. Billy Joe's eyeliner has gotten out of hand. Then they started playing the classics from Dookie and I stood up. In the middle of one song Billy said he was going to get people from the audience to come up and play the instruments. He started looking around for people who had their hands up. When he asked who wanted to play bass Roya started jumping up and down and screaming her head off

and pointing at me "Pick her Pick Chelsea! Chelsea Plays bass AHHH!! BILLY JOE!!" She got his attention and he pointed at us. I imagined being on the stage and within a second thought about how horrible I would feel if I couldn't figure out how to play the bassline and how i'd look like a stupid girl and people who could actually play bass would be mad that I was the one who was picked so I did what my body wanted me to - I dove to the floor and got down on the ground under the seats on the disgusting soda and gum covered concrete floor. Billy Joe picked someone else and that was that. If I can't handle anyone looking at me while I play will I ever be able to handle being in a band?

Dear Young Rocker,

Ok so - Anyone who makes you feel like you aren't good enough isn't worth your time or mental energy. But you still have to learn to deal with these kinds of situations because they're pretty common when you stand out. Just know that when other people show off in front of you it's because they are insecure about their own talents. It has nothing to do with you personally so don't feel bad. Plus you have so much anxiety and such complicated feelings about groups of people and whether you are in or out of them that you might have inflated how much you were actually being purposely left out in your head. I'd be interested to go back now and watch that scene from above. I know that highschool boys tend to not be able to address girls in a normal way in general anyway even if they mean well. I think John mostly meant well even if he wasn't doing it right by showing off the claw marks on his back.... And hey maybe the boys in the nu metal band felt intimidated meeting a cool girl bassist too. As much as you doubt yourself and feel like a no one it is still very possible that other people are intimidated by you even though I can hear you sarcastically laughing at that idea in my head.

See, you're already more than good enough to play in a band. There's definitely kids at your school who just started playing bass and are only half as passionate about playing music as you are. You've got the two things that matter the most in any art. Passion and the drive to endlessly work. Technique can never make up for a lack of those. Plus a lot of bass players are really guitar players who are just filling the role and just play all over the place and have no sense of holding down the rhythm in a way that makes people's bodies move. You are a true bassist. Now on to your other problems.

You seem to have a real anger towards people who want to be in groups. As humans we are naturally social - our survival and a large part of our mental health depends on working as a group. So I think this anger is another case of you actually being jealous and protecting your feelings because it's easier to be angry that it is to be sad and lonely.

You said you're above being in a group but you actually desperately want to be in a band ... and sorry but that's a group and it's not all that different than a friend clique, fans of a sports team or even a church group. The point of all of them is to be together and to connect with other people - no matter what the medium. So getting angry at people who want to be in any kind of group and calling them "sheeple" really isn't fair. They are just being human. I feel for you

though because you also might be bitter toward groups because your family isn't a large tight unit and you haven't figured out how to fit into a friend group either. Making fun of family walks and game nights and hating the popular kids gets you off the hook for feeling sad about it. Which even if you do, I know you would never admit it... except maybe in a poem.

It's ok though, because you have a powerful tool to connect you to others, music. My greatest hope is that all of us weirdos find our own little nook whether it's an art a sport playing video games larping doing drag shows boxing or whatever else that connects us to others. We have to realize that we aren't the only ones who feel alone and that by recognizing it in each other and reaching out we can really benefit, even though it's scary. Eventually you will even find ways to talk to non-musicians - sort-of. I know normal small talk is a thing your brain can't really figure out and honestly never really does but there are ways around that as long as you're nice enough people don't mind if you say goofy things.

Another thing: trying to look like you aren't trying to look any certain way is *still* trying to look a certain way... You're still putting as much if not way more energy into strategically planning what you wear so doesn't that defeat your purpose? All the other kids in the school are just trying their best too and are probably insecure inside like you. Yes you are special and unique but never ever think that that makes you fundamentally different or better than other humans. We're all stuck in this life together – even the so-called sheeple do deserve empathy.

Besides it's impossible to please everyone at once. Trying to pick an outfit based on whether people will dislike it or think you in a certain way is really not realistic. That method will just lead to being a nothing yourself, which I know you aren't into because creativity and authenticity are so important to you. So dress like your weird self if you want. Just be nice and accept other people doing their own thing and you'll be liked. It's not about the right t-shirt. No one could possibly judge you as harshly as you judge yourself. And the getting spooked by people coming out of a door thing... is just another terribly anxiety symptom. It sucks but I promise it goes away. Just like when you had that weird problem when you couldn't get on an escalator or an elevator for a couple years. Annnnd your Mom saying "ten more pounds and you'll be perfect" is total CRAP. DO. NOT. LISTEN. YOU. ARE. PERFECT.

Can't wait for your next adventure young rocker.

Love,

Chelsea

Next time on Dear Young Rocker An opportunity arises for young Chelsea but can she overcome her anxiety to take it?