

Chapter 4

Dear Young Rocker,

Isn't it amazing how similar terror and excitement feel? You're standing on the edge of endless potential. There will be many bands to come in your life but this one... the one that's coming your way very soon... this one's important. You're going to learn an incredible amount about yourself from being in your first band. There will be some really difficult moments and some painful mistakes but this is your path, and you are destined to walk it - bass in hand. Enjoy this moment – because soon enough you're going to have to confront the fact that your gender makes you stand out no matter how much you and everyone around you tries to pretend it doesn't -- the boy rockers are going to pull some crap and spoiler alert that's going to keep happening for kind of a long time – Hey I recently went to a music store and while casually glancing at some super overpriced guitar pedals and seeing nothing I really am into anyway a gentleman who did not work there came up beside me to let me know that he knows a lot about guitar effects and could explain them to me. Then when I walked away and picked up an interesting looking Fender Bass VI he kindly let me know that it wasn't a guitar. Wow who knew! Have a funny feeling that if I appeared to also be a gentleman this guy wouldn't have had such free flowing commentary.

But hey, for right now you're still just a bass player. And not an invisible one anymore.

I'm sitting in Ms. Piccione's English class and it's hot. Thank god we're getting a new highschool cause this no air conditioning thing sucks. She's talking about Shakespere but no one's listening. She's a lot younger than our other teachers so no one respects her. I kind of feel bad for her but it's the end of the year so I get it -- I can't concentrate either. The crappy old windows barely even open in here and it sounds like the heater might still be on. It's clanging like someone is trying to escape from inside.

She turns around to write something on the board and everyone starts talking. I'm not talking to anyone though because even though i've survived nearly a whole year of highschool with a terrible way too short haircut that thank god is growing out finally -- I'm still a no one. If I vaporized in my seat right now it wouldn't matter to anyone. I'm still only a *secret* bass player, the only shows i've played are for my cat in my basement jumping around like a dork to the Smashing Pumpkins in my pajamas.

I'm listening to one girl talk about the two guys she's dating. (Girl's voice: '*Yeah he's less hot but he's older so whatever*'). Then some kids on my right start talking about their band. That skinny kid Ricky who played cello with me in orchestra in middle school is one of them.... So that's what he's been up to. Maybe he's less nerdy now then when we did that Metallica cover together for the 8th grade talent show and got us disqualified for making fun of the girl who sang a song for her mom. He's talking to another kid who looks like Kurt Cobain junior.

"Yeah dude we have to find a new bass player. We should audition people. Yeah."

This. Is. My. Chance. It's here. Time slows down. I have to *talk. Out loud. To people.* I have to seize this opportunity or it might never come again. If I don't get in this band I might as well give up on life. Being in a band is the only way i'm ever gonna be able to talk to another person or maybe even make friends. I can't freeze up or be invisible or dive to the ground and crawl under my desk. I look at the clock. There's less than a minute before the bell rings. Ok. Ok....

I don't think I'm going to be able to do this. I start thinking about how much I'm going to hate myself later for not saying anything and how much I'm going to cry about it but just as my throat starts to get tight and my face gets hot I hear my own voice come out of my mouth.

"Can I try out?" Crap. My status as invisible must make my voice inaudible to other people.

"Can I try out?"

"Woah yeah that's right. I forgot you play bass." Ricky says.

"Do you have an amp?" Fred is taller and just as skinny as Ricky and has greasy white-blonde hair and all his clothes are too big.

"Yep I do."

Ricky rips off a piece of yellow notebook paper and scribbles down his phone number plus Fred's and Nicks and hands it to me, "Band practice Saturday or Sunday call Nick to find out. Wish him a happy birthday!!"

On the walk home I read that paper about a hundred times. I feel bouncy and shaky and have to work on walking normally. I think the only scarier thing than talking to someone is calling someone. I hope I do it.

I have to. My life depends on it.

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I don't like calling anyone. Even the pizza man. I usually make my mom do it. But If I want to be in a band – which I do more than anything in the world um obviously – I have to make this call. I dial and it rings and Nick's mom picks up and I ask for Nick. I don't know if I've seen him before so I don't know who to imagine but his voice is intimidating, it's really deep on the phone. He sounds really cool like he could care less so I try to sound that way too.

"What day is practice on?"

"uhh Saturday."

"Oh ok"

At the end I get up the nerve to say

"Oh yeah happy b-day"

“What?”

“Ricky said to say happy birthday”

“Oh.... Thanks”

The next day at school I was in the hall when Ricky started walking toward me really fast with a big stack of papers. It was tabs for all the songs the band plays. He said most of them were Nirvana or Pixies. Some of them were their own original songs but I didn't know which ones were which because they only had the song titles on them and I didn't have any Nirvana or Pixies CD's - yet. He told me which songs I should learn for the tryout practice. I looked at them in my next class and was super relieved. They were all really easy looking. I was nervous though because I didn't have any of the songs to listen to for reference so I just played the numbers on the page through a few times. You can't tell the song parts or how fast things are just by looking at tabs so I would have to figure it out at practice and hoped I could keep up.

My mom dropped me off at Nick's and he answered the door. He was a lot less intimidating in person. He's the same height as me like 5 foot 4 and kind of chubby with red hair in a kind of shaggy 80's looking haircut and his pants were way too long. He had a goofy wide smile and his voice was way higher than it was on the phone. I followed him downstairs into the back guest bedroom which was the band practice room. The basement had a strong wet dog smell. It kind of grossed me out. There was a twin bed against the wall and a drum kit shoved in the corner. I didn't know how I was going to fit in there. I put my tiny amp down and stood with my butt up against the bed. A boxer dog came running in and jumped up on everybody. I didn't like it. Nick yelled “Jumper!” at the dog and Nick's mom came in and took her away.

Fred was the band leader and he said we should play a song called Hercules. I didn't know if they wrote it or if it was Nirvana or something but I didn't ask because I didn't want to look lame. I looked at the tabs – it was just like 3 notes but I felt really shaky. I turned my amp up but not all the way. Nick counted off and the guitars came in. I waited for them to play the first part for a couple seconds so I would know how to do it then I came in. It was easy. After a while Nick did a big fill and I could tell they were going to switch to the next part of the song and I totally nailed the change. We did a few others and I pretty much got them all. Ricky had to show me the rhythm on a couple of them that I hadn't heard before. As we kept playing I realized how amazing this was. I can barely handle talking to one person at a time but I was communicating with three people all at once and I wasn't awkward at all. This must be what its like when popular kids talk to their friends I thought.

Then I remembered... this wasn't my first “band” with Ricky. In 8th grade we had teamed up with another cello player – one of the embarrassing dorky girls from my former lunch table and the three of us formed a cello Metallica cover band for the talent show. It was called Mecellica.

At the end of practice Ricky said he would make me some CD's of the songs we were working on. Then they started making fun of their old bass player Becky. They said she played like a Robot. Ricky did an impression – he awkwardly plucked the strings way too hard at the wrong

time. I laughed. I had no idea other any other girls played bass, but obviously I was better anyway. I asked if they were trying out other people. They said I was good. I was in a band! I was in SAMSARA!

If my life were a movie, this next part would be the happy musical montage. A heavy but happy guitar riff – probably Smashing Pumpkins Today would start playing over a scene of me walking to school, and as I enter the building the lyrics would come in, “Today is the greatest day I’ve ever known...” As I strut down the halls with a smile on my face, two or three guys would come from the wings and start walking next to me, all of us wearing band t-shirts and jeans. We would approach doorways and I would step confidently past, never gasping or jumping. I look everyone in the eye and smile when I pass them. Next is a cut to us walking in slow-motion over to a lunch table and taking up the whole thing. We throw our heads back while laughing as we play air guitars. As the montage ends my voice-over comes in: “I was finally a *band guy* and it felt just right.” End scene.

June 24, 2004. My first ever show.

My mom drives me out to Sterling. Holden where we live is pretty quiet but Sterling is even quieter. Its one of the towns that’s part of our high school. You can’t drive over 20mph through the center of this town which is just like a bank and a pizza place and a church. I start feeling twitchy in my seat as we pull up to the church.

When we walk in I see there are like 30 kids already in the church and the stage is pretty big -- it’s a good four feet off the ground. My mom leaves and I find my band pretty easily because Fred is tall and I see his blonde mop bouncing around. I point at Nick’s head ‘cause he has a buzz cut instead of the floppy mop he had before. He says his mom made him do it. He’s wearing a Clash shirt and Ricky’s wearing a Jimi Hendrix shirt and Fred has an old t-shirt that says I’m a friend of Holden Hospital. My parents worked there before it closed in the 80’s. I like old crummy t-shirts like that and I say cool shirt. And now that I’m in a band and knew I’d be with a group of friends at all times I finally felt confident enough to wear the kind of outfit I day dream about but never want to wear to school. I’m kind of copying Gwen Stefani. I think she’s cool because she’s actually a good musician and isn’t just trying to be sexy. I love No Doubt. I’ve known all the words to the the Tragic Kingdom album since I was like 12. I cut off a pair of my super wide leg jeans below the knee to make the sort of blousy pants she wears. On top I have a tiny red tank top and I wore my red belt that said CAUTION in black letters to match. I topped it off with my big black doc marten boots, red lipstick and a clip on long blonde ponytail since my hair is still too short to put up. I don’t look invisible at all.

I walk around the room to look at some info booths that are set up. I go over to the one from PETA and and it has really gory pictures of dead animals. I squint so I can’t see them clearly but try to read the information about going vegetarian. It seems like it makes sense. Then a man with a notebook comes up and asks if he can interview me for the Sterling paper. I say “sure.” He asks me what bands I like.

While he’s writing down my answers I watch Beware of he Dog getting ready to go on stage. There’s good old John. When the guy walks away Beware of the Dog gets up on stage and John actually takes his shirt off before putting his bass on. I roll my eyes. My band stands in front of the stage and we head bang along to the music even though we all think it’s cheesey. We were kind of making fun of them but they probably thought we loved it. We giggled as we threw up metal hand signs. During the last song John jumps off the stage to show off his wireless bass transmitter and runs around the audience. We all laugh out loud at it it’s so over

the top. No more being a dumb silent groupie for me. I can't believe I used to be intimidated by these guys. The tables are turned. I don't feel nervous to play in front of John any more. I think I'm ready

Welllllll until I start to climbing the stairs to the stage. It hits me that I am being looked at by a lot of people. I am definitely the only girl musician here. My boots feel super heavy. And I worry that I look like I am clomping across the stage to my amp. I kind of wish I had worn something less attention getting. I've plugged in my bass to my amp a million billion times but suddenly it seems hard to do, I'm super worried I'll do it wrong and look like a dumb girl. Why is this happening? This is not what I imagined getting hung up on. *God don't look like a GIRL* I think. I look at Ricky and Fred they are giggling about plugging in a pedal wrong or something. I look at Nick and he looks annoyed. We make eye contact and he rolls his eyes and says "Get on with it!" I couldn't wait for them to start.

It finally happens. Nick counts off and Ricky and Fred start playing. I try to think about how any of the songs go but I can't and worry that I won't be able to play anything but two measures later my hands just start playing the song. If I think about the notes it gets harder to play but if I just listen to the music it kind of magically happens. It doesn't make any sense. People start nodding their heads and our friend Biph starts doing crazy headbanging. I am making people move. Me ! I am doing this! The person who cannot talk to anyone or look anyone in the eyes is making a dozen people nod their heads! I let myself be absorbed by the swell of noise. After the first few songs I realize it's my turn to sing. Again I worry it's just not gonna happen. I have to just trust that it will but it's almost impossible. This is the hardest one because it starts with just me playing and singing. It's a pixies cover. I want to tell them "WE can't do this one I forgot it!" But I can't even get that out. Soon enough my hands are playing the opening bass line. I look down at them in amazement. I don't think I could even decide to play faster or slower, something else is definitely making me play. The moment before I start singing time collapses again and I want to stop and yell *no way I cant do it nope!*

This had been a really really hard one to learn. Playing bass and singing at the same time isn't easy but this song is weird the singing rhythm and the bass rhythm don't line up at all. You can't think about both at the same time when you practice you have to just think about the singing or the bass and hope your body makes the other one happen at the right time. I sat on the floor in my room for hours after school everyday and for a while I didn't think it would ever happen I wasn't going to give up though, I needed it to happen. I couldn't be a *Becky*. And then one day I kind of stopped thinking so hard about it and it just happened. But would it happen on stage?

I tell myself to not think about it – don't try to count it or say the notes in your head Chelsea it won't work. I'm so nervous about the people looking at me that I probably couldn't even think about it if I want to anyway. And it happens. My voice comes out of me and it sings. At the right time. I watch from inside myself and imagine the bass line and the singing line as two circles turning at the same time but at different speeds and lining up every so often. I feel the cycles moving through me without my effort. Then I look out at the audience. I usually feel so separate from the people around me but right now we are all in this song together. It's like I can feel all our brainwaves vibrating at the same frequency. Who am I? Am I anyone? Am I them? Am I the music? All I know is I am not at all invisible and somehow I am totally OK with that.

When it ends everyone claps and all I want is to feel that again.

When all the bands are done we go outside so Fred can smoke a cigarette. He walks around the back and Nick and Ricky and me stand in front of the church and talk. I feel buzzy but like I can breathe normally for once in my life. I bounce on the balls of my feet trying not to look too dorky and excited but I am. We talk about what we messed up and Nick says something to Ricky about his fill being right but I'm not really paying attention.

"Hey I'm not doing *anything* mannnn" It's Fred. What the heck? I turn around and a cop has Fred by the wrists. He drags him over to the police car and puts cuffs on him and pushes him into the back of the cop car. My heart starts racing. Fred looks weird he paints his fingernails black and he has chains on his pants and stuff but he's always smiley and goofing around. He doesn't put on the serious tough cool guy act at all he's super nice what could he have done?

Nothing the answer is just what he said. Absolutely nothing. In this town where you get pulled over for driving 25 miles an hour kids our age are constantly getting harassed by cops. You can get pulled over for looking young and they will make up some stupid excuse. It's not surprising Fred got picked out just for looking different. They searched his pockets and didn't find any drugs or anything at all. They probably made up some rule about him smoking a cigarette on the church property or some old lady called the cops on the "freak" she saw outside. Fred gets let go and we talk to him. I didn't even have any weed on me man, he says.

We go inside for the judging. Beware of the Dog is the winner. "It was rigged!" Nick says. We don't really care. Or at least I don't. I'm a little shook from the cops but still happier than I can remember feeling. I want to feel part of something like this forever.

The next day my mom gets a copy of the Sterling paper. It has an article on the front page with the headline "Beware of the Dog Bites Head off of the competition in Sterling First Church Battle of the bands." *Yeah right* I think. There's a quote about us too, "Samsara came on next and turned up the volume a bit with their material which was reminiscent of the early Seattle grunge scene featuring a great lead solo on their last song. The band put a lot of energy into their set and got a good response to their original numbers." Clearly an old person wrote this. Original numbers? It was still a lot better than the awkward and obviously incorrect way they quoted me "I like the Smashing pumpkins, Nirvana, and the Pixies. I like all the other alternative rock." There is no way in heck I said that. Oh well. It's all part of being not invisible I guess.

Dear Young Rocker

Wow, I am so proud of you. Whenever you need to be brave again in the future please remember the time you asked to tryout for a band even though you thought you were incapable of talking to other kids at school and the time you played your first show and even sang and played at the same time in front of a real audience – something plenty of people who've been playing bass for years can't even do. I know you're probably going to immediately start thinking about how you could do it better or what you should have worn instead but please please take as much time as you possibly can to just feel that happiness and pride in yourself. It's so easy when we look back at where we've been to only see the negative things and to add them up and convince ourselves it's been all bad. Maybe there are less moments of glory like this than normal boring frustrating depressing days but I truly think those shining moments no matter how few and far between they are, carry about a million times more weight than the crappy ones do.

And yet we forget them so easily. Regardless, I am just so happy that you got to experience the feeling of being yourself in front of people and feeling connected to a band and an audience. It's pretty dang amazing right? When I look back at the pictures of you from that show I always feel struck by the look on your face. I can tell you are working really hard to not smile like a huge dork. It's such a change from your school picture day photos and candid ones of you at girl scouts or field trips where I can tell you're doing that thing where you're shrinking your energy inside yourself and look like you barely want to exist. An older teenage you will be embarrassed by your outfit but super old you aka me thinks you look like the coolest kid in school. The early 2000's were a weird time for fashion but you somehow look bomb thanks in part to Gwen Stefani. And cropped wide leg jeans actually are popular for a moment in 2019 too. I know you probably still didn't think you felt confident at the time but no one could tell looking at you, I promise.

Now let's talk about Becky. And John.

Part of your basis for feeling good about yourself is feeling cooler and better than others. You're a total newbie to the self-confidence thing so it makes sense that that's how you're doing it. Also you were raised by some very let's say detail oriented people. But pointing out the flaws in others is not how true confidence works. As lame as other people seem, they need support too. Actually they need the most support****. And once you get out of this mental cage of defensiveness and insecurity you'll find that supporting other people is actually one of your favorite things to do and feels a heck of a lot better than putting other people down to pretend to feel good about yourself. Poor Becky. You are naturally a very talented and driven musician. Not everybody is. They still deserve kindness. And John looks like a doofus to you and made you feel weird with Roya so maybe making fun of him showing off and taking his shirt off is more justified but still – it's good to revel in other's happiness even if you don't appreciate their taste or agree that their nu metal band should have won first prize. But the truth is you don't have to feel better than anyone else. You have a right to just feel straight up good because you're you. And so do they. Maybe to you it feels conceited and jerky to actively think you're cool but actually it's just thinking you're cool compared to other people that is the conceited and jerky thing to do. Feeling good for other people and helping them feel good about themselves will do more for your own confidence than anything else. It's going to take you many many more years to figure that out but I hope people your age can get there on their own faster than you do because where you're at now isn't fun.

Anyway, you do feel a little bit good about yourself for once, and compared to how you felt before you more than deserve this. I know it feels like your social problems have up and disappeared but that's just because you haven't started making out yet. And by god I wish you never did. But that's for next time, let's leave you on a happy note. Enjoy yourself for a minute young rocker. You have a lot to be proud of.

Next time on Dear Young Rocker young Chelsea has some near misses and finally gets her first kiss, unfortunately... will the band be the same?
