

Dear Young Rocker

This is the final chapter for you, for now. I'm not going to say much and let you get back to your story. All I do want to tell you is that as hard as this all seems and even though I know you feel like you still haven't started really living yet, I'm actually really proud of you. And that's a reminder to me too. I'm still so quick to dismiss all I've done and act like everything I've accomplished and made just isn't that great for whatever reasons and think of all the ways I could have done it better and all the people on twitter who could point out every flaw I didn't even know I had, but I need to be proud. Proud that I've told your story no matter what anyone thinks of it and proud that I've helped some people with it. Ok go ahead.

As I walk down the sidewalk (footsteps) with my bass on my back I think about that first time I hung out with Aaron - the guy I still refer to in my head as Craigslist guy. After I answered his "Anti-social Loner" post, he told me he took classes at Umass Lowell too and I couldn't believe it. It seemed like a sign, so we planned to have dinner at the cafeteria - the same one i'm going to right now.

When I told my roommate Caryn I was leaving to go on an internet date she said "be careful". I performatively grabbed a shaving razor out of my shower caddy and threw it in my tote bag. She said it would be a good story to tell at our wedding if we ended up getting married someday. I got to the caf really early so I could get my food first and sit down at a table. I hoped if he only saw me from the waist up I could make a better first impression by hiding the part of myself that I hate. When he came in and **started walking over** to me I immediately wanted to run away. He hadn't wanted to share a picture with me because he said he didn't have any good ones so I didn't really know what he looked like but there was no mistaking this was him. Even from across the room he was immediately so intensely focused on me. He made eye contact with me right away which always makes me feel weird and he didn't let up for the whole walk to the table and then the entire time we sat there. It was like he was taking in my every single breath and movement. He's got dark curly hair and blue eyes which to me is usually an attractive combo but something about his face was just weird and it kind of freaked me out. Something was... gnome like about him. He has these small beady eyes. I couldn't even really tell they were blue. He kept laughing at everything I said even if it wasn't funny, like I was the most incredible entertaining person he had ever met in his life. He had on one of those super tight long sleeve Underarmor shirts football players wear. It seemed like he was trying to show off his body. That made me feel weird too. He asked me so many questions about myself that I didn't really learn anything about him. This intense attention on me really made me nauseous. I just wanted to leave as soon as possible and never talk to him again but after he finished eating and made fun of me for barely touching my food - he said we should go on an adventure and "explore" the building even though I knew there's nothing in here but a cafeteria. I hoped it would be quick so I could go home. We went up into the stairwell even though there was nothing at the top but a locked emergency exit. He started trying to open the door with a credit card which I really didn't

like because I kept thinking about the fire alarm going off and people running up and seeing me with this weird lookin' guy. He just kept saying, "where there's a will there's a way." I kept saying "yeah maybe we shouldn't do this." I focused on how his face scrunched up as he tried to pry the lock open. He looked even more like a gnome. How could anyone ever kiss that face, uuugh? We finally went back down into the lobby and I said I had to go back now to study. I looked at him and he moved closer to me so I raised my arms to give him a hug, but he pulled me in really-really tight and kissed me. He squeezed my entire torso in this vice like hug the whole time. After a second of this I realized it was intended to be way more than just a peck, and that my eyes were still open, and *worst of all* other humans coming in and out of the cafeteria were witnessing this. I didn't like how his mouth looked and something about how soft it was on my own really grossed me out. I eventually pulled away and he was staring deeply into my eyes again. It kind of felt like the same look you get from a cat when you can tell they're about to bite you. I somehow still felt his stare on my body as I left. It really doesn't make any sense that I decided to see him again.

As I go through the doors into that same cafeteria now, I walk past the pizza slices and I think about how after that date when I got back to my room I microwaved a frozen pizza and ate it so fast that I burned the crap out of the roof of my mouth. I decide now I'll have a hot dog and I put every kind of topping on it even the relish which looks like boogers coming out of the dispenser. When I get to the tables I see some of my fellow bass players including James and I sit down with them. The bearded guy asks me where I got my pink bass gig bag and I tell him online and make a dumb joke about how now no one will steal my bass because of it, but they all say they want it. As the only girl in the program I couldn't resist getting a pink one. If i'm gonna stand out anyway I might as well own it right?

They start talking about prog rock bands and my brain stops following within ten seconds but instead of feeling stressed about not keeping up with the conversation I'm just happy to be at a table with other humans who do the same thing as me and aren't trying to makeout with my face. It's kinda like the good days of high school. A couple of them are also sound recording majors and they start joking about who is going to drop out of the program first because of the math requirements. Apparently that's the reason less than half of us SRT majors end up finishing. "Calc is brutal" one of the dudes says. I tell them "I had the same professor when I took it last year and I got an A- but I think the syllabus is different this year?" "You got an A?" two of them say in unison as if I'd just said my uncle was jaco pastorius or something. "Yep." I know I won't drop out. I can't let people think I'm bad at math or not smart enough to be a sound engineer, especially boys and really especially my dad. The others get up to go to class and leave me and James at the table together.

The seven of us first year bassists sit in a circle in one of the narrow side classrooms. I look at the staff lines painted on the chalkboard while Chuck writes out a quarter note walking line. He sits down with a guitar and counts off and we all play it together. I can hear that one of us is

adding extra notes and inflections. Then while Chuck keeps playing the chords we go around and play the line one at a time and he tells us we can embellish it if we're feeling it. I play it mostly straight and just turn a couple of the quarters into eighths. The next guy tries to add more than me but doing that makes him completely miss a couple of the root notes. I smile to myself that's what you get for trying too hard. Then it gets to *that kid*. You know there's gotta be one in every class. He somehow plays almost completely up and down the neck in the course of the four chord pattern. I think about how that would sound really stupid and unnecessary if other instruments were playing and how as bassists we're supposed to be holdin' it down and supporting other people. Chuck didn't ask us to play a friggin' solo bro. It just didn't feel solid or like bass-y to me. Like play the sax or something. And if you're so great why can't you show any restraint huh? Poseur. Then again - I've never listened to jazz for fun ever and think it's boring so maybe I'm the poseur. Maybe I'm the one who shouldn't be here and I'm just feeling pissed at this kid because I know I can't do that. Once again am I better than everyone or worse? The show off guy makes this "oh me I didn't do anything special face" when he's done but I know he's expecting glowing praise because he answers really fast when Chuck critiques it. Like "ok yeah ok." Chuck's doing a good job as a teacher praising us equally, but everytime this kid plays he seems another light year ahead of me and I feel worse about my own playing. I hate to admit it but I actually do wish I was the one playing up and down the neck. My line was so boring, but I didn't want to risk playing bonk notes in front of everybody. I do a lot better when a bunch of people aren't watching, like, I can come up with super cool bass lines if I have a little time to plan it out but I don't know how i'll ever be able to think fast enough about the notes in the chord on the spot like that. I want to be able to do it perfectly before I show off. I want to be a jazz bass expert. But I also don't at all. Whatever, jazz is stupid anyway, I think, as I walk back to my room. Each of my steps feels like a quarter note and I can't stop myself from walking at the tempo we practiced.

Back in my room I see that my roommate is gone. As usual. It's kind of nice that she's never here. I see a message from Aaron. It says, "Hey what's up Sea Urchin?" He calls me that because my email is CURsin. I tell him I'm chilling in my room alone. He says he's been meditating a lot lately and that we should try meditating at the same time and see if we can connect with each other, like mentally. That sounds kind of weird but I kind of like the idea of connecting in a non-physical way. I believe it's totally possible. I close my eyes and think about him. How he left me totally alone for nine months after that weird date and then randomly messaged me. He said we should go rollerskating and I said sure because I still haven't really made friends yet since switching majors and I used to love going to the roller rink with my dad when I was little.

It ended up being the funnest date i've ever been on. I liked zipping around to Spice Girls and Ace of Base and I was way better at skating than him. He kept falling down and laughing at himself and it made me laugh and feel good about myself. Everytime I tried to help him up he'd try to pull me down too. I felt like a little kid. When we left he didn't try to kiss me this time. He said he liked my aura and respected me and I was starting to believe it.

He sends me another message and says he thinks he can see his skin glowing from the vibes I'm sending. I really don't know if he's being sincere, but I know he's laughing either way and that he's trying to say - he likes me.

As we chat, a new friend request pops up. Well that doesn't happen very often. It's another guy. He doesn't look familiar, does he even go here? Doesn't look like it. I look at his pictures. He's got really nice green eyes. And he's muscular looking, which is a thing I didn't realize I was attracted to until right now. I don't usually like people just from their pictures. I have to hear them talk or see them play or do something interesting first. I definitely wouldn't have met up with Aaron if I had seen his face first. But I feel like if what he says is true, that you can sense people even when they aren't near you, like even over the internet, that I'm getting good vibes from this new dude. I click through all of his profile and tagged pictures. He's pretty cute in all of them. He plays guitar. I wonder why he friended me.

Well whatever happens I know two things: I'm never letting anyone make out with me again until I decide it's a good idea first and I'm sure as hell not letting anyone get in the way of me finishing this music recording degree. Well, that is if I can get past learning jazz bass and even worse, my goddamn aural skills class.

I close Facebook, plug in my headphones, load the ear training CD into my laptop and tell myself I won't give up practicing this time - no matter how much I want to scream and cry.

You can set the program to use four tones, flute, piano, guitar or generic computer tone. I click the flute tone first, since sometimes that one seems easier to hear for me. I do the basic intervals but as soon as I try even the simplest chords the notes start doing the thing they always do. Like they are blurring in my ear and I can't separate them out. You're supposed to be able to hear the notes in the chords separately like looking at a rainbow and being able to see red yellow and blue stacked on top of each other, but to me it's just like the rainbow melted and the colors have mixed together into just one ambiguous brown that could be made up of any combination of shades. Maybe if I change the instrument from flute to piano it will help. Sometimes switching instruments makes the edges of the notes seem sharper. I click on **the cheesey fake piano sound**, then what's supposed to be a **guitar** to see if I can hear one or the other better but they all don't work eventually. Every time I change at first it seems a little easier to hear the notes but no matter what after only a few minutes of practicing they just seem to get slippery like when you get bleach on your hands and it feels like your fingerprints melted off and you can't pick anything up. At that point I can't even tell a seventh from a sixth. I think about the color blind kid in my elementary school and how he used to get angry and cry when we talked about colors because he was trying so hard to see them but couldn't. That's how I feel. Sometimes when it gets really really bad I go back to just doing basic intervals like root-fifth and I can't even hear if a note is higher or lower than another note. How in the hell did I play cello so well? I guess maybe because you can feel the vibrations of the pitches in your body since the instrument is right between your legs, but the computer-generated piano doesn't do that for me. I try one more chord and I *know* it's different notes but when I try to sing them it all comes out

the same like some dumb tone deaf person trying to sing. I throw the music theory book at the wall (thud).

Mr. Buckles likes to wear one pink sock and one blue sock. I can't stop looking at them while he writes on the chalkboard with one hand and hits notes on the piano with the other. My focus goes from the socks to the rainbow flag on his backpack and back again. I can't get my focus to land on the pitches he's playing. I hate this. I hate his socks, and him. But maybe that's just me being defensive. My other classes can be hard, but nothing I can't figure out. Music Theory has a really strict old professor who locked me out of the classroom when I was one minute late one time, but at least that class is all a formula, like math. You just study it and practice and you can get good at it and write your little minuets out on the music paper. Music history is a lot of listening and charting out symphonies and stuff but that's also just memorization and it's an interesting subject. I like hearing the parts when I listen to classical. It's funny no one mentioned this class when they warned me about how hard the SRT major is. Clearly I am abnormally bad at it. I guess this is my version of calculus hell. I had some trouble hearing pitches in my highschool music class when we were just learning simple intervals and chords but I thought I'd get better with enough practice and the help of some teachers. I tried to practice over the summer before this year, but it feels like I'm getting worse every day. The more I try to hear the difference between chords and pitches the more they seem to mush together until I can't even sing a major scale anymore. My ears get so tired so quickly. Sitting at my computer with my ear-training practice software has become such torture I barely even try anymore.

Mr. Buckles plays four notes at once as a chord and asks us to sing the four pitches from bottom to top. Then he plays three chords in a row and asks us to sing all the notes from all of them. He tells us only the root note of the first chord and we are supposed to figure out what all the others are by hearing what kind of chords they are and calculating which notes fit. "You made the first chord major" he tells the person who sings before me. I actually sing the notes somewhat OK but I have no idea what they are or what kinds of chords they were. He asks us to write down the notes on our staff paper and as soon as I pick up my pencil I can't hear them in my mind anymore. This always friggin happens to me. I try to sing the root note of the first chord to myself but everyone humming around me distracts me and I lose it. I try a bunch of different notes and they all sound like they could be it. I know it's a C but how do you sing a C? Once I've picked what I think is a C in my mind, I can't remember how the notes in the first chord sounded, never mind any of the others. So when he reveals the answers, as usual, all of mine are wrong except the one note he gave us. I feel so crappy about it I don't even bother changing my answers and I hand in my paper on my way out the door. I'd ask him to stay for extra help again but last time he just said he didn't know how to make me hear things if I didn't practice. I couldn't explain how everytime I try to practice I feel like I am going to explode and then go tone deaf. How the notes run away from my ears. I don't know if I can face that CD again. There are four semesters of this class. If by some miracle I pass this one I have three higher levels to get through. I'm just a rock band kid and not a real musician. And Mr. Buckles seems to know that.

I sit down at a computer in the library and log into my grade report to see my midterm grades. For some reason I couldn't get myself to do it in my own room. I let my eyes move slowly down the page. Music Theory 1: B+, Calculus 2: B, Music History A, Bass lessons A-, Intro to Keyboard Playing B+, recital attendance S for sufficient, Ensemble 1: A- Last is aural skills. There it is. Just the shape of the letter is so unfamiliar to my eyes it makes me shiver. My first ever F - F is for failure. I am a failure. So this is what it feels like. Even though I knew it would probably be the case I kind of feel like all my blood is being sucked out of me into the floor as I look at it. Taking another breath in doesn't seem worth it. I sit there not breathing, and looking at the F until I get a headache. I imagine telling my dad about this I can picture the look on his face, the corners of his mouth drooping in disappointment. I thought you were going to be a sound engineer he'll say. First you couldn't do biology and now you can't do this? I imagine him asking. I am useless. I am stupid. I can't do anything right. I am not good enough. I won't get through college for anything interesting. I'm too dumb and the proof is looking right at me. I don't want to eat dinner. I don't want to breathe or move or exist. It's almost my birthday. Who gives a crap?

Dear Young Rocker,

OK, once again TAKE. A. DEEP. BREATH.

Don't be so hard on yourself. That's the stupid blanket advice a typical adult would give you right now. But if you weren't hard on yourself you wouldn't end up achieving the things you eventually do achieve. The more ambitious you are the harder setbacks feel. Instead I would say accept failures because they are always part of the process but don't judge yourself over them without analyzing them first. Most failures are actually a lot smaller than we realize. You are the kind of person that looks at things very closely and deeply. But if you pull back to the big-big picture this really isn't a big one or a long term one. This isn't a failure of all of college like you seem to think it is. You can retake any college class and the first bad grade will be erased and replaced with the new better grade. Most colleges understand people encounter roadblocks and sticking points. Here's your first one.

So let's break this "failure" down right here. Some people just shouldn't be teachers and you've found one at this vulnerable moment in your new major. People who escape college without encountering at least one of these are very lucky. This really isn't a life-shattering crisis as much as it feels like it is. I know you have a lot of your self esteem wrapped up in your success at this major so I get that. But you're still putting your failure on yourself more than him. You shouldn't. You're a capable person who shows up to class and tries really hard and *cares*, if *you* are failing a class it means something else is wrong - isn't that all what you would tell a friend? I'm sure there are plenty of others struggling even if you haven't talked to them. I know James is doing perfectly well in Aural skills and that makes you feel even more defective but that's one person and he has a different teacher and a different brain. You definitely aren't defective or not

musical enough. Listening is a hard skill that requires very focused attention to develop and you have trouble with that. You also have anxiety which makes you get freaked out and flustered by your inability to focus which then shuts down your brain entirely and makes all the sounds the same. Almost like a colorblind person. I bet if you were patient and kind with yourself you might actually be fine. It makes perfect sense that you can't get yourself to practice - it makes you feel terrible! It's not your fault. No one's immediately perfect at everything and it sucks that you feel you have to be for reasons we don't have to get into here. But the fact that when you are relaxed and your ears are fresh and that you played cello pretty well means you are in no way tone deaf. You just get flustered and like I said before you have some type of attention disorder and this is part of that. If you were having the same problem with reading it would have a name for it - dyslexia - and there would be concrete resources available at your school to help you through your classes. People with dyslexia can be great writers with some support. Unfortunately the musical equivalent of dyslexia doesn't have a name and just makes anyone who has it feel like a bad musician. When things get hard don't assume you are terrible or that you're doing the wrong thing. Things are often the hardest when we're doing the thing we should be doing, the thing we really care about and is important for us. It's actually a good sign that you're struggling. If it wasn't important you wouldn't be freaking out. And once again, you are plenty good at bass, you just aren't that much of a jazz person, and that's fine. It's also a biased space - a huge number of girls who start playing jazz band in middle school have dropped out by college and the pressure you feel might be a part of that. I wish you could openly talk about your struggles instead of hiding them within yourself and feeling more and more ashamed. It's not a weakness, it's normal but you still have trouble connecting with people so you're again alone in this.

Maybe you don't know jazz theory well yet, ok, so what. There are plenty of other people in the program who don't either. That's why you are taking classes, TO LEARN these things. It's OK that some people are ahead of you in some ways - them being good has nothing to do with you. Don't get so wrapped up in that fact that you ignore how good you are at certain things. You have a feel and a way of playing that's already great because you've just been doing it for a few years now, and oh yeah you love the bass more than anything. This show-off environment and the fact that you are the only girl in your program is not a good match for a sensitive person who struggles with self-esteem and wants to feel like an A plus student at all times. If you believe you can learn new things you can, if you don't believe it - then you can't.

You've gone through alot already in your short time at college and you're going to go through a TON more in the next few years. I would give it away but you are actually going to go through some things that are so weird and difficult very few people get through them and come out healthy. What I am saying is that this F is nothing. As always I promise you are on the path you are meant to be on and you're not alone. It's tough to leave you but, see you next time kid.