

Episode 5 - Kiss

Dear Young Rocker,

Well, it's inevitable. You're going to have that first kiss. I promise that eventually in your life you will start kissing people you actively seek out and personally choose to, but unfortunately you're still in your confidence building phase and it's a long one for you. This one is not going to happen in the most fair way and I know you will entirely blame yourself but you absolutely should not. With the pressures of teenage social life around you it's hard to tease apart what you actually want to do from what you feel will make you appear a certain way. The biggest fear in your life right now is looking lame to other kids. I have a feeling that just about everyone who has ever been a teenager has also made some not super great decisions solely in order to look cool or grown up or not a prude or a wimp.

It's all pretty confusing I know. You're doing your best and despite this hiccup your band is definitely shaping up. Once you get to where I'm at, both kissing and bands become fairly boring compared to the role they play in your life currently so hey live up that drama while you still have the energy for it and no real responsibilities yet because soon enough you'll be comparing health insurance plans with your drummer and falling asleep in front of the TV every night next to the same wonderfully un-dramatic guy who made sure to ask if he could kiss you the first thousand times it happened. So I guess my life is boring now, but thinking back on what you're going through: I'm pretty happy with that. PS It will take you five or six to figure this out but drummers are always bad news, stick to your own kid, bassists are the coolest.

-Opening Scene-

I'm walking around the fair grounds with my band. Our friend Brian is with us too. It's kind of drizzling and we keep kicking trash away on the ground. Those huge spinny rides covered in lights are whooshing. We pass a food cart and the fried dough smell makes me feel nauseous.

School's been back a couple weeks and we're all sophomores now. The Sterling Fair is kind of the first social event of the year - you can tell who's dating each other now and who the new friend cliques are. I feel good to be in a group of all guys. It feels natural. When I'm around boys I feel less self-conscious about how I look and how I dress. I can just talk about music and fit in right away. The social rules of girls seem more complicated to me. I don't know what I'd talk about with them. I'd probably do it wrong.

Ricky, Fred and Nick split off and walk ahead of us. Brian hangs back with me. All the sudden he says "What would you say if I told you someone likes you?"

I feel kind of weird like maybe he's making fun of me. Or maybe Brian actually likes me? Brian is OK I guess I'm not exactly sure I like him back though...

Oh CRAP It's not him. It's Nick. I'd sensed it in his sweaty hugs after practice. He always puts his head really close to mine. I remember that Fred had made a rule there would be no inter-band dating but Fred just quit the band.

"So....?" Brian says.

"Huh? Yeah uh of course I like Nick." I say trying to make it clear I mean "like" as in like as in a friend not *LIKE LIKE* and kind of pretending I don't know what he actually means. Then I walk faster to catch up up to the rest of the group.

I see a ride I want to go on but I don't have enough tickets left so I ask if I could get one from someone. Brian says he'll give me one ---- "*If you kiss Nick*".

NOOO. Heartbeat sound

I want some time to think about this first - maybe ask my mom about it or something but now I have to just do it. Maybe I can make it off like just a friend kiss and it wouldn't mean anything. You know like the French do?

I'm totally zero percent attracted to Nick so maybe it will be obvious in my body language if I make it real casual. And I know if I refuse I'll look like some kind of wimpy prude again like I did this past summer at camp when I found myself sitting on a boy's lap and everyone around us started chanting "make out make out" but I chickened out, even though I thought he was really cute. I don't want to be a prude forever and I don't want Nick to be mad at me at band practice or something.

"Ok sure."

I close my eyes. My heart races and I feel a jolt upon impact. It doesn't quite feel good -- it was kind of too hard and I didn't like the spit part. He had his mouth open for some reason. Was I supposed to do that? I try to discreetly wipe my mouth after.

(group) "ooo ooohhhh"

"Ok let's go on the ride now." Nick sits next to me. *Great.*

After the ride I realize my mom's going to be here to pick us up soon. We walk to the back of the field to hop over the fence. Ricky walks ahead and hops over but Nick holds my arm to stop me and turns me towards him. He kisses me again. I want to say no but I don't know how. After a couple seconds I pull away and turn it into a hug. He looks *really* happy.

Fred quit this summer. It was while I was at camp. I walked down the dirt path to the camp computer to check my email and Nick and Ricky said that they had stopped hearing from Fred and then he finally said he didn't want to do it anymore but didn't give a reason. They said they'd be happy to do it as a three piece and I said sure.

The other dramatic email I got at camp was from my friend Roya. Before I left I knew she had started dating this guy Mike who was like 19 even though he still hadn't graduated. He had been in the mental hospital a couple times and had cigarette burns on his arms that he had done to himself and definitely did drugs. He had scary dark eyes and I felt creeped out when he looked at me. I told Roya I was really pissed about her going out with someone so dangerous and that it was "Me or Mike."

The next day one of the camp counselors took me to the office to get an "emergency phone message." It was Roya, she said she'd "choose me over any boy and we were best friends forever." The counselor gave me an angry face and told me I wasn't allowed to get calls from friends and I tried to explain I couldn't help it if my friend was being a crazy drama queen.

The counselors didn't like us because our cabin had a lot of girls that were not at all prudes or virgins like I was. One of them even had nipple rings which she showed us and had been in a

porn. At the end of camp, she had sex behind the music building with the boy I almost kissed. Another girl stole stuff from all of us including my shoes. It was a theater camp. Theater kids are weird.

I just went there because they had a music program and even a rock band option. I wanted to take bass lessons and get better at it so I could be super good. I prepared the bass part from Black Sabbath's Iron Man as an audition for when I got there. The teacher was blown away. He said I was the best bass player he'd seen at the camp and brought over another teacher to have me play for him too, but I didn't like that. I turned red and got mad. I had messed up a couple notes. I'm not that good, I went there to *get* good. I have to be better than any of the guy bass players. If I'm just OK at bass everyone will think I'm "good for a girl" I had to just be *good period*. I tried to convince my bandmates to go to the camp too -- I said we could all get better at music -- but they said why not just stay home and work on songs with them -- we didn't need band lessons. They didn't get it.

When I got back from camp we sat on Nicks bed and flipped through a book of poems by Jim Morrison. One was called "The New Animals" and we decided it would be our new band name. Then we started writing some new songs. I'm not good enough at music to write a whole one myself, but I can come up with ideas and then Ricky makes them into a song.

One day during practice we're goofing around and I start playing a root-fifth thing on two different notes, *Bum-bum-ba-Bum-bum-ba*, it sounds like cheesy elevator music. Nick starts playing a Jazzy beat. Ricky adds some seventh chords and starts singing in a high falsetto, "bah-bahhhhhh" and then we take turns talking over the music. I say, "First floor for all your elderly undergarments." We keep improvising stuff and after a couple minutes of elevator music Nick shouts "one-two-three-four!" and we break into a fast hardcore-punk riff and all scream, "elevator ride, elevator ride!" over and over again. I jump up and down and pretended to kick the drums over.

When we all recover from "Elevator Ride" I start playing a bass-line I had come up with at home. It sounds like something a ska band would play, probably because I've been listening to The Specials and Madness lately. Ricky picks up on the line and started doing the guitar chords with the *uh-Chuck, uh-Chuck* ska rhythm. It feels good having my ideas accepted, as stupid as I think they really are.

After a while Nick stands up from behind the drums looking all red and sweaty Ricky and I know that meant we were done. We sat on the couch and Nick put on the *Full Metal Jacket* DVD. A few minutes into it Nick's mom yells down the stairs, "Nathaniel, Ricky's mom is here." I hug Ricky goodbye. Nick grabs Ricky around the neck and gives him a painful looking noogie and then Ricky is gone and I'm alone with Nick. I'm not sure when my mom is coming.

I'm not nervous anymore as he leans in, but I hold my breath, like I do every time. That way I can't smell Nick's spit. Spit is the worst part of kissing. When he pulls away to laugh at the movie, I use my sweatshirt sleeve to wipe off of my mouth and chin. I don't understand how it always gets all over me.

He's started kissing me in the hallway before the bell rings too. I figure that means i'm his "girlfriend". I'm not really sure how I could have stopped it from happening. I really knew it was too late the day my English teacher Mr Ferrell asked me, "How's Nick?" If the teachers knew then it was official. I couldn't stop the kissing because now it would mean I was "dumping him." If I do that I know the band would break up and I would once again be a no one. I'd be

back to roaming the halls alone, constantly moving because I wouldn't have a group to stand with, flinching at doorways, and scurrying home as fast as I could when the bell rang. I can't be that way again

So I've accepted the girlfriend role. I like that I get a best friend out of the deal at least, someone to talk on the phone with since I didn't talk to Roya as much since the Mike thing – it seems like she must have stayed with him. I still hang out with Colby sometimes but Nick always wants to come over after school and I've never been good at hanging out with two friends at once. One time the three of us were together and Nick and I locked her on the porch and made out. Even though I didn't even like him that much or making out really at all I guess it felt cool to have a boyfriend or something – it doesn't seem like Colby will ever get one. She walked home mad at me, and then in Latin class when I said I had band practice she said "Nick practice?" I felt really dumb but didn't know how to say sorry. I thought about it a lot of times but I couldn't think of a way of doing it without things getting even more complicated. My life is just my band now. Colby joined the drama club and started hanging out with those kids more. I actually thought about joining too but I need practice band time and Nick time now too. At least Nick always laughs at my jokes and we can be goofy together.

At school my legs don't feel heavy and painful anymore when I walk around. It is slightly less scary to be looked at now, even if I still don't love my body or how I dress. At least I know one person likes how I look and it's easy enough to blend into my friends with band shirts and jeans since that's what I usually want to wear anyway. I still feel embarrassed if someone sees us kissing so I try to get it over with quickly or defer until there aren't too many people looking.

The idea of being with someone I *really* like or have a crush on is still impossible. I know it will just never happen and I don't even try to dream about it. *You don't go out with people you like*, is the unwritten but obvious rule in my mind. I know if I find myself alone with someone I like it would be scary and I'd be self-conscious. At least with Nick I'm comfortable because I'm not worried about looking cool enough for him.

As we keep watching full metal jacket, I look down at his t-shirt and I think that I must have seen every one he owns at this point: the army green M*A*S*H one he's wearing, a couple of super faded black The Clash shirts, and a red Che Guevara one. The acrid smell of his sweat saturating the old t-shirt blending with the doggy smell of the basement and the dried spit on my face hits me. The full combo reminds me of vomit. And I hope my mom picks me up soon so I can breathe through my nose again. I try to focus instead on his big round blue eyes framed with long eyelashes and his light reddish brown hair. His cheeks are still a little pink from playing. He's cute right? I'm sure other people have thought so I just have to find it. His eyelids are always kind of half-mast. He looks at me with that sideways glance of his that suggests some dry sarcastic remark floating in his head, probably something like "You're really loving this movie huh?" and I start laughing before he even gets it out.

We played our first "real" show in October. It was at a place called Club Marquee spelled wrong with one e so maybe it's actually Marque. It's on Main Street in Worcester and looks pretty shady from the outside. John from Beware of the Dog was the one who got us the show. It was the only club we knew of that let kids under 18 play. When we walked in I saw John's tall skinny frame and wide black pants, like the double barrel of a shotgun. He came over to us as we were putting stuff on the stage. We thanked him for letting us play the show. He had set it up for Beware of the Dog and given us the opening slot. I think Ricky had kind of bugged him about it. He said he'd introduce us to the guy that ran the shows. While we waited I realized how

disgusting it smelled in there. People definitely must smoke cigarettes sometimes. And the floor was so sticky my shoes got stuck to it every time I stood still for one second.

John brought us over to a tall heavy set black guy in a big leather jacket. He seemed pretty nice and shook all of our hands. He told us to get on the stage and set up our stuff. Ricky tried to sing into a microphone but no sound came out. I tried another one, I could smell it from almost a foot away and when I got close enough it hit my lip with an electric shock.

Ten or fifteen people were standing in the audience watching me get shocked. This included some of our parents and the other bands who were gonna play that night. We walked away from our parents before our set, to the back room that had mirrored walls. I thought it looked like a strip club, not that I've seen a real one. As we talked about what songs we were gonna' play I wrapped my legs and arms on a pole that was holding up the ceiling and swung around. Ricky wrote out a set-list with a sharpie in his nearly illegible handwriting. Then Bubba came over and told us it was time to play.

I liked that it was dark in the club but there were lights facing us that were so bright I could just make out the shapes of the people in the audience but not really see their faces. It was like I was playing for cardboard cutouts. This made me feel more comfortable than the brightly lit gyms and churches we had played in before. I turned on my amp and checked that my tuning matched Ricky's. We tuned like we did in orchestra – he gave me an A and I matched it by ear instead of using an electric tuner. Ricky had started playing double bass in orchestra this year so I saw him a lot. Soon Nick counted off, Ricky started playing the guitar riff, I waited a measure and then came in with the bass part without thinking about it. As I've gotten better, the divide between my brain and body seems to have increased. My hands just do what they're supposed to and my brain goes off and thinks about whatever it feels like. Sometimes this leads to a bum note but whatever.

When I saw a couple kids standing right up against the stage nodding along to the music, I started playing more intensely and nodding my head too. It brought me back into thinking about playing instead of just mechanically doing it. I couldn't hear Ricky's singing though. I tried to come in with the back up vocal part but the mic zapped me for a second time and I couldn't hear myself so I gave up. I looked to the side of the room at the bar and the backs of a few old people sitting hunched over, one playing the gambling computer game on the end of the bar. Our set felt like it was over quickly.

As we were packing up our instruments another band came up to us and one of them said "great set." They called themselves Skeeter Valentine. It was a reference to that show Doug. I told them we liked the name and the bass player told me I did a good job. I felt my cheeks flushing and didn't say thanks because I thought it would be narcissistic to feel good about playing what I thought were such easy bass parts.

To avoid thinking about myself I focused on the instrument the other bass player was holding. I'd never seen a bass that looked like it before. The body was unfinished wood and the shape was a weird mashup of different polygons. He held it up to me and said something about it in my ear but another band was already playing and I couldn't hear him so I just nodded because I didn't want to look like a dork by saying "What? What?" I felt like I should know what it was. I leaned closer to the headstock where a brand label should be but it was blank. "Who makes it?" I asked.

"I'm telling you, I made it!"

“Oh wow, neat!” I immediately felt nerdy for saying “neat” but I thought it was so cool that he built his own bass. It was just about the coolest thing I’d ever heard actually. He told me something about the pickups. I didn’t know what he was talking about but smiled and nodded as if I did. I’d never thought you could make your own bass. I opened my eyes wide, and realized he was *really* cute. His big blue eyes looked nice with his black hair, and the way he spoke gave me the feeling he was super smart. I like smart people.

When his band played I found out he was the singer too. I still didn’t know his name because I couldn’t hear him tell me. They started playing a Weezer cover. I hadn’t heard the song before so I didn’t know it was a cover. It was fast, I liked the energy of it, and I started bobbing along and caught on to the chorus, “You take your car to work, I’ll take my board, and when you’re out of fuel, I’m still afloat.” I was fascinated as I watched him sing and play. I liked how powerfully he sang and how comfortable he seemed playing bass and singing at the same time. I wanted to do that. He opened his mouth really wide and pushed his chest out, unlike the singers in most of the other bands we’d played with who just mumble and look down at the floor through their emo bangs.

After he played, we talked again and I found out his name was Chris. He asked me for my screen name on AIM. I told him, “Silverbass18,” and he remembered without writing it down. Beware Of The Dog came on next, and pretty quickly my mom said it was late and that we all had to go because she couldn’t handle listening to metal music.

Chris sent me a message on AIM the next day. My stomach did a flip when his window popped up on my screen. We talked about bands and bass playing and he said he was impressed by my “rocking rhythms” on our song “Hercules.” It kind of embarrassed me because I knew it was a really easy two chord song and I figured he must know that. I wondered if he was just impressed that I could play such an easy song because I’m a girl.

We chatted more and I found out he was exactly one year and one day older than me. When I asked where he went to school he told me he was at Mass Academy. I looked it up because I hadn’t heard of it. It’s where advanced high school kids interested in math and science take college courses at Worcester Polytech. I was impressed. I really hoped he thought I was smart. When we finished chatting he told me, “Give me a hug next time you see me,” and I felt a million little sparkles rise inside my chest. I told him I would. I didn’t tell him about Nick and I wondered if I could keep him from finding out. Like maybe we didn’t have to be officially going out after all. I didn’t sign anything or really make any sort of agreement right? Maybe I could write it off as friends who kiss each other once in a while.

A few days later, we all went to Chris’s house in Worcester and had a jam session in his basement. We all traded off different instruments and I tried out the homemade bass. I found it kind of hard to play but still thought it was sooo cool. Just touching it made me tingly. Afterwards we stood around in the cold driveway and Nick put his arm around me and kissed my cheek. A bomb of rage went off inside of me. It was an anger I haven’t felt since I was little. *Why’d he have to frickin’ do that why did he have to show off that he thinks I belong to him. I’m my own damn person.* I thought. Chris stood looking at us with his hands in his sweatshirt pocket and blinked. He was who I actually wanted to kiss. As my insides reached a boil I imagined clawing Nick’s arm off of me, punching him and finishing it off by spitting at him. Instead I just looked at the ground like nothing happened and let my cheeks turn red.

Dear Young Rocker....

Ok we've avoided it long enough. It's time to start talking about dating. By dating someone you aren't interested in you are doing yourself, your friends and the person you are going out with a total disservice even if it feels like the way to keep everyone happy. I understand you didn't intend to do it, and to you, there was absolutely no way around it. Well, the way around it *would have been* some firm but delicate verbal communication which I know to you is a terrifying thing. You probably overthought what exactly to say and came up with nothing in the classic social anxiety style. But it really doesn't have to be complicated. Practice saying these three little words a few times in a row: no thank you. No thank you no thank you no thank you. It might have gotten you out of there pretty quickly if you could just deal with the moment of awkwardness. But you couldn't and now you're starting to feel trapped. Being a female musician often comes with a lot of completely unfair baggage and this is your introduction. But hey even if you weren't in a band you could have been in a friend group and feel pressured to date someone to keep the clique happy. Girls often sense that boys will get mad and ruin things if we don't comply with them so we do what we can to take care of their feelings, but that needs to be rejected as soon and as firmly as possible. If I could go back to being you, I would explain to Brian and Nick how from your perspective you felt pressured whether or not that's their intention – In Nick's mind you just like him back as much as he likes you and Brian thinks he was being a good friend by helping his pal kiss his crush. Teenagers, especially boys, typically don't take subtle hints and aren't super great and understanding how their actions make other people feel until they are told. But then if you really go out of your way to say you aren't interested, you run the risk of being labeled a b-word at best and I don't want to get too dark here but we've been programmed our entire lives seeing TV shows, movies and news stories where violence is done to a woman or girl after they've rejected a man or boy. You don't have enough experience to see all these factors at play you just feel bad and weird and stuck because you are sensing this potential to have someone be angry at you or to make weirdness in your friend group, so you comply even though you weren't the one who started the whole thing. You'll have to practice that no thanks for exactly these situations. I mean, even very recently / a happily taken woman got tricked into being on a date with someone. I went to a show alone to see my friend's band and two guys standing near me asked me to get a drink with them after. We had been talking about music - guitars and recording and bands, it hadn't been remotely flirtatious and they seemed like harmless nerds plus it was a group thing so I said sure – yay friends. When we got to the bar one of the two said, "eh i'm going home now but you two have fun - Mike's a really great guy" and turned and walked away. I was suddenly alone on a date with Mike without my consent. I was so dumbfounded I couldn't even think of what to say - in that moment I remembered your own paralysis, my first instinct was to go along with it and keep being friendly even though that made absolutely no sense and I had no interest. I went over the facts in my mind wondering if I had done something to seem like I wanted to go on a date or indicate that I was single but neither of these people had asked me if I was in a relationship or even attracted to men, never mind if I was interested in the guy himself. Once again a guy was just trying to help his pal and once again he didn't consider my feelings. I'll give it to the guy I was left with that he also seemed pretty confused and not super thrilled with his friend for pulling this move. My point here is this: of course these things are entirely the fault of the other party but you still better get those communication skills together because unfair stuff probably isn't going to stop happening. *But* if we help each other to resist it, and tell the perpetrators why it's wrong, we might be able to reduce its frequency and help stop it from happening to others.

Feeling inadequate as a bass player even though you are already very good is another part of the female musician baggage. I'm certain there are probably many non-dudes out there who feel intimidated to even try to join a band because of that. They're out there playing and drawing and creating all kinds of incredible creative things alone in their rooms and I truly hope all of them find others to share their work with one day even with all the baggage it may come with. I am so proud of you for at least putting yourself out there despite your insecurity, but God I wish you knew how talented you already are.

Your biggest fear is losing your band. That makes sense. It is your entire social life and you feel like you would be lost without it because you don't have anything in common with anyone else. You feel like you've lost your two female friends because of issues with boys too. You've neglected Colby for Nick for far too long at this point even if that wasn't your intention. And not to get too deep but it might have something to do with having divorced parents. You are used to the specifically weird feeling of being torn between two sides and it feels like your natural state so you end up recreating it with your friends and you will see this pattern emerge many more times. But anyway....

Remember how Colby has a guitar and takes lessons and you used to play together? And you know how in orchestra there's that girl that plays percussion? She's pretty good -- I wouldn't be surprised if she could play a drum kit as well as Nick. I bet if you wanted to, you could get a band going with people who you'd never have to worry about pressuring you into dating them. I know it seems impossible, but it's really not. And thinking you don't know enough about music to write a song is completely incorrect - if you can pluck a couple notes and hum a tune you can write a song and you're far past that.

With everything you are going through I bet you could write some SIIICK songs.

Next Time on Dear Young Rocker – Young Chelsea gets put on the spot with a very stressful decision. How will she do?