

Episode 8

Dear Young Rocker,

You are a wild, fragile thing. It's OK to be both at once. It's actually a pretty incredible way to be when balanced and harnessed correctly. It's the same quality that Kate Bush and Bjork have that gives them such a devoted following. And it's what people will like about your own music someday too. If you were a song you'd probably be Wuthering Heights. And if you were a horse you'd be an Arabian. So smart that you can figure out how to unlock yourself from your stall but once you get out there in the open wilderness you crave you scare yourself with your own shadow and break a delicate leg trying to run away from it.

This is going to be a tough year. I know you're probably like uh yeah what's new. Well it's going to be tougher than ever. You're about to enter the period of your life I refer to as "the time in which no rock occurred." Playing music in a band is more than just a hobby for you. It's something you can't not do. The rock of your life is rock. It's what keeps you grounded and without it the strong currents that constantly swirl through your mind can sweep you away as you'll soon find out. As much as medicine can support you as you fight your demons, music is the one thing that can always get your neurons firing in a way that allows your brains true power and potential to overcome the potential for darkness all of us sensitive creative types struggle with. You'll learn eventually though, you'll learn.

=====

Me and Dan pull up in my mom's car to the old Cider Mill building in Sterling and start unloading our stuff onto the grass patch in front. It's just about across the street from the Church where I played my first show ever with Ricky, Fred and Nick. Now me Dan and Ricky are standing out in front of the old mill building all wearing sport coats and khakis -- for some reason we had decided to match. I think we got the idea from that band Presidents of the United States of America. No one's really here to watch except for a couple of our friends who live nearby.

We play the songs we've been playing for what feels like forever. I'm kind of sick of them. I don't really think about it as my hands go through the motions of the songs and add in little bass fills between notes I feel a little irritated and they seem to do more and more. My voice comes out of my mouth on it's own now, I hardly think about it. I'm almost proud of myself for how good I've gotten at these songs, but what's the point? This is our last show.

Afterwards, I drive over to Dan's house. We sit on the couch in the back living room. He slowly slides on his back down to the floor until he's fully laying down. He says he can't sit on couches because he has no butt to hang on with. I get down next to him. I put my arm over his chest, and we kiss.

I'm so happy to be rid of Ricky, to finally be with someone I want to be with...

so why do I kind of feel like I'm going to cry?

—

I think of myself as a wild mustang. It's cheesy I guess, but, whenever I feel like something or someone is potentially threatening my freedom to do what I want to do, I get angry. I feel the steam feeling again like when I was little. I have the urge to kick out at anyone who comes near me. I imagine a heavy harness being strapped onto me and a hard bit biting into the corners of my mouth and I want to buck and flail as hard as I can until I rip all of that leather and metal right off of me. When my horse Stanley tries to throw me off I don't even blame him. (horse snort) My dad says there might be something wrong with him and we've taken him to all these vets and trainers but I think it's pointless. I get it. As a creature who embodies freedom, nothing feels worse than having someone on your back making you feel like you have to behave a certain way.

And that's how I started feeling around Ricky last year. It was time to throw him off.

I finally ended up doing it in the spring. I had really wanted to wait until the school year was over so I wouldn't have to have the last month feel awkward as I avoided him around school. But I just couldn't wait any longer. When I told him he asked me a favor.

"Just don't date Dan." He said. Date anyone, date Chris, just don't date Dan or you know the band's over and we can't be friends.

Dan and I had become friends over the spring. He's kind of a big dork and his friends are dorky too. Sometimes he would decide to have his own costume dress up days even when it wasn't a spirit day. One day he was "putting on the ritz" and wore a tux jacket with a box of ritz crackers around his neck and on the Ides of March he wore a toga. Clearly he was weird and creative and didn't care what anyone thought of it. So basically exactly who I want to be around and who I want to be myself if I could only be confident enough. Dan and his nerdy friends didn't make me feel weird and anxious like Ricky's friends but they were all seniors last year and I was a junior. I had another entire year of high school to get through by myself.

Ugh

Ya know that smell at the end of summer? Like in August sometimes especially at night you get that little whiff of colder air that smells kind of like the fall? It gives me a panic attack. It means I'm no longer safe. In the summer I can just be myself and not feel all weird around these high school people with their drama and their expectations.

I had that panicky feeling at the end of last summer after having dumped Nick, knowing I'd have to see him around school. But at least I had Ricky and his friends. This year it felt even worse because now I just have enemies. Dan's off to college. Every hall I turn down there could potentially be someone I dumped or the friends of someone I dumped or all the people I've never talked to who probably wonder what the hell is wrong with me for sitting alone at lunch as

a senior. I don't have a band anymore. I've been kicked out of my tribe and left to wander the forest and fend for myself.

Senior year is the worst year to be friendless. It's ok to be a little nobody as a freshman but this is the year of prom and graduation, senior week and epic parties, all the stuff you're supposed to do with a group of friends. The stupid school keeps telling us how many precious memories we're supposed to make as seniors. The whole point is to bond with your forever-friends who will be at your wedding someday and probably your funeral too. If I had a funeral right now there wouldn't be anyone to even invite. I wish I could just move to Sweden or something.

SO I had to focus on SOMETHING to get through this crappy year and I figured I can just start looking forward to college. I'm gonna' go to Umass Lowell because they have a sound recording technology major and it's supposed to be one of the best places in the country to get a recording degree. Plus, my parents will pay for it since it's cheap they said if I go to a fancy private school I'd have to take out big loans. I know sound recording's an intense program -- you have to do all the music major stuff -- ear training and music theory and everything and calculus and engineering stuff on top of it. So this year I'm taking a calculus class, and physics and I took that music theory class with Dan last year.

I thought about applying on bass but I just don't think I know enough about jazz. I did play in the jazz band but, well, Jazz Band 2 -- the not that good one. Mr. Miller just gave me sheet music and I played it -- I didn't come up with bass parts myself. So anyway I'm working hard on cello, kind of for the first time since I started playing it.

I don't have a band anymore. So this is all I've got. I have GOT to be good at this.

So my cello teacher is this guy Jim. He's gay. I've always felt really strange around feminine gay men but not cause they're gay, like whatever, but for the same reason I feel weird around most girls and women - I feel expected to know how to communicate in this specific girly way I just don't understand and so I end up just feeling like I have no idea how to talk or dress or do anything right and that it's obvious to them how defective I am. Jim's personality is kind of weird in general too. Sometimes he doesn't seem to be paying attention to me at all during our lessons. I started with him because he was Ricky's old cello teacher and I'm not enough of a virtuoso for the \$100/hr ones. I was working on a bunch of bach exercises and some Vivaldi with him and then when I got the audition requirements for college in the mail I brought them in. The suggested pieces were full solo concerto's -- stuff that Pablo Cassals played. Jim looked at me and explained that this stuff seemed more for his students who had been playing since 2nd grade and could play Haydn without sheet music. My stomach started feeling a little seasick.

He asked if I was interested in other majors besides music and the question made everything happening in my head grind to a halt. I had been working my butt off on cello all year... this was supposed to be it for me. My heart started pounding in my head. And then I felt a deep heaviness pulling my stomach down while I looked at the floor. I thought about it for a second. I did really like science and there were probably way more jobs in that. Majoring in music might be a bad idea. And I know I'm really still not that good at hearing notes by ear so maybe I

wouldn't even be able to pass the ear training test....Plus my dad really wanted to be a scientist or an engineer but he never finished grad school because I was born and he's always talking about how great his sister is for being a genetic engineer. He used to give me those extra math and science books in elementary school to do and I know I'd impress him if I became a scientist. Plus... I like animals.

"Yeah... Biology"

"Well that sounds like a really good idea."

I played my senior recital with Tim a little after that at the music school. I felt like I played that Vivaldi piece better and more emotionally than anything I had played in my life. I had always liked how the cello sounded but had never felt good enough to really love playing it while I did it. But then I felt like my pain of being a failed musician was coming through every note Vivaldi had written. My wrist seemed to glide in the exact way I had wished it would for years. When I switched going from up to down with my bow there wasn't a scratch, it was like one continuous note flowing. Maybe it was also because it just didn't matter anymore so I had no reason to be nervous. I knew I would not be a musician anymore, it was too painful to love something this much and not be good enough at it. I'd have to quit. This is my swan song I thought. People looked sad when I looked up from the music. The MC hadn't heard the news and she announced to the audience that I would be going to school for music recording. Tim winked at me and handed me a weird peppery smelling plant as a parting gift. I breathed in as hard as I could to try not to cry when I took a bow and then walked over to my parents.

This whole year has been hell. Of course lunch is the worst part. Since I live so close to school I can time my walk so that I get in the door right before the bell rings and leave as soon as my last class ends so I don't have to hang around the halls like the people who take busses. But at lunch i'm trapped. I had an idea one day that maybe I could just practice cello extra. And that would work at a normal school. But we have military rules here. I got to the lunchroom as fast as I could and ate my gross sandwich in two bites and then went up to the lunchroom chaperone and asked if I could go to the music room to practice cello. She said no. Students aren't allowed to be in the halls during lunch. Seniors at other schools actually get to go outside for lunch or even like drive to McDonald's or something. Not in this prison. So everyday it's just like freshmen year. I am the biggest no one. I spend as many minutes as possible in the bathroom and then I try to sit at the edge of a table with the fewest people at it as possible. Sometimes I'll even sit facing outwards so that I don't look like i'm associating with whoever happens to be sitting there. I meet unusual people this way occasionally. There's this kid who is really short but he's a body builder and he has these giant arms. We had lunch a few times then I went over his house and he showed me this weird tent in his backyard. I thought he was going to try to make out with me in there but he didn't. We went back in his house and he introduced me to his dad – he was this bald guy in pajama pants. Then my friend said his dad was going to become a woman soon right in front of him. I had no idea what to say besides "oh."

I also met the awkward kid I ended up going to prom with that way. He was in my movie making class. Unfortunately, so was Ricky, and some popular kids he was friends with, so I desperately needed SOMEONE to talk to. Tucker was always super nice to me but he was constantly quoting movies and he didn't respond to stuff like a normal person. I couldn't actually tell the difference when he was quoting something or just talking as himself.

Prom was weird. I didn't originally want to go at all. I talked about it with Dan. We decided it was stupid and for idiot popular people. But then.... I really kind of wanted a prom dress. And my mom took me dress shopping even though I still didn't think I wanted to go. But when I put on this one red dress I never wanted to take it off. I had lost a lot of weight this year, probably from being so nervous at lunch I could barely eat and having dinner at Dan's parents every night. His mom cooked actual meals with vegetables instead of eating takeout with my parents. And i've been taking aerobics for gym class. When I put on that dress I felt hot. Like in a girl way. The back was completely open all the way down to the butt. I think it's the first time I've ever felt like I dunno, feminine and not hated it. I usually despise dresses. Both how they feel and how I look in them. Now that I found something that made me feel so good about myself I knew I needed to go to prom. So I asked Tucker. Dan got really really mad. He said he couldn't believe I was going with "that oaf." I said that was mean but I got it, I mean Tuckers a big kid like 6'5" and something about him is kind of off... not in a bad way just like socially, weird. Which I can relate to so I don't mind. I know he gets made fun of. And some popular boy I didn't even know asked me why I was hanging out with him. He wondered if we were dating – NO!!! I said he's my friend and I gave him a face like he was being an asshole cause he was. Great. God I hoped Tucker wouldn't try to make a move on me at the prom in front of everyone.

He didn't. I actually sat with Colby and her friends at a table. They were all drama club kids. Tucker was too. It made sense since he was pretty much acting 24/7. I know I looked hot in the dress. A lot of people looked at me and a bunch of girls came up to me to compliment it. I had my hair done up in a French twist at a salon and I put on super deep red lipstick that matched the exact color of the dress. If only I had a date who I wasn't actively trying to avoid physical contact with or like a real group of friends. I wasn't totally alone, but I still had that feeling that I didn't fit with the people around me. Like as good as I might have looked I was still with the oaf and the drama club nerds. I was fine with them they were all nice and goofy and dorky but I knew they weren't my people. I couldn't 100% relax with them. Especially with all the stupid popular people walking by and looking at us.

Graduation was the absolute worst. Of course I skipped all the "fun" senior events but I had to go to the ceremony so my family could take precious pictures. The worst part of all was before it started. I had to be there like 4 hours early with all the other seniors for absolutely no reason. The vice principal yelled at us about a hundred times to make sure we knew where we would be standing in line and how to shake hands and how to pick up the diploma but other than that we just stood around in the gym. While everyone else was taking cutesy forever friends pictures with their cliques I just kind of wandered around trying to look like I was looking for someone. Maybe there'd be someone I forgot I was friends with years ago and we could reconnect. Nope. Just the same old kids I felt either too cool or not cool enough for.

Then I saw Nick. Then I saw Ricky. Then I saw all Ricky's friends. I tried to triangulate the corner of the gym as far from both of them as possible and I just stayed there. I tried not cry. Then I tried not to throw up. Then I tried to breathe.

One night after graduation I was just hanging out at home with Dan. We were sitting on the carpet in my room trading off playing my bass. I played a Pixies song then I handed it to Dan and he played some really hard part of a Beatles song. I didn't realize Beatles songs were hard but he was doing all of these fills really quickly over this walking line and talking about the chord changes. I started thinking about how I would never be a good enough musician to go to music school. I didn't know as many chords as Dan and couldn't do all this jazzy stuff on the bass and even though I thought I was good enough at cello now I know i'm nowhere near good enough. He passed the bass back to me and I felt like I couldn't play a note. Like suddenly my brain and hands had no idea how to even play the most basic riff, even the ones I had written myself. I just plonked at it like a little kid who doesn't know how to hold down the strings hard enough to fret them. My head started drooping towards my chest. Then I thought about how I truly have no friends to spend this summer before college with and no band either. The steam feeling I hadn't felt in a while started rising in me hotter than ever. My head started hurting really bad and my vision started to sort of flicker out as I thought over and over about how I can't create anything or connect with other people and how I am a waste of a human life because those are the two most important things about being a human. I thought the sentence I am the worst bass player who has ever lived. Then I am not a musician I am a fake. Then I am nothing. Useless. I don't even exist. It was like someone was reading these sentences in my head more than me making them happen. Like God was telling me inside my head and I knew it was true. He knew I was a mistake who shouldn't exist and that I should give up. The voice of God or whatever it was got louder and my sense of my body sitting on the carpet started slipping away. I saw a black hole sitting before in my mind. I knew if I let myself tip into it I might not come back but that if I tried really hard I could lean back and pull myself out. It felt like maybe I could stop existing and stop feeling this pain if I went in there. I'd just let go of all control and see what my body would do. I decided to let myself fall forward into the black and my vision of what was going on around me cut out immediately. Instead it was replaced by what was kind of like a movie but from my point of view. It was like a dream because the room looked different like when you dream about being in your house but everything's weird. I wasn't sure if I was awake anymore. But I got up, or maybe dreamed I was getting up and I walked downstairs to the kitchen and I took the biggest knife out of the kitchen drawer or did I. I had no idea if it was happening or not. So I started screaming and asking Dan if I was upstairs or downstairs. My mom came running in and I told her I was going to kill myself with this knife I had in my hand. What knife? She asked. I couldn't tell if I really had it in my hand or not. I could simultaneously feel the kitchen floor under my feet and the knife in my hand and still somehow the carpet under my legs in my room. It was impossible to tell what was real. My heart was beating so hard it was hurting and the pain in my head made me feel like I could throw up. I screamed more and more pleading Dan and my mom to not let me do it telling them I was going to do it and I didn't think I could stop it because I didn't have any control over any of my senses. I screamed and screamed and screamed. I had no idea how much time went by but soon my dad was there holding all my limbs like nurses do in movies when someone is having a psychotic episode. He is a nurse I thought. Maybe I am psychotic.

Eventually I came down from it and all three of us were in the bathroom for some reason. My mom must have sent Dan home. My vision and senses came back but I was shaking. I was so scared that it could happen again at any moment. My Dad asked me if I heard voices. I said no because I think the voice I heard came from inside me I didn't really think it was God it just felt like someone else. I know there are people with schizophrenia on both sides of my family so he had to ask. I tried to explain that no I wasn't crazy something just happened to me. I started crying and telling them I didn't feel very good. Did Mom and Dad do anything wrong they asked me. I said Dad didn't really hug me or kiss me or tell me he loved me especially when I was a little kid. He said "Well I don't want to be one of those mushy sappy Dads." I laughed and it pushed another tear out.

Dear young rocker,

You just had your first panic attack. And like many firsts, it was the most intense one you will ever have. I promise you will never have another one quite this bad because next time you see that black hole open up in front of you, you won't relinquish control to it, you will fight it and you will do all the right things to help you move in the other direction. The biggest thing you will learn is to accept that panic attacks are like waves. They start off small then get bigger and bigger, they peak at some point and then they get sucked back into the ocean. They never last forever. For you they are only very bad for about 20 minutes. So next time you can say to yourself I'll be OK in 20 minutes I just have to breathe as deeply as I can and do my best to try and believe I am safe and that my body will be fine. Eventually you will be able to have a panic attack in the middle of a meeting or on a business phonecall and besides maybe saying some stuff that doesn't make the most sense no one will even notice and you can go on with your day. I am sorry you have to go through this but you are able and you are strong and will get even stronger from it. You get to this point alot by yourself and your own experimentation but i'm sure it would have been a lot easier if you had found a good therapist to help you along, that's who you should be talking to this stuff about kid.

If you look you will always be able to find that person who tells you that you aren't good enough. I wish I could extinguish them all from the earth but unfortunately they will always be there. And smart creative people like you will always be able to find reasons why you shouldn't or can't do the thing you want to do. Imagination is both a blessing and a curse. So, unless you are the grand champion gold medal world record holder of whatever it is you are trying to do, which 99.999% of us are not, then of course there will be that kid who's better, or at least thinks they are. But that is not a reason to not try. No one starts out as the best. And ya know what? Being the supposed best isn't that great anyway because even the world's best can find ways to criticize themselves. Yo-yo ma known as one of the world's best living cellists has been overheard berating himself with horrible mean language for performances that moved hundreds of people to tears with beauty. So what I am saying is you can't look for the reasons not to, the reasons you aren't good enough, because you will always be able to find those and they will just shut you down over and over. Just like you thought you weren't dressed cool enough or had

enough entertaining stuff to say to sit with the kids you deemed the popular people at lunch. And how you quit karate and gymnastics and doing horse shows because you always saw other kids winning medals. Those kids probably didn't have any other hobbies and their parents might have been unfairly pushing them too. But what I am saying is that none of that is a reason not to try. The only thing that should make you decide whether you want to do something or not do something is whether *you want to* do it. Whether you think doing it will make you feel good or accomplished or help you express yourself. If you want to feel bad about yourself, if you want to find reasons not to do something, you will always be able to find people or things that will agree with that negative opinion. And you might have your eyes and ears closed to the people around you who actually support you in doing the thing you want to do. The negative voices always seem louder and more important. But they aren't.

And I know I know your anxiety plays into this. When Jim asked you if you had other ideas for a major you had that classic anxious super sped up moment where you felt like you had to have all the answers RIGHT NOW so you said biology. If you had really slowed down and said like I have to think about all this, you might have eventually decided to keep on the same path. And that maybe Jim doesn't know everything. Because as it turns out he was wrong as wrong can be. Your cello playing was absolutely good enough for the Umass Lowell orchestra, if not better than most there. Whoever created those suggested audition pieces was full of CRAP. Just like you'll learn about job ads someday – the requirements section is usually a wish list for a perfect person who may or may not actually exist, they aren't something to make you feel bad about yourself. Although that's a lesson I need to keep telling myself... but I have friends to help me with that. But remember anxiety speeds you up, slow yourself down.

I know you don't have a support system or don't think you have one at least to say hey you can do whatever makes you happy! You like recording music then go record music! You can figure it out! As much as you aren't a group of friends person – which again is TOTALLY fine – you still need support outside of the negative adults in your life. I understand why you felt so isolated this year with all the ex's running around, you felt guilty and ashamed. Well you shouldn't first of all. And second of all, I bet you would be absolutely amazed to know how many of your classmates feel just like you. Who feel like this is just a waste for them and that they want to just graduate without a ceremony and never look back. There are others who feel like the cafeteria is a war zone and want to take cover out of sight under a large rock. I'm sure the stupid strict rules about not being able to leave the cafeteria during lunch make a lot of other students feel pretty anxious too. And I am sure there are others who feel like their only true deep connection is with music or art and that they have no one to share that with. Or that their parents expectations are ruining their lives. They were all around you I'm sure of it, even if from the outside they looked fine. Maybe they even looked popular and perfect.

We're all responsible for creating our own hell on earth – to a point. Of course i'm not saying someone dealing with issues resulting from trauma or abuse is responsible for feeling bad. I just mean no matter what we've been through or are going through we are the only ones who can actively change our state of mind as much as other people can help or hurt. You can choose the words and images in your mind that describe your life to yourself. If you see and feel the words lonely, depressed, stuck, isolated, angry over and over, that is what will manifest for you because you will be ignoring the potential ways out of that. It's easy to blame others, especially your parents or ex's for setting you up for failure. But the truth of life that we have to face to become adults is that no matter what someone else did to make you feel bad it is always your

responsibility to find a way to feel better. Sitting there blaming and getting angry at people will never ever move you away from those feelings – as bad and awful and deserving of blame and anger as those people are. After someone breaks you down it is always your responsibility to build yourself back up. No one can fix you after you've been broken but yourself. Even the most perfect loving romantic partner can't do that for you. They can only support you while you do it for yourself. I'm sorry but the quicker you learn this and accept it, the quicker you'll grow away from the pain in your past. So I know graduating alone was hard. Part of that was that you've been indoctrinated with these images from high school movies and your teachers about how perfect and amazing and the pinnacle of your life senior year is. They suck. It's not. You have a lot more life to live. Many more chances to make friends and really live. High school isn't the end, kid.