

Dear Young Rocker
(Chapter 1 - Steam)

I've gotten good enough at playing bass that I don't have to look down at my hands anymore. I've been practicing almost a year now. A Smashing Pumpkins song is playing from a CD in the stereo sitting on the windowsill in front of me and I'm playing along. I love this album even though I was only 2 when it came out in 1991. <music> I look out into the backyard as the rhythm of the song creates this gravity that is sucking me in. The way the drummer plays pulls my insides and my whole body feels like it's getting rocked to the beat.

I can kind of see my reflection in the window. I'm twelve, I have this boy-short haircut that sticks out all over the place and I'm wearing my rainbow tie dye pajama pants and an extra large black t-shirt with the periodic table of the elements on it, pretty dorky, I know, but, I don't care what I look like right now.

I feel like I am part of the music. The drums pound out the beat and the bass line I'm playing matches up with it. I like how *heavy* and loud it is. It stomps the stupid thoughts out of my head. The anger and tightness in my body I feel when I think of what the popular kids see when they look at me flies away. My muscles relax and I let the music pull me and push me.

I feel secure with the heavy instrument strapped to my body. I like the feeling of the dense wooden instrument in my hands and how it covers my body and the strap pulling down on my shoulder. Usually I don't know what to do with my hands, they awkwardly go in and out of my pockets when I'm standing around at school I feel so vulnerable, but now I just feel like completely locked-in. I start moving more with the rhythm. I can finally jump around when I play without messing up instead of having to sit down and look at each note. I spread one leg forward and one back and rock from foot to foot. I think about the Smashing Pumpkins bass player D'arcy Wretzky and how I want to look *that* cool. She's tall and thin though like a rocker is supposed to look, and I have this stupid curvy body. But right now I don't really care. I'm starting to feel cool. I start hopping as I yell along to the lyrics "I am one as you are three." "Tryna look for something in your city to burn."

I feel part of something - connected - connected to the other people playing the song, and to something even bigger. It's not a normal feeling for me. But right now I feel the layers of the song and my role in it.

The world outside of music scares me. It seems so disorganized and I don't have any idea where I'm supposed to fit in, not that I even want to. I want to stop existing out there and just live in this song where everything makes sense. I feel in control of myself and I start to feel like a rock star. I am IN the Smashing Pumpkins.

When the bass solo comes in I kick my right leg high in the air and swing the neck of the bass up. God it feels good to thrash around. At school I feel so clenched, so tight, but here I can let it all out. I do a headbang and as I'm coming up I see a man looking at me through the window. CRAP. I dive below the windowsill and on the way down register that he had a jumpsuit on. It's the oil man coming to fill the tank. Sitting under the window I reach above my head and turn the volume down on the stereo.

---No one was supposed to see that ---

(guitar theme, typewriter sfx...)

Dear Young Rocker,

I'm so so so happy you're discovering music. It's going to take you places you can't even imagine just yet and more importantly it's going to transform the pain you feel but don't know how to express to anyone around you. By the way - I'm the older you. You probably won't believe me but I'm the 30-year-old you. Weird, I know.

This podcast is partly your story which I'll let you get back to in a minute - a memoir of the anger, isolation, anxiety, body issues, and other crap of adolescence and how playing rock music transformed the pain of growing up a loner. Yours isn't a sad story, though - it's about survival and ultimately learning to flourish in your own weird way. It's also about a topic I've never heard discussed before - that it's not just boys who deal with anger and aggression issues even though when they act aggressively it's seen as a normal healthy part of growing up and are way more likely to be pushed toward an outlet for those feelings - like hey son bang on the drums or try out for

football, while those of us elsewhere on the gender spectrum get labeled as problematic or crazy if we dare let our anger out so we often end up pushing all that unplaced aggression inside ourselves until we internally combust. Because we're told it's normal for boys to want to hit others but not for the rest of us right? Wrong. I dedicate this story to anyone who's ever felt out of place or wrong or weird for something they can't change about themselves and found a home in music.

(Typewriting SFX)

Dear Young Rocker was born from an idea many of us share – that I wish I could go back and tell my younger self a lot of things. And that's the other half of this. I want to talk to not only the kid me but every kid out there who wants to be invisible, who feels strange in their growing body, who might imagine everyone hates them or that they hate everyone else and feel like no one on earth would ever get it. I want to tell them that they actually aren't alone. I want to tell them that the pressures put on them as a girl or a boy or whatever their gender identity or sexual orientation or race or class or culture - those pressures aren't always right or fair no matter what their parents say. And though this is my specific story, I hope it might help anyone who struggled or is struggling with those pressures. Music, specifically rock music, is what got me through it all and my dear young rocker it's time for you to tell that story...

Trigger warning for the rest of this episode for mental health and body issues, but I promise there's a happy ending... and to understand how important finding music was for me, you'll have to understand how badly I needed it first ... Ok young rocker back to you.

(transition)

So -- I have this thing where I want to be famous but I don't want anyone to actually see me. Maybe I can tell you a story from when I was little to explain.

One time my mom brought me along with her when she was shopping. (DRESSING ROOM MUSIC STARTS) While she was in the changing stall I played in the hallway with the big mirrors while the women were coming in and out. (DOORS) There was a leather ottoman to sit on for people waiting and I climbed up on it and jumped off over and over again. I pretended it was a tall building and I was actually *flying* down. I wanted to fly so bad back then. I thought about it constantly. So while I was doing this I said "I'm the flying girl. I'm so amazing! But no one even wants my autograph." And I sighed really loudly. (SIGH) I don't know how to explain it but I wanted all the women to see me -- but I didn't at the same time. I pouted and sat down on the ottoman. Then a woman came out of a stall and said "It's the flying girl! Can I have your autograph!" I turned bright red and my heart started racing. I dove to the floor (obviously a recurring theme in my life) and crawled into my moms changing room. I felt so ANGRY at the woman but I didn't know why. (ANGRY GUITAR STARTS) My face burned and I felt this thing like hot steam rising up in my chest and pushing its way out of me through my head and my limbs. It felt like I could hurt someone without trying.

BASS/Guitar Transition

It was the same feeling I had when Mikael said that dumb thing about me in Algebra class. OK, I have to explain my body to you first so you get it. It's like as soon as I got my period I went from a kid to a middle aged woman with these WOMANLY hips. By sixth grade I was *curvy* but not in the good symmetrical way. I wear an extra but my butt only fits extra and I hate it. It's like I'm two different people glued together in the middle. (9:14)

Sometimes, when I'm getting dressed I stand in front of the mirror and hold a big towel horizontally. I call this my magic trick. I slowly move the towel down until it divides me in half and I can only see the skinny top part of my body (9:29) and I imagine what someone who'd never seen all of me would think I look like if they just saw me like this and wonder how amazing it would feel to be that thin. Then I lift the towel up so it's covering my top half and all you can see is my eyes and my huge hips down through my big knees and thick ankles and it really

looks like I MUST have a fat stomach and wide shoulders and big boobs behind there. At least that way I would be symmetrical and not a freak.

(9:58) And I know the *hot girls* are all skinny not just half skinny. They don't have any sort of butts at all. I know this from overhearing the popular boys talk on the bus about which girls they want to hookup with. Not surprisingly it's the super stick thin ones and one kid even said "it doesn't even matter what the girls face looks like" (10:21) It's not that I want to be hot or impress those guys even, I just don't want my body to stand out so bad. It's so embarrassing. (10:29) I hate when i'm walking down the street and I get attention cause of my hips (HEY BABYYYY) "Those popular girls are shaped like boys" like my mom says, but the clothes at the store in the juniors section are for girls like that. (10:46) Skin tight super duper low rise hip-huggers are what's popular but I can't barely even get them on my body. (unghh). My mom buys me ugly jeans in the misses section because she says they *fit my shape* but they come up ABOVE my bellybutton which looks like so 90's aka LAME. No one wants to look like the 90's. Everyone wants to look like Britney with their pants so low they probably have to shave down there to wear them. I usually just wear those big giant wide leg boys JNCO jeans to hide my hips. I feel more comfortable because I know no one is looking at my body or me and I think these pants are cool. I look like a raver, whatever that means. Plus I kind of just like looking like a boy too.

When I think about it, I *really* hate being a girl. The problem with being female is your body is always being looked at and you get judged on it while boys get judged on how smart or tough or cool they are and those are all the things I WANT to be. I don't give a crap about trying to be pretty or cute or hot. Being hot is stupid – no one cares what you say or think. And you're just born pretty or not you don't earn it by doing anything interesting.

But ONE TIME one time I bought a pair of hip huggers and I wore them to school. Of course in Algebra class the funny kid Mikael called out for everyone to hear "Hey Chelsea I think you need to get some duct tape for that crack." Everyone laughed including my "best friend" I turned red and I tried really hard to stop existing.

That night and for weeks and weeks afterward I thought about Mikael's stupid comment and the steam rose up in me again. I thought about wrapping his ugly head in duct tape and smashing it against the desk. (thwack) In my bed I curled up in a ball and I ground my teeth together and clenched my fists. This feeling was so intense I felt nauseous, I didn't like having these thoughts they made me feel disgusted but I didn't know what to do and I knew I couldn't tell anyone --they'd think I was nuts.

(uncertain guitar cue)

I've had this feeling since I was pretty little. It wasn't anger or rage really but more like being completely out of control like it was happening *to me*. It made me imagine all kinds of stuff – stabbing my teachers with the classroom pointer stick if they corrected me in class was one. Especially my first grade teacher Mrs. Dimick. Everyday in first grade my stomach hurt really bad, it felt like I was super super hungry even though I ate breakfast. Eating a snack was the only thing that made it feel better so I hid them in my desk and would try to sneakily eat while she was talking. (BLAH BLAH BLAH MUNCH MUNCH) I went to the nurse almost every day for the burning but she never did anything. Eventually Mrs. Dimick didn't believe me anymore and got really mad that I was hiding snacks. Another teacher told me that if I was really hungry I could drink a bunch of water to feel better so I snuck off to the water bubbler whenever I could (BUBBLE GLUG) but she started not letting me do that either. So I would go to the bathroom to drink water and one time she followed me and yelled at me in the hall. When she found the snacks in my desk she dumped out my desk in front of the whole class and made me go get the vacuum from the janitor to clean it up while everyone stared. (VACUUM) I imagined hurting her a lot.

Sometimes when I was sitting there in class I imagined shooting my classmates with a bow and arrow. I knew they all liked each other and didn't like me. I took a pen and scratched out all their faces in the class picture we got at the end of the year. (SCRATCH) Especially stupid Sabrina. I ripped her face right out actually. I hated Sabrina the most because she was just so GIRLY. And something about that drove me nuts. When I watched the slow careful delicate way that she turned the pages in her trapper keeper and smoothed her hand over each one (SMOOTH) I wanted to punch her face. (PUNCH) And she batted her eyelashes at the boys like some kind of dumb cartoon. Girliness always seemed to me like putting a sign on yourself that says I'm dumb and stupid and weak and useless. Until 2nd or 3rd grade I got mistaken for a boy all the time and I kinda liked it. Even as a baby people would tell my mom "*what a beautiful boy you have*" and as a little kid I always had a bowl cut and liked to wear overalls or my karate uniform. I even smashed all my baby dolls heads against the floor because the angry feeling came

when I looked at how innocent and cute they were. I liked playing with my Power Rangers transformer robots way more.

Sometimes lying in bed at night the steam feeling would get really really bad and I'd imagine how it would feel to stab a knife into someone's body. I really didn't want to imagine this kind of stuff at all but it just pops into my head SO vividly. My breathing would get all tight and I could like really FEEL the knife in my hand and exactly how it would be slicing into flesh and scraping against bones. The whole time I'd be cringing under my covers and grinding my teeth. And - I kind of don't even want to say this part – but one time the awful feeling made me put my hands around the throat of a kitten we had and I squeezed until his pink tongue came out and he started to go limp. Luckily he woke right back up. I loved him. I didn't know why I did it but I felt like I couldn't help it. Something about how innocent he was it just made whatever evil thing is in me come to life.

And one time I kicked my mom, really hard. We were sitting on the couch and I just suddenly had this urge I could not control to kick out at her as hard as I possibly could -- and I did. She even got a bruise. I told her it was an accident 'cause I really didn't know how else to explain it. She still remembers it and says she knows I did it on purpose because I was testing her. Sometimes at night when the really bad stuff would pop into my head I'd imagine stabbing HER with the big knife in the kitchen, but not because she made me mad or anything more like because it was SO scary and SO horrible to think about that I couldn't stop it from coming into my brain, like a nightmare when you know it's a nightmare but you can't get yourself to wake up, but I was awake. I worried I'd do it in real life and not be able to stop. I knew I couldn't tell anyone that. So I never ever did.

Before a horseback riding lesson one day I was sitting in the bathroom looking out at the backyard and the steam feeling came out of nowhere. It was sudden and the world kind of seemed like it was red, not that I was seeing red but I was *feeling red* or something, suddenly I couldn't stop thinking about hitting my head as hard as I could on the windowsill. I didn't want to. But I did it. I got a big bump on my head.

It was really hard work keeping these feelings inside but I knew I had to try as hard as I could so I wouldn't hurt myself worse than that or do something to someone else. <PAUSE>

And that's why I wanted to play football.

When I was in second grade we got a green flyer in the mail advertising Pop Warner football and cheerleading sign ups. (paper sound) I asked if I could do football. My dad said no. He said I could get injured. He said you get hit in the chest a lot and I could hurt my "little boobies".

I don't remember if they asked why I wanted to do it. And if they did I probably said "just because" or something. I didn't even like sports. I just wanted to shove and tackle and run into boys as hard as I could. I took every chance I could get on the playground to push boys and punch them and arm wrestle them – no one would admit a girl beat them up. **** (triumphant guitar)*****

The feeling still happens but it's gotten a little less I think. I don't know where it comes from. Is it cause my parents got divorced when I was in first grade? I don't see the connection. I mean like A) they got divorced (PAPER RIPPED IN HALF) and B) I felt angry (ANGRY GUITAR) but when they told me they were breaking up I made sure to show to them that I wouldn't be bothered by it. And I did kind of feel a sense of relief. My mom had asked me a few times "should I divorce your dad" and I said *I dunno - no?* I knew it was weird between them because I felt extra shaky when the three of us were together like it was hard to breathe or something. (NERVOUS GUITAR) Sometimes around then it was hard to chew and swallow my food. I'd just mush it around my mouth until it was so gross I wanted to spit it out but my dad would get really mad. I liked just being with just my mom or just my dad better.

They sent me to a kid therapist and I just made sure to prove to the lady that I was a super good kid. I showed her my artwork and my stories. I had one about the place where all your lost socks and toys go. I made sure not to tell her all the stuff I worried about. When she asked if anything upset me I made sure to say nope in the most casual way I could. It worked. I didn't want my parents to think I was bad.

But wherever the anger comes from, when I'm playing bass (BASS/MUSIC COMES UP) my feelings combine with the loud music, they are absorbed in the noise and for a few minutes they all go away.

14 Dear Young Rocker,

I'm not going to talk down to you. You're smart. You've got ideas. But so far you've grown up in a little town of very boring close-minded people so you haven't been exposed to many ideas out there in the world yet, and there are some things I'd like you to know. **Mainly about gender and anxiety.** Let's start with anxiety:

First of all: Hate is just fear in disguise. Anytime you feel angry, you are probably actually scared of something. I know that being tough is important to you but just because you are fearful does not mean you aren't tough. You are VERY tough. Hiding the pain you're going through so well that no one notices anything wrong is a very hard thing to do. Your fear is not your fault though. You just have really-really bad anxiety and probably OCD too although you won't find this out til your 20's. You don't hate your school classmates you are *afraid* of their opinions of you. That's called social anxiety **get acquainted with it because it's going to shape a lot of your life but not always in a bad way I promise.** (20:48) Social anxiety (20:50) makes it so that instead of just opening your mouth and saying something or going and doing something your brain gets in the way and creates a million thoughts at once about what all the people around you are going to think of what you say or do. It tries to calculate the perfect response that will please everyone but it's like a calculator that can't stop calculating and eventually you can't say anything. You know how sometimes you KNOW you should say thank you to a grownup but for some reasons the words won't come out of your mouth and it feels like they're stuck in there and then you worry they think you're impolite? That's social anxiety. It's mostly in your head but there are physical things that happen too.

Your stomach pain is anxiety giving you peptic ulcers, but Mrs. DIMWIT (as your dad rightfully nicknames her) thought you were just misbehaving when you ate snacks and drank water. A good teacher would tell your parents to take you to the doctor. Oh and by the way you find out when you're older the same teacher had your aunt when she was little and used to lock her in the closet for getting up out of her seat – punishing her for her undiagnosed ADHD AND on top of that the evil principal had purposely put you in DIMWITS class when your parents went in and specifically asked that you wouldn't be with her. That witch had it out for you from the time she saw your last name on the class roster. But like many things you won't know all that til you're older. For now know that as chaotic and scary as the world seems, there *are* reasons for everything, even if they suck.

Mental health education should start kindergarten. Severe anxiety and OCD can push unwanted images into your mind, over and over again. Violent ones. That's what's happening to you – you are not a violent person no matter what kind of horrible visions come to you at night. Deep down you know that you'd never actually hurt another person or a kitten. And the anger you feel isn't actual anger, it's your anxiety constantly activating your fight or flight response and for you it's the fight part that's dominant – That's why you feel like you're going to explode. But for whatever reason the anger part of anxiety never gets talked about. I know you aren't even aware yet that other people aren't like this and it's totally unfair that you have to live with it but look mental illness makes your brain into a kind of like messed up TV or computer that shows the wrong thing at the wrong time. I know you feel like this thing is in control right now but I promise you will beat it... So where'd it come from? Well genetics partly, plus your sensitive mind absorbed the anxiety from your stressed out parents who were going through a troubled marriage and divorce for your first six years of life, just like most people's parents are stressed out when they are young - we all end up taking on some of our parents pain even when we are infants or not even born yet because of our deep physical and psychological connection to them. So even though you will get angry at mom and dad for having this effect on you when you are a little older you will eventually realize they definitely didn't mean to do it just like you didn't mean to make any of your own mistakes, and you will forgive them. Right now you know girls aren't supposed to feel this type of aggression and anger, so you hide it. And that brings me to my next topic...Gender

See, you might not believe me but you don't actually hate being a girl - **As a shy kid you just hate the sexual attention drawn to your body because of your gender – that totally sucks** and it's OK to hate that. You *also hate* what a girl is *supposed to* look like and act and dress like – and that's fine too. Society and mass media has told you that femininity equals wearing dresses and makeup and having low intelligence and being incapable of just about anything - unfortunately at this stage you've bought into that because it's all you've seen. You think that's what it means to be a girl thus you hate being one. But luckily that equivalency is totally false **in the real world.**

You want to be taken seriously and you want to be cool and tough and you think being a boy would make that easier – sorry but there’s no easy way out -- boys deal with insecurities about their bodies and their image too. And I know you don’t know the difference right now but you don’t actually want *to be* a boy. If you did, you would be transgender and we would be having a completely different conversation – I know you haven’t even heard the word trans yet but it basically means your gender is different than the one people tell you you are. And to you, it might feel that way right now because you HATE girliness but it’s the surface idea of what a girl is that you hate. If you were trans it would be a different and deeper feeling which I am not qualified to describe to you. All I know is you hate your female body *because* it’s under more intense and sexual scrutiny than you imagine a male body would be -- you don’t actually hate your body in and of itself. Be nice to your body, you need it. The extra unwanted attention is just a crappy thing that everyone who looks remotely female has to figure out how to deal with in their own way. For now, you hide yourself under baggy clothes and that’s totally ok. And it’s OK to just wear boy’s clothes cause you like how you look. It’s even OK to wear a dress and makeup one day if you randomly feel like it and baggy jeans and t-shirts other days or even to mix it up and wear some masculine looking clothes and feminine looking clothes at the same time. There is nothing wrong with being unsure of this stuff. Keep figuring it out and by experimenting and keep changing your definition of yourself for as long as you need. What feels right one day might change tomorrow. You can keep on changing for forever if you want. You have all the time in the world kid and don’t let anyone tell you any different.

Instead of running away from what you are show them all that just because you’re a girl doesn’t mean ANYTHING about you as a person. Someday you’ll even stop hating the girly girl Sabrina’s of the world and realize everyone gets to express their gender in their own way -- even if it’s like totally cheesey and unoriginal.

But it doesn’t matter what anyone else is doing, it matters how you feel about yourself and you deserve to feel beautiful, even though I know you hate being called that.

Know it or not you are loved, you are safe and you are on the path you are meant to be on, and there’s so many other kids out there who feel just like you. And I am so excited for you to find music. Of course I want to take all your pain away -- but it’s actually all the struggles you’re going through now that will make music feel SO good. Those perfect popular kids don’t know what they’re missing.

Theme song with no vocals

If you liked this first episode of Dear Young Rocker and can’t wait to find out what happens next, well guess what? Episode 2 is available to stream or download right now! We’ll be back next Wednesday with episode 3 and keep releasing a new episode every Wednesday through the rest of the season.

Next time on Dear Young Rocker, young Chelsea will tell us how she found the love of her life – the bass.

Credits:

-Dear Young Rocker comes to you from Double Elvis Productions and is executive produced by Jake Brennan of Disgraceland. It was created and written by me Chelsea Ursin. I also wrote the theme song. Production, sound design, and additional music are by myself, Sean Cahalin, and James Bridges -- who is also the audio engineer.

Please leave a review if you like the show!

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