



No Doubt

"Just a Girl"

Tragic Kingdom

10/1995

Trauma Records

Just a Girl

Elizabeth Ditty

Take this pink ribbon off my eyes, I'm exposed and it's no big surprise

The familiar notes of the No Doubt song trill from my minivan's speakers, and I reach for the dial to turn it up. As I prepare to rock out to this suburban-punk-pop anthem of my adolescence, I think about the songs my mom used to sing along to on the radio, always tuned to the Oldies station back then. John Denver. Barry Manilow. The Carpenters. I wonder if she ever shout-sang anything.

I'm driving my five-year-old son to zoo camp, as the days of summer dwindle toward a brand-new chapter called kindergarten. My daughter sits across the aisle in her own car seat, two years old, wishing she too were going to zoo camp, and kindergarten, even though she has no idea what either of those things is, beyond the fact that her brother gets to go and she doesn't.

My memories of my mother's singing juxtapose with the future-memories of my children's mother's singing and create an odd feeling that probably only has a name in another language. What do you call a memory that will belong to someone else?

Don't you think I know exactly where I stand? This world is forcing me to hold your hand

I'm doing my best to find the path to the sky tram, so my daughter can see a baby giraffe, since she's slept with not one but two giraffe rattles since she was old enough to grasp things, and everyone looks like they understand where they're going better than I do. I've taken the day off from work to join the stay-at-home moms counting down the days until they get a few more hours to breathe easier between chaotic bookends. I'm not sure any of us ever breathe that easy, but it's a nice thought. In any case, I'm not sure how I got where I am, nor do I have any idea where I'm going, and I am forced to admit to myself that I have no clue where the sky tram is. I think to myself, not for the first time and not in the first place, "I wish they had better signage here." It might make a nice epitaph someday.

The moment that I step outside, so many reasons for me to run and hide

A few weeks later, my son finds out who his teacher is, and I try to remember the details of her classroom, but only one thing really comes to mind. During kindergarten roundup, while my son sprinted through the hallways like he already owned the place, I counted windows. They're in every classroom and every door. My heart was in my throat the whole time because I know none of them are bulletproof. Now, it's settled back into my gut and seems to have made camp there, below its old home, and the illusion of breathing easier has dissipated for good.

I can't do the little things I hold so dear, 'cause it's all those little things that I fear

My son and his preschool buddies all go to different schools now. In another time, goodbye would have been forever, but now I'm Facebook friends with the other mothers. So he's run off to play, and the other mother closes the door, and I drive away leaving a sliver of my heart bleeding on the doorstep of her home. Three hours to myself. I return ten minutes early, and only because I stopped for gas.

Oh, I've had it up to here! Oh, am I making myself clear?

I read an article the other day about how yelling permanently damages children, giving rise to anxiety disorders and confidence issues. It feels like a direct rebuke, possibly written by my own mother under a pseudonym to throw me off track. "You yell at him so much," she once told me. I kept my mouth shut but thought, "Do you remember raising me?" The article didn't say how much yelling was required to obliterate a child's heart. Nor does it advise me on this: If I can't yell, what do I do with all this rage? I make a note to grab a bottle of wine on my way home.

What's my destiny? What I've succumbed to is making me numb

Since 2016, I've been trying to come up with a way explain to my children what "grab 'em by the pussy" means. You know, in case it ever comes up. I can guarantee you, no parenting book or scholarly article has an answer for that either. These days I mostly find myself pondering the logistics. How does one even accomplish such a thing? Last I checked, there's no handle down there.

Guess I'm some kind of freak 'cause they all sit and stare with their eyes

"She dares to be different," my fifth-grade teacher told my parents, after she'd scrawled "eccentric" on my report card. I'm not sure she meant it as a good thing, but my parents seemed amused, as if it wasn't anything they didn't already know. In any case, I've never lived it down.

When my daughter started preschool, just after she turned two, one of the teachers, well-meaning, pulled me aside and said, "We've been working with her on not saying 'no.'"

And I laughed and replied, "She might be getting mixed messages then, because I've been encouraging her to say 'no,' and with gusto."

I worry about what might be scrawled on their report cards someday, and how much of it might be my fault.

Your rule of thumb makes me worry some

Anyway, I pray to a god of this increasingly clockwork universe to please let their teachers be kind. Because I don't have much patience anymore. There's too much work to do. I recall my suburban-girl rebellion fondly, the height of which culminated in a shouting match over a spaghetti strap tank top. I think about how my parents had it pretty good. And I think about how a bunch of old men are trying to revoke what I thought were irrevocable rights—my rights, my daughter's rights. (Oh, there's that rage again.)

I think about how we have to fix everything that went wrong before my kids are old enough to see how far we fell and how hard we hit the ground. I think about how we'll fail, and about how we have to try anyway. And if that isn't parenting, I don't know what is. It feels like attempting the world's greatest cover-up on a daily basis. Maybe a couple of bottles then.

Oh I'm just a girl, my apologies

The song rails toward its end. I turn the radio back down. My kids both stare out their respective windows, unfazed by my behavior. This is normal to them. This is who and what their mother is. What else would she be? Indeed. What else?

Oh, I've had it up to here!