

Dear Hozier,

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It's about time I apologize for all the many thousands of times I have pronounced your name incorrectly. We live in the digital age and I have also seen you perform live, so I really have no excuse for the lazy, American way I blur the syllables together. It's just that it is comforting, and it feels like falling in love with you all over again. It feels like a long stretch of Idaho road where the fields are the color of sand and honey and my mom is singing to herself while I have my head rested against the cool window of her blue Rav4. It's only eight in the morning and we've been on the road three hours already. And I, I am listening to your first album, self-titled Ho-zi-er, all the way through for the first time. I'd heard Take Me to Church about a million times on the radio – and in fact it was probably some Utah radio DJ who I first heard pronounce your name with the sliding *zh* – and I had long loved Work Song in the way that we all love Work Song. But a few weeks before, on one of those Spotify playlists that recommends songs to you, I had first heard Sedated and it felt as though I had been struck by lightning. Or, to borrow your own words, it was “just a little rush, babe/ to feel dizzy, to derail the mind of me.” And all the sudden I had to know more about you, this man with an achingly beautiful voice who sang of church and drugs and teeth. So, I guess saying your name as I have been – *Hozher* – is a bad and comforting habit that I can't seem to break. And, at least in part, isn't that what this song is about?

Every Sunday night (or Monday night, depending on bank holidays and how they affect my work week) I take a gummy Melatonin vitamin. The gummy tastes like strawberry in the way that candies always do: it's the shadow on the wall of the cave rather than the real thing, if I were to borrow your metaphor, which you borrowed from Plato. Each vitamin contains only two and a half milligrams of melatonin, which is, as my doctor so eloquently stated, the amount they give babies in hospitals. It's not enough to knock me, a fully grown adult, out, but after an hour I begin to feel drowsy, and when I crawl into my bed, I slip easily into sleep.

I don't do drugs. Never have. Not even marijuana and barely even alcohol. I am stubborn about taking painkillers, in that I won't take them, not even ibuprofen, unless pushed by another person or a pain I simply can't breathe around. In a way, the fact that I have never done drugs embarrasses me. Maybe it's the roots of D.A.R.E gone wrong or too much TV, but it seems like everyone does drugs. At least smokes weed, right? It makes me feel uptight, like I am not very much fun, and that ultimately no one likes me that much. I know these are feelings that a 15-year-old should have, but I'm 25 and I still feel these things. But even when given the opportunity, I reject it every time. Why? Because of my dad.

Sleep does not come naturally to me. Or perhaps it's more appropriate to say that falling asleep doesn't come naturally. Unmedicated, it takes me an hour, minimum, to fall asleep. Often more. This was true even when I was a child, bookish and quiet and prone to bursts of worry. It

wasn't anxiety that kept me up, but the wakefulness itself made me anxious, because everyone else in the house was in bed, asleep seemingly without trouble, and this was just one more way in which I was different, defective. I know how much it bothered me because recently I found an old note from my mother, addressed to my four- or five-year-old self, which reads: "Dear Emily, I'm sorry you feel stressed, and I'm sorry you have a hard time falling asleep. I'm proud of you for facing your challenges. I love you -- Mom."

I don't speak to my dad much. We have an odd relationship. I'll confess that I'm afraid of him and always have been, though it was both so much worse and not nearly so bad when I was a child. Maybe this memory is so ingrained because it was when I first attached fear and intensity to my father. Maybe it's nothing like that at all, but it's one of those early childhood memories that is burned into my nervous system more clearly than it is my actual memory. And whenever I am offered anything resembling drugs, my body is back in this memory and I say no, because I made something like a promise.

I know now how appropriate it is that that note came from my mother. As a kid, you think everything comes easily to your parents because you're not equipped to understand their humanity. As an adult, I know that my mother has struggled to sleep for at least as long as I've been alive. She lays awake like I do, trying and trying and failing. For years she blamed my dad's snoring, but since their kids have all moved out of the house, my dad mostly sleeps in another bedroom, and as far as I know, she doesn't sleep better. Surrendering your consciousness isn't supposed to be a skill. It's supposed to just happen. For me and my mother, sometimes it just doesn't.

It happened at my maternal grandparents' house in the countryside of McNary, Louisiana. This was a place that no one in my immediate family liked very much. My grandparents were unpleasant people at the best of times and that unpleasantness turned to abuse very quickly. My brothers and I always stepped lightly – one time my brother Ian swallowed a mouthful of milk that had soured because he would rather do that than spit it out on my grandmother's wood floors as he walked back to his room at night. Point being, we hated it and my mom only went out of familial duty, so I can't imagine my father was overly fond of it. He hardly spent any time there. Sometimes this was because he was visiting his own family an hour or so away, and sometimes there isn't an explanation for why he wasn't there. He just wasn't. So, the memory in part strikes me because he *was* there at this house and, not only that, he was the only parent present, which was unusual. It might have been different for my brothers, but I, at least, never spent much time alone with my dad.

I can't speak for my mother, but I know that for me, the problem is only partly inherent to myself. For two years, I lived in New York, working long hours of manual labor, sometimes waking up at seven, walking dogs in the morning, miles upon endless miles around the park, then spending my afternoons shifting and organizing heavy boxes. I'd collapse into bed at midnight, or more likely one a.m. I don't remember having trouble sleeping in those days. So

theoretically, were I willing to drive my body to its exhaustion point every day, I wouldn't ever need melatonin. But now I have a cushy desk job, and I try to do a half hour of yoga every day. Those two years taught me to love my body, to appreciate its strength, but I understand its breaking points better now. Too often in New York I risked falling apart. I don't anymore. In exchange, I sacrifice my easy, dreamless sleep.

We were coming back from the creek in the woods behind the house. My grandparents lived on 80 acres of land, though we only ever saw about ten of them, including the five acres around the house that my grandfather had cleared, ripping up my great-grandmother's sprawling flowerbeds because he needed everything tidy and containable. He couldn't fully clear the land, though, there were these *giant* trees dotting the landscape. I have no idea what kind they were, but some were what felt like hundreds of feet tall. These trees comforted forest-desperate children as we walked the couple hundred yards from the house to the tree line. I remember these trees like they were my grandparents, sometimes I think I remember them better than my grandparents. I was always so stunned by how massive they were, and I loved that height so fiercely. It made me feel like things were going to be okay, if there were such things in the world as trees like this. I loved the creek, too. We were only ever allowed to play in a small section of the creek – and even as I write this my heart aches for the forest children when could have been, the way we could have known that wilderness if only my grandfather were a different type of man who protected the forest for the delights of children, rather than opening it up for squirrel hunters and limiting where children could walk safely. Our section of the creek had a sloping beach with soft sand and cold, murky water that we had to constantly watch for snakes. It was lovely, and in this memory, we were leaving it behind to return to the house. We were just coming out of the woods.

That's another thing my mother and I share: vivid, endless dreams. We poke fun at her for it now, the way conversations with my mother often start with her saying, "Listen to this dream I had last night." It's usually boring to listen to people's dreams, but me and my siblings are frequent cast members in my mom's subconscious, and in a way, it's comforting to know that someone worries about your well-being to the point of dreaming about situations in which you're in danger.

I can't think of anything that prompted my father to say what he said. It might have been a joke of one brother's or a question from the other. But he told us, very seriously, that we needed to be careful with drugs and alcohol because addiction runs in our family. I don't know exactly the first half of what he said, but I am positive of the latter. *Addiction runs in our family*. In hindsight it was a rather progressive thing for my father to say, implying an understanding of addiction that goes beyond just an individual's choices. I feel like my father might have been looking at me as he said it. Impossible to say through the haze of memory, but I am certain I was holding my father's hand. Not because I remember that exactly, but this was the time in my life when my father was always holding my hand when guiding me from one place to the next. As if he could

protect me from squirrel hunters and addiction with a firm grip on my creek-wrinkled hand the same way he could steer me away from traffic if he held my hand on a sidewalk.

Everyone dreams because dreams are part of the REM cycle, but it's less common to remember your dreams. I almost always do. As an adult, I know it's because I have a panic disorder. I'm medicated for that now, but the medication itself causes vivid dreams. As a child, my parents tried to soothe me by telling me that my trouble sleeping -- and my frequent dreams -- was due to my particularly active brain. I interpreted that as a compliment toward my intelligence. I don't know if my parents meant it that way. I know that I interpret it differently now. Having a so-called more active brain doesn't mean I'm smarter than the masses of people without sleep problems. It just means I have less control.

Sometimes I wonder if there was magic in what my father said as he was holding my hand that day. As if through that skin-to-skin contact he got his message deeper into my heart than my brothers'. They've had a much more relaxed, and in their way probably healthier, relationship with drugs and alcohol than I have, not addicts but not opposed down to a stinging in my nerves when confronted with the opportunity to take them. I also wonder at the magic, because somehow this conversation feels like a promise when I am also fairly certain I didn't say anything in response. The best I can recall he was talking to my brothers, and even if he wasn't, I didn't really talk to my dad unless forced to. I might have said, "Okay," if I said anything, so why does it feel so binding? I wouldn't call my dad magical. He's a rather logical, serious man, but in this memory, standing under those so tall trees, it feels like he's Merlin or Odin or the demon at the crossroads, and the two of us have made a pact.

My mind is a contrarian; it doesn't stop when I tell it to. It's a sprinter trapped in a marathon, dropping only when it exhausts itself, while all the other runners veer around it. It's a roadblock. A mile marker. I am still waiting for it to cross the finish line. This is why I have panic attacks. It's why I can't fall the fuck asleep.

I know, with my adult knowledge of family issues, that he was thinking of his brother, my Uncle Ricki. Ricki was an addict – meth, mostly, I think – and it ruined his lungs to the point where he was trailer-bound with just his oxygen tank during the last few years of his life. Ricki wasn't the only family member with addictions, but I think he was the one my father loved the most. I don't remember my Uncle Ricki very well, except for the semi-truck he once parked in front of our house and the giant tattoo of the wolf jumping through his chest, but I have heard a hundred stories of Ricki and they all go the same way. He had a heart of gold. He was a good person, a good brother, a good uncle who seemed like was always picking up and helping my family in ways I am distraught I don't remember. Ricki Lynn, my dad always called him affectionately, first and middle name. The same way I call out to my nieces and nephews, as I'll never be able to get enough of the magnificent fact of their existence. Ricki Lynn, his little brother, who he had to watch dying for the better part of my life.

I try, I really do try, to handle it in a healthy way. The medication I take doesn't stop me sprinting, but it sets up an obstacle course, hurdles and climbing walls, to prevent me from gaining a dangerous amount of momentum. So while I have fewer panic attacks, and that's great, if I want to fall asleep I have to rely on what doctors and experts call sleep hygiene. This means I'm not supposed to sit or lay on my bed unless I'm preparing to sleep. I am supposed to go to bed at the same time each night and wake up at the same time each morning. For an hour before bedtime, I shouldn't look at screens, even though it feels like *everything* is on screens. And occasionally I take a melatonin vitamin. I'm bad at all of it. I can't help but feel envious of my mom, who has a prescription for ambien. My dad, perpetually stressed though he doesn't like to admit it, just takes allergy medicine, the kind that makes you drowsy. I am afraid of substance dependence but worry it's my inheritance, my lot in life.

This wasn't the only time my dad used Ricki as a cautionary tale. Once, I ended up hiking with my dad and Ricki in the mountains around the Salt Lake Valley. This is another thing that I can't understand how it happened, because it was just me, Dad, and Ricki. Not my brothers or my mom, and that just wasn't how family outings happened. But there we were, hiking up a hill, and my dad and I had to stop to wait for Ricki who was struggling to keep up with us. I couldn't have been more than seven. My dad looked at me and said, out of Ricki's earshot, "This is why you don't smoke. You don't want to end up like Ricki."

I could get addicted to a lot of things. If my brain can't even moderate itself enough to fall asleep, I can't imagine how it would react to chemical stimulation. Maybe it wouldn't. Maybe I'm overcautious. But I like to think I was born overcautious to balance out my bullet train brain.

I wonder if this broke my father's heart. I don't know much about my dad's family; his choice, for whatever reason, was that his children didn't spend much time with his family. A place and people of painful memories, maybe, or painful current day realities. So, I don't know his relationships with his siblings, but it isn't hard to tell when someone loves their brother. I have two, and I know what it sounds like, feels like, looks like. So, did it break my father's heart, using his beloved brother as the wretched thing you didn't want to aspire to in order to try and protect his youngest daughter in the way he felt he could? Addiction isn't something he could hold my hand against, not there on that mountain, not there under the too-tall trees of McNary, Louisiana. But there was Ricki.

"Sedated," your song, has many possible interpretations, and I know I've chosen the most literal. There's more there, like how modern society is numb to the violence and suffering taking place elsewhere because we're all so damn good at escapism. There's an interrogation of that tired trope, that addicts should or can be saved from their addiction by their loved ones, when the truth is that addiction is a more complicated monstrosity than we'd like to believe. That's not even digging into the music, which is beautiful to the point of devastation, like all your music is. I go weak at the knees when I hear that line, that breath before the plunge into the chorus, that goes: "Any way to distract and sedate/ Adding shadows to the walls of the cave."

One day I might tell my father that I don't hate Uncle Ricki, that I don't think any less of him because he was an addict. These aren't conversations he and I have, but I wonder if that's something my father needs to hear. I rather love my Uncle Ricki, actually, and when he died, I didn't have anything to write on his virtual obituary page that would have been as real and full of love as he was. Ultimately, I didn't write anything. Perhaps I should have written this. Or perhaps I should have just thanked him for being my dad's brother, for my dad obviously loved him very, very much in order to ache and bleed the way he did over how Ricki suffered. I don't know. I don't know. I'll spend my lifetime wondering about my family and the odd way we were put together, but the meaning will always be thin. You can't hold family in something as meager as meaning.

But how can I not think literally about sedation when I am so frequently sleepless? We see what is most familiar to us, the way you can find human faces in the bark of trees. I think about it so constantly that I dream about it, over and over again. So maybe I should ask my mother what her dreams have been like lately.