

Dear Hozier,

“Screaming the name of a Foreigner’s God, the purest expression of grief.” No. This isn’t true.

The purest expression of grief is a 35-second phone call in which your brother can only say, “He’s gone. He’s gone. He’s gone.” He being 10, 108, 800 seconds, 168, 480 minutes, 2,808 hours, 117 days, not even four months old. He being a baby. He being your nephew.

The purest expression of grief is a series of phone calls that look like:

[oldest brother]
[neighbor]
[oldest brother]
[second brother]
[oldest brother]
[oldest brother]
[oldest brother]
[oldest brother]
[oldest brother]
[oldest brother]
[mother]
[neighbor]

It is a series of text messages to nine different people that just read: “He died.”

It is sprinting up the hill of your mother’s front lawn in dirt-stained sneakers and pushing past the police officers that you can’t even see so that you can hug your mother, hug your mother, hug your mother. It is sitting with her at her kitchen table and holding her hand while she tells two police officers and a detective the story of a disease that didn’t even last a year. Telling them the impossible fact of how she performed CPR on her grandson. The police will compress this story into half a page of well-organized notes; the bald police officer who is such a masculine stereotype has the most beautiful handwriting you’ve ever seen. You cannot make eye contact with them. You look at this handwriting or you stare at your hand intertwined with your mother’s. You both wear a silver bracelet engraved with your nephew’s initial. It hasn’t even been a year since his diagnosis. The next day your mother will ask you, “What’s that line from *Rent*? 525,600 minutes? I keep thinking how he didn’t even get that.” You grip the steering wheel and think of the bagels on the floorboard.

The purest expression of grief is being tasked to check on your two-year-old nephew who has been alone in his room throughout the ambulances and the screaming and the breaking of baby gates. No one has had a moment to check on him, so you slip into his room and slip off your dirt-stained sneakers and crawl into bed with him. He is still asleep, somehow, and in his sleep, he turns to you, tiny and only two, because you are the scent and shape of warmth, comfort, and laughter. Aunt-shaped. Love-shaped. You lay your head on the pillow above his and watch the quilt to make sure he is breathing. His chest rises and falls, rises and falls, rises and falls. This is the last perfect moment before you know. Your mother texts you “come see me.”

The purest expression of grief is standing on the front porch with your mother. She says he didn't make it or he's gone or he died or he passed or some other turn of phrase that has blipped from your memory, though the meaning sticks. Everyone tells you that moments are long when you are in suffering, but no one tells you that each moment is like a stich. Puncturing you on the way in and on the way out. Your mother starts to sob. "I did everything I could to save him. I promise." You tell her that you know she did. Of course she did. You will work with your oldest brother on a plan to get your mother into grief counseling.

It is that after hearing how your nephew died, you still have to pee. That's the first thing you do in this new life. It is pacing from the base of the stairs to the dining room wall, where the masculine police officer can't see you, and crying softly, so the masculine police officer can't hear you. It is hugging your oldest brother so tightly. It is holding your sister-in-law as she sobs; she is several inches shorter than you. It is holding your second brother as he sobs; he is eight inches taller than you, so you stand on the very tips of your toes to reach him because he deserves to be held. It is sitting on the grass in the shorts that will always be *the shorts you were wearing when he died* and the grass is poking your thighs and your brother is making noises of anguish and pain, somewhere between sobbing and screaming. He'll break out in these noises periodically for the next twenty-four hours. His best friend has driven over, sits at his right side. Your oldest brother sits on his left side. You sit behind. None of you have any words to offer beyond the usual rote phrases *I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I know. I've got you. This isn't fair.* It won't take but twelve hours for these phrases to turn molten in your ears, making you angry, angry, angry.

It is your two-year-old nephew saying, "Party!" when he sees how many people are at the house the following morning. It is crying alone in a liquor store parking lot because the back seat of the car you're in is filled with baby toys your sister-in-law couldn't stand to have in the house anymore. It is standing in the room he died in, on the night he died, cleaning up before your brother and sister-in-law get home and scattered about your feet are oxygen tubing, an oxygen monitor, the epinephrine the paramedics used to try and revive him, and a single baby sock. You cry as you stack all these things in the guest room closet.

It is staying up to watch tv with your brother and every few minutes he says something like "I just can't believe it" or "we need to send flowers to the nurses" or "I'm worried how her dad will respond" or "what if I will be sad every day for the rest of my life." It is the tenderness that allows you to breathe again when you see he's finally fallen asleep around three am. It is your own inability to sleep because every time you get to the brink of sleep you remember. He's dead. It's being woken up after an hour of sleep because your sister-in-law is sobbing and screaming upstairs. It is waking up each day and your first thought is the same. He's dead. It is the primal comfort you feel holding your cats the first time you go home again.

It is the one, two, three, four, five, six, however many times you stared into candles while his life was in danger from the disease because fire is the only god you know how to pray to anymore. And yet it is also praying to God as you drive to give everything to you instead. A damaged heart, cancer, the need for a lung transplant. Anything that is needed to balance out the cosmic scales of health – you'll take it if it means he lives a long and beautiful life. As you drive you also wonder if the key to a Subaru Forester is strong enough to break open a human chest,

because it's all you have and you want to spill out your life and send it to him. But the outcome is the same. He's dead. And you can't help but wonder if all the other Christians are right and that God really does hate you because you are queer and every word you pleaded in prayer was a mark against your nephew. You can't help but believe that God never wants to hear from monster like you. It is believing, at the same time as all of this, that your nephew is in heaven, and he is being looked after by other family members that have passed.

The purest expression of grief is exhaustion that reaches even the fluid in your body making you so dehydrated that you can't drink enough water. You feel thirsty all day long. It is buying a dress for the funeral. It is crying while folding your laundry because this is the first time you are alone for an extended period of time, and you don't want to be around anyone else while you cry like this.

It is all the *nevers* that accompany his death. It is all the people finding meaning where you can't find any and don't want to hear any. It is this heavy weight that presses in from all sides. It is having to go back to work on Monday and the laundry that still needs doing and the cats that still need feeding. The purest expression of grief is that life goes on when babies die and at some point you just have to go on with it.