

Dear Hozier,

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I think in one of my earlier letters, I referenced “Cherry Wine” as one of the sexier songs on this album. Having just spent ten minutes reading its lyrics and watching the music video, featuring Saorise Ronan’s wrenching performance, I’m confident that I was either thinking of another song or was, at the time of writing, possessed by the deranged spirit that occasionally overtakes my body whose sole mission is to make me look like an idiot.

Both my parents are survivors of childhood domestic violence. It has taken me weeks too long to sit down and write this, because I only realized this fact – at least in the ability to articulate as such: a fact – when I took another look at the *Cherry Wine* lyrics. I’ve always known that my parents were abused as children, but it was a fact that danced around the edges of my family unit unless my mother occasionally brought it to the center with stark statements such as “I was beaten every time I wet the bed as a child, which was most nights.” Even after she’d place a hand on it, the fact would dance away again. It was never something I could hold onto it until *Cherry Wine* glued it to my palms – *hot and fast and as angry as she can be*, you say. Both my parents are survivors of childhood domestic violence.

Because wow, this song isn’t sexy at all, huh? No, this song is about domestic violence, and if you didn’t get that from the lyrics’ direct references to closed fists, crimes, and blood, well, there’s Saorise Ronan looking at us dead-on while she wipes off her make-up, wincing, revealing a black eye. And then, to top it off, there’s the hashtag Face Up to Domestic Violence, which closes out the music video. The only way to miss the point is to pay attention solely to the music, which is charmingly accompanied by the occasional twittering of songbirds. This has something to do, or so the internet tells me, with how you recorded the song on the roof of a burned-out hotel. Which is weird and chaotic, but you know what? This is the last song before the bonus tracks, and at this point I’m not surprised by your antics. I’m more surprised you didn’t record “Like Real People Do” while standing knee-deep in bog water.

I’m at a loss to say anything memorable or touching about this song. Thank God I have no personal experiences with domestic violence to offer up on the altar of internet oversharing. I’ve been trying to remember the first time it occurred to me that people in intimate relationships could intentionally hurt one another. I can’t. It’s troubling to think I’ve always known it, but I can’t pinpoint a moment of epiphany. I also can’t remember when I learned about death. I guess some things you just know.

And, like, I’m not even sure if domestic violence is the right term to apply to beating your children? Is that something we only reserve for intimate partners? If so, what about the term Intimate Partner Violence? And what do the words even fucking mean when both my parents were attacked by the people meant to love them more than air. It was their fathers who hurt them. Mostly. My mom also mentions being sent outside by her mother to pick her own switch off the

tree to be switched with. My grandmother's sick joke was to call the switch Mega, because Mega Hurts. Like megahertz, which is a measure of frequency. There's no unit to measure the frequency of child abuse. It was their fathers, mostly, though. That I do know.

My mom has a younger sister, who, when I was five or six, divorced her husband. I don't remember much about this incident except that I was very concerned for my aunt. At twenty-seven years old, I don't know the details of their relationship, whether it was at all abusive or simply a marriage that didn't work out; no one has ever told me, and I've never asked, my instinct to mind my own business outranking my natural curiosity. At five or six, I definitely didn't know. Someone must have explained the concept of divorce to me, and it's possible they told me that the process itself would be difficult for my aunt and her three kids; hence my concern. It's also possible that I assumed, with my imperfect understanding of the world, in some ways too old for my age and in some ways too naive, that the only reason for someone to leave a marriage was if their partner was hurting them. Again, hence my concern. I have no other memories of it except that when my aunt remarried a few years later, this time to an extremely tall cowboy with a booming laugh and an endless capacity to fling me and my cousins into the air and then catch us, I passed judgment and was satisfied.

For my mother I can, in some small way, testify to the fact that it was her father who hurt her, because I met that man, and he was the type of man who took no issue with hurting others. I watched him hurt my cousin, blowing an airhorn directly in his ear. My cousin was six. I watched him hurt my grandmother over and over and over again in every way he could. Physically, emotionally, financially, spiritually, socially. He almost killed my grandmother several times. Literally, bringing her to the brink of death. I never saw him hit my mother, but I was there when he threw us out of the house at 3am because he was tired of us being there. I didn't do anything in that situation because A) I was a child myself and B) I didn't know enough to recognize this as a form of abuse, only that it felt bad. Bad, bad, bad. I wonder what I would have done if I had seen him hit my mother. Today, my grandfather is dead. He's been dead the better part of a decade, but all those years also mean that I am older and I can now say the words *my mother is a survivor of childhood domestic violence*. I would say to him, she is the survivor of your violence and then I don't know what I would do because I think of all the times I was polite to him, because he was my terrifying grandfather, and even though that's what my mother told me to do, was it a betrayal in her eyes? Or was she just so scared that he would hurt me as he hurt her, because he saw children and needed, wanted, enjoyed shaping them into pain and misery. I don't know what I would do if I saw my grandfather now, but it would probably be violent.

Cut to less than a decade later. I'm in middle school, seventh or eighth grade. My exposure to popular music was, shall we say, limited. I figured out MP3 players, as with most technological developments, a little later than my peers, and for a while the only new music I heard was on the radio or blaring over the loudspeakers in my school's gym while we ran laps around the squeaky hardwood. Or maybe one of my friends pulled it up on YouTube. My naivete

was embarrassing then, but I find it charming now. I relate to the Amish tradition of rumspringa more than I probably should.

Anyway, somehow I heard this song called “Face Down” by Red Jumpsuit Apparatus. It, like Cherry Wine, is about an abusive relationship, though from an outside perspective. I recently heard it again while Sally and I were at a local mall, and it was a little shock, like touching an electrical outlet after crossing the carpet in socks. I’d forgotten about it, as I’ve forgotten a great number of things from my middle school days. Figures it would resurface in the mall, already a site of mid-aughts nostalgia, that to add insult to injury insisted on playing music fifteen years out of date. I shudder to think that Red Jumpsuit Apparatus is making a comeback along with low-rise jeans and halter tops, but I guess that’s fashion.

For my father, I can’t in any way testify to his suffering. It wasn’t even my father who told me he was abused. It was my mother, who finally stopped me in a rant about being annoyed with my father to try and explain some things about him to me. Not to forgive him, she said, but just to understand. All she said was that my grandfather, my dad’s biological father, was abusive and that “It was bad. Really bad.” Five words to stop me in my tracks. *It was bad. Really bad.* The only thing I’d known about my dad’s childhood up to this point was that he was extremely poor. “Holes in the ceiling kind of poor,” my mom said in an attempt to really get it across to me. Of course, it was also my mom who told me this. My dad has mentioned offhand that he was poor, but he’s never said anything to me about abuse or his biological father. I’m not even sure he knows I know. And what am I going to do, *ask?* No, sir. I’m not even sure it was right for my mom to tell me. I don’t know. I don’t know. Except now I know. I know. The only detail I’ve ever been able to gather was that my biological grandfather once took all my dad’s comic books, that he’d saved up all his pocket money for, and burned them in the backyard. This one miserable detail has taken up parasitic residence in my heart in order to break it over and over and over again. How can I not weep for the little boy my father was when the man who beat him took his most prized possessions and burned them because he needed a new and more intimate way to hurt him? Oh, Hozier, I can hardly bear it.

I could’ve just cringed at the reminder of my teen angst and moved on, but Cherry Wine was on my mind, and I listened a little more closely than usual. It struck me that, when I was a pre-teen, this song was of the most direct references to domestic violence I’d heard in my sheltered life. As such it inhabited the world of fantasy that I’d built of things I’d only read about in books. A battered woman was the mirror image of the princess locked in a tower, and she demanded rescue the way the narrator of that Red Jumpsuit Apparatus song frames himself as a rescuer. For God’s sake, he spends half the song speaking not to the woman but to her abuser, metaphorically over her head. He’s like some sort of medieval knight, throwing down a gauntlet, staring down a dragon. We can skim over the inherent tragedy of partner abuse because our focus is on the glorious man-to-man confrontation, not the sexy lamp they may as well be fighting over.

God, it makes me nauseous.

A point of clarification: I keep saying my “biological” grandfather. That man died when my dad was twenty-ish (another detail from my mom) and thank the saints, the stars, the lord above. My grandmother remarried another man who, from all accounts, was good and kind and gentle. I only met him once that I can remember. He had a strange way of talking, a thick Southern accent mixed with a natural proclivity for mumbling and a wad of chewing tobacco, and he had also lost a few fingers in a construction accident. To seven-year-old me, only familiar with grandfathers as an object of terror, he was too frightening to look in the eye. Foolish child, so unfamiliar with the way kindness sounded. He has also passed away. I hope he would forgive me for thinking he was the scary one, when there was an actual monster hiding in the shadow of his family position. He was such a good man that my father would have named me after him, had I been born a boy.

I got older and just a little wiser. I started seeing relationships, romantic or otherwise, with the nuance they demanded. My dad used to come home exhausted by the weight of the stories he'd heard, the interpersonal dramas and tragedies that people took to him demanding solutions like the two women bringing the baby to King Solomon, only without the tidy resolution of reverse psychology. He wasn't a therapist or a doctor; he was an accountant turned business manager who happened to have a central position in our local church, a little like a priest or a pastor, only he wasn't paid for the hours. It was volunteer work. Along with his religious duties, he provided counseling, sometimes helping people with their crises of faith but often also dealing with breaking marriages or family conflicts. As an adult, I don't believe anyone who hasn't been trained and educated as a counselor should provide counseling, even with the church-mandated rules that certain situations, especially those involving children, should be redirected to social workers or law enforcement. As a teenager, though, I saw no problem with it because I thought my dad was the smartest man in the world. I knew he tried his hardest, too, and I knew those efforts came at a cost. He told me -- he continues to tell me -- edited stories, names redacted, and sometimes he's looking for a fresh perspective or my opinion but more often he just needs to be listened to the way he listens to other people.

I am the only person in my family who has blonde hair. My biological grandfather on my dad's side had blonde hair (another fact from my mother), so if any genes are responsible for my hair (if we can break genetics down so easily) they're probably his. I hate this. I've been diagnosed with a connective tissue disorder that causes hypermobility in my joints. My grandfather on my mother's side was “double-jointed,” the only one in my family who presented/presents any of the same symptoms that I have. If any genes are responsible for my disorder, they're probably his. I hate this. I hate that I can look at myself and pin the tail on what I got from my parents' abusers. Because I don't want to be reminded of them. I don't want to be a reminder of them.

I'm cognizant now of some of life's realities. My own life has been a series of leapfrog jumps from ignorance to innocence and back, but I've kept my eyes open and seen what I could from beneath the safety of this shelter. I know the statistics. I know survivors. I know

perpetrators. The Me Too movement did not take me by surprise because systemic misogyny can no longer shock me. I am more jaded than I have a right to be. I have read widely and listened as much as I could, but do you know, when you sing, "Don't fuss over me," I still feel an ache deep in my stomach. Because I can hear myself saying it, if the trajectory of my life were different. It doesn't take all that much to change someone into something they never thought they'd be.

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I'm paraphrasing, but Joseph Campbell said something like, "When you marry someone, you take their life into your hands." I've been thinking about that a lot. Usually when we use that phrase -- a life in one's hands -- we mean that it's a matter of literal life and death. But there are so many ways to destroy someone without killing them. There are an equal number of ways to nurture someone without, quote, saving them. Partnership in all its forms is a tremendous responsibility. You try to live and behave in such a way that your partner, one day in the future, won't regret tying their life with yours. You don't know if it's enough.

This is hard to reconcile with. It involves the mental gymnastics of imagining your parents as children, as vulnerable, when for so long they were invincible. It involves feeling sad for your parents, feeling tender towards them, aching for them. Which are not necessarily bad things, but perhaps a slippery slope where you are too quick to forgive the mistakes they made as just being a result of their own traumas. Except you also are angry and want to hold them accountable for their mistakes, because they were responsible for you. You were their child. I feel like a hydra but rather than too many heads I have too many hearts feeling too many different things, and the hearts keep spawning. Is it too cliché to say that the abuse has made monsters of all of us? Not necessarily in the monster = bad way (which is an equation I really try to avoid, though I made it up above because I couldn't think of anything else that conveyed how evil I find my biological grandfather. Language has limits, et cetera, et cetera), but in that it has un-humanized us. Shaken something loose in us that would have been our thread back through the labyrinth if we still possessed it.

I was going to write more about the nuances of abuse and victimhood and what it means to care for oneself while also caring for another person, but ultimately I think you and Saorise Ronan have said it all eloquently enough. The only perspective I can offer is narrow. I have sympathy more than empathy; to act like I understand would be an insult. There are some things you just know, I guess, like that you will one day die and that the people you love can hurt you, and there are some things you can't ever understand, like why.

I don't know. I don't know. I only know I am haunted by the lines "Oh but she loves/ like sleep to the freezing." When your "love" (heavy emphasis on the air quotes) is equated to giving in to death after fighting it for so long, what's left? What's left, Hozier? What's left?