

Dear Hozier,

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I had lunch with my parents today. It was the first time I'd seen them in months, and it was a typical representation of how our interactions usually go. There's food – there has to be food. We tease each other. I behave like a less emotionally volatile version of my teenage self. We talk about my dad's retirement, an unspecified future date that is nevertheless inching closer and closer. We talk about the house renovation, my mom's latest project. She tries to get me to express an opinion about paint color, and I refuse, exchanging knowing looks with my dad. He and I are similar in ways, some comfortable and some not, but one is that we both know better than to express opinions about matters like interior design, because even though my mom insists she wants honesty, she really wants affirmation, and predicting what she wants to hear is a gamble that might not pay off.

It's possible that I have to get my gallbladder removed. The surgery is called a cholecystectomy and though I'm staring at the Google search for this surgery and being told things such as "In 2011, cholecystectomy was the eighth most common operating room procedure performed in hospitals in the United States" and "A cholecystectomy is a common surgery, and it carries only a small risk of complication," the internet has never faced the prospect of losing one of their internal organs, so what does it know?

We're wary, careful not to step on each other's toes but inevitably failing. We try to steer clear of politics, but my dad and I still end up scoffing at each other. They repeatedly suggest that I go to Disneyland with them, even though their trip is tomorrow and I've made it clear, also repeatedly, that I'm not interested in traveling during the pandemic, much less to one of the most crowded places on Earth. I ask them about church, because it's a big part of their lives. They answer, but do not ask me about religion. They don't want to be reminded that I haven't taken the sacrament in half a decade and that honestly, I'm happier that way.

I've been having stomach issues for seven months now, the most persistent of which is intense abdominal pain every time I eat. I've had, I believe, nearly every test that gastroenterologists use to screen for common stomach issues and after a string of negative or inconsistent results was hit with a double diagnosis of anxiety and 'possible IBS' – both of which are real things, both of which are unfortunately often treated as catch all diagnoses for stomach issues when nothing else comes back positive. It's a particularly vicious bit of irony then, that the possible need to remove my gallbladder comes as a result of a test my GI ordered "just so we can rule out your gallbladder once and for all." Ha.

I only stay for an hour or so, but without the buffer of my siblings or nephews, that's about as long as I can take. I love my parents, and in many ways I even like them, but I can't fully relax around them. I suspect they can't really relax around me either; my mom doesn't know how to handle the fact that I don't think they've been very responsible during the global health crisis.

She's constantly looking for reassurance that I'm not judging her, but since I am, and she knows it, she can go weeks without talking to me, preferring radio silence to the discomfort of a child's diminished respect. My dad, on the other hand, is so confident in his every thought and opinion that mine don't tally up to much in the scheme of things. He wants to be a good dad, the kind of man who has a strong relationship with all his kids, and my judgment hurts him a lot less than my ability to shut him out. Though that, too, comes back to insecurity: if I go a few weeks without talking to him, he views that as a negative reflection of his parenting skills, kind of like getting a bad Yelp review on fatherhood. He's a perfectionist; he won't take less than five stars.

The test, the HIDA scan, was this morning at 8am. I didn't sleep well because I was anxious about getting an IV, because I fucking hate needles and I will never quite recover from fainting from an IV placed before my colonoscopy. I had the same technician this morning who conducted my gastric emptying study, who asked me about my gallbladder ultrasound. All these tests like some miserable game of dominoes and the picture you'll see when they're all knocked over is my half-decomposed body since I've been sick without treatment for so long that when I look in the mirror I can't see anything but the dark, dark circles under my eyes. The technician was terrible at placing the IV. It hurt. Still hurts. I hate the feeling of saline coming into my body, the rush in my head that feels like presyncope even when it isn't. I had to hold my arms off to either side of what's essentially an MRI-type bed since my hands couldn't be on my abdomen. The IV kept pulling. The arm rests were too high (left side) and too low (right side), and they aggravated my bad shoulders. I had to eat two Reese's cups and a carton of milk halfway through the test to stimulate my gallbladder and prompt it to empty bile (spoiler: this is what it failed to do). The high fat content of this noxious 9am breakfast caused pain in my stomach like a meteor shower – hot and bright and inconsistent so that I wasn't sure exactly what number on the pain scale to give the tech when he asked. I said “seven,” thinking that was probably too low but didn't want to sound like I was lying and they responded, “Oh wow. That much?” Then I sat there for the second hour of the test with my hands pulled into the arms of my sweater because the room was cold, cold, cold and cold hurts the bad tendons in my hands. I sat there, flicking my eyes between the pasta salad the Pioneer Woman was making on the Cooking Network and the real time scan of my gallbladder, which showed a thousand small pinpricks of white light that drew the lines of my liver, gallbladder, and intestines like galaxies in an infinite black void. These white spots were the radioactive tracer (an extremely small amount of radiation, I was told repeatedly, not enough to be harmful) moving through my body. The void was the rest of me, integral and yet irrelevant to this test. I am not a radiologist, but even I could tell that the light wasn't moving out of my gallbladder quick enough. No motion. An object at rest gets surgically removed from the body.

Relationships are hard. I know that's not exactly an epiphany, and it's not something I've only just now realized. I've known it for a while, but the last few years have thrown the cracks in some of my family ties into sharper relief. It's not just the pandemic, though that's been part of it. It's my secession from organized religion. It's my getting older and farther and farther away from the blueprint that parents always, sometimes unwittingly, write for their kids. Here I am,

twenty-eight, unmarried, and with as little interest in child-bearing as ever. (Twenty-eight might not seem very old, but in Mormon years, you multiply by seven.) It was my coming out, which I didn't even really want to do. I told my sister once that while my family, including my parents, had all reacted well to the revelation – or not-so-revelation; I've always dressed pretty butch – of my queerness, they probably wouldn't have ten or even five years ago. Sure, no one can know what *would have happened* or what anyone *might have said*, but it's all too easy for me to imagine a scenario in which my parents acted brokenhearted, like I'd just confessed to murder, or in which they insisted that I talk to religious authorities in an attempt to change. Even if it never happened, the idea of it is there, and how do you recover from that? How do you forgive someone for something they only might have done? How do you let them in to the delicate, soft parts of your life when you've spent your formative years forging contingency armor?

What's the point of all these details? Processing or self-pity. I don't know. I am sad. I am scared. I don't want to undergo surgery. I don't want to lose an organ, even one I can, technically, live without. If I do have to get my gallbladder removed, it will be a threshold – forever after this I will be a little less than whole.

In this song you sing, echoing Otis Rush, who wrote it originally, "You've done me wrong for a long, long time." Well, I'm not a blameless victim, and I'm not just saying that because one of my father's favorite parenting tactics was reminding us every time we expressed self-pity that actually, we're the masters of our fates, the captains of our souls. My child self gets a pass, but as an adult, I have been less kind than I could be, less patient than I should, and far too eager to hold grudges. And if I could talk or write on the internet for hours about the damage my parents unintentionally wreaked on my psyche, well, how much of that is their fault and how much of it is my fault for not going to therapy? (Actually, since my resistance to therapy stems from the terrifying child psychologist my parents took me to when I was five and, later, twelve, I can pin that one on them too.) I'm just asking, at what point do I stop sounding like I'm singing the blues and start sounding like I'm just complaining? Because there's a line there. I think you know that. I think Otis Rush knew it too.

And that's okay. Biology doesn't define what a body is. A body is a body is a body no matter how many organs, limbs, or diseases it does or does not have. There's no correct number or type of ingredients, despite what the anatomy chart says. 'Whole' implies a moral value like 'a whole body is a good body,' but I don't need my body to be whole for it be good, to matter, and to deserve. Logically I know this, and on my better days I believe it deep in my malfunctioning gut and I adore the splints on my fingers and I think about getting words from my Physical Therapy chart tattooed on one of my shoulders (bilateral subluxations, rotator cuff tendinopathy) and I have pride fit for in Olympian. Today is not one of my better days. I don't want to know anything. I just want to be sad. I just want to be scared.

I used to think of love, romantic love especially, like an explosion: a sudden burst of color and sound. People describe fireworks and butterflies, these colorful, ephemeral things. And maybe some love is like that, at first; I wouldn't know, but that's another letter, one I have yet to write. I

understand, though, that love isn't a sprint but an endurance race. People in long-term relationships like marriages understand that when they commit to each other, or they should; either way, you have to imagine that they figure it out eventually. But family relationships are like that too. My parents are going to be an intrinsic part of my life until I die, and if their religion is to be believed, our relationship will extend beyond that finish line. Even if I were to cut them out or cut them off, they'd still be part of me. In some ways I'm grateful for that. I like most of who I am, and I know I got a lot of who I am from them. Some days, though, I wish I could just take a break.

I re-read the lyrics to "My Love Will Never Die" today and I thought – selfishly, indulgently – how my body has never loved me. *You've done me wrong for a long, long time...Honey please, try to love me.* Now that I have a diagnosis (more or less, it's complicated) I can look back on my life and see the symptoms manifesting as early as five years old. There were so many strange things my body did that made me feel off kilter, misaligned. There were no explanations for these strange things – joints sliding, mysterious pains, perennial "allergic shiners" under my eyes. No explanations so I started to think that I was just a bit off. Only now, with my adult eyes, can I see how much of a disconnect this created between me and my body. The consciousness was me, but the body it inhabited was alien and unwelcome. We still don't mesh well. I still don't feel like it belongs to me or I to it. I fear this fissure might be permanent.

"My Love Will Never Die" is one of those classic achy blues songs that's clearly about unrequited love. Neither you nor Otis Rush was thinking about your parents, I'm sure. And I know it's a little silly to conflate the two, especially because I'm lucky enough to know that my parents do love me. In all the ways in which we hurt each other, lack of love isn't one of them. I don't need to beg them: "Honey, please, try to love me." I don't need to say that out loud. And if I think it sometimes, especially as we dance around unpleasantness and I disguise the parts of myself that I suspect they neither like nor love, my queerness, my liberalness, my indifference to God – well, no one needs to know that. If my family's unwritten policy is to be believed, your feelings don't count until you speak them out loud.

It's hard not to wonder, "Why shouldn't it be permanent?" The mind is so much safer. My body is full of pain and disfunction, malfunctioning organs and hormonal imbalances. Pain. So much pain. It's so much easier to be distracted than to be embodied. I don't want any more pain. I don't want to have to work through the pain, live through the pain, smile through the pain. I'm tired. I just want there to be no pain, for 24 hours. Honey, please. Honey try.

But I can't think of any other way to talk about love as obligation, love as duty. You say, "My love can never die" because you're expressing a profound depth of love that isn't limited by time. I say, "My love can never die" because my family is my family, and it would take drastic measures to change that. Thirty years from now, if our health holds out, I'll still be eating the occasional lunch with my parents, still feeling fond of them and exasperated by them; saying and not saying the same old things. Even in death, the name on my headstone will still link me perpetually to my parents. Flowers, flowers grow where I'm laid to rest.

But if wishes were wings, well, my wings would probably hurt too. There is no break, because the pain is branded on the genetic code. There is also no treatment for this diagnosis except symptom management so over the past few years I have begrudgingly followed the instructions of my doctors. Medications, ever increasing daily water intake, fiber powder, fresh fruits and vegetables even though they make me feel like death, monitoring my sugar intake, daily physical therapy, daily exercise, blood tests even though I fucking hate needles, a colonoscopy and endoscopy even though I'm terrified of anesthesia, hundreds of dollars on splints and braces, thousands of dollars on appointments, millions of dollars in damages to my fragile sense of self every time a doctor tells me nothing's wrong.

When I was a kid, I didn't like hugging. (Excuse the anecdotal digression; this will only take a moment.) I don't know why I hated hugs; I was a little touch-averse, maybe, and also they made me feel a little trapped, maybe, a little stifled, maybe, and maybe, actually, I will do my younger self this grace and say that I didn't need an explanation. It was enough that I didn't like them. And it was obvious I didn't like them; I'd submit to hugs elbows-first, trying to keep enough space to fit a Bible between me and the other person, and I pulled away as fast as I could. My dad, at some point, decided that regardless of my feelings on the matter, I needed to be taught to give, quote, good hugs. He also taught me how to give a decent handshake, for the record: firm grip, eye contact, shake, let go. I didn't mind that; the hugging practice was worse because even though it was my dad, who I didn't mind hugging as much as, say, a stranger, or any of my slightly overwhelming aunts, it was still awkward, and it made me feel awkward and clumsy and even more touch-averse because apparently the way I did it naturally wasn't right.

My therapist loves to tell me how resilient I am, which I know is meant as a compliment, so I mostly accept it as one. She also loves to tell me how impressive it is that I keep going back to these appointments and keep fighting for answers and care. These are also meant as compliments, since advocating for myself is something I'm very bad at, and we've been working on that for the last two years. I try to accept the compliments, but it's hard because it's not like I'm doing all this because of my undying self-love and my belief that I deserve care. I'm doing it because I don't have a choice. I'm sick. I have mobility issues. I might have to get one of my fucking organs taken out. This is not self-care. It's just management, survival.

This sounds like a horror story, my anecdote about hugs. If I were to tell it to my friends, they'd rail against my dad's parenting decisions, especially if I told them the part where he used to tell other people about it. I understand my father a little better than them, though, having spent the first eighteen years of my life in his vicinity, so I can afford him a little grace. He had my best interests at heart. He knew that throughout my life, I wouldn't always be able to sidestep hugs or turn them into handshakes. There are grandparents to think of, and people at funerals, and acquaintances who say, "I'm a hugger!" like being self-aware is also an excuse. And he knew that my self-image included and resented my natural physical awkwardness. So he was trying to give me the tools I needed to dispense with that, when I needed to. He also probably hoped that with practice, some of my aversions would fade. They didn't, but it was a nice thought. When

the occasion arises now, when certain friends greet me or someone wants a hug for comfort, I can provide it, and my elbows don't even get in the way.

Annoyingly, however, all the care I'm forced to direct at my defiant body has made me feel tender towards it. Tender in the same way I feel tender about baby birds, which is maybe more condescending than one should feel about their body, but it's a step in the right direction. I give it so much time an attention and, also annoyingly, I guess it's true what they say about loving yourself being a practice not a feeling. It starts every morning with fiber powder mixed into a glass of water and it ends every night with me strapping on my shoulder braces so I don't have bilateral subluxations while sleeping. And a hundred little things in between. For the rest of my life my days will be structured around tending to this body so that I have a tomorrow. I am bitter about it, sure, but episodes of bitterness are growing fewer and farther between. These days, I'm mostly resigned to it. So it goes, you know? And on my good days I feel the baby bird tenderness and it's a lot easier to choke down a dozen pills a day, check the grams of sugar in everything I eat, finally make the rheumatology appointment.

So I understand my dad's choice. Sometimes I am grateful for it. Sometimes I resent it. But whenever I see my nephews, I am cautious, perhaps overcautious, about how I show them affection. They're very cute. They're two of the very few people in the world who I actually like hugging, maybe because I can spin them around when I do it, making them screech with laughter. But I try not to ask them for hugs unless they can refuse, either verbally or physically, and when they refuse – and they do, because they're not hug-giving machines – there aren't consequences. I offer a high five, instead. High fives are funner for little kids, and I enjoy them too. They reassure me that I'm not turning into my parents.

It has taken so long to get to this point. I am caring for myself the best I can. So, why? Why now? Why am I facing down surgery for organ failure? I know the universe isn't keeping track of how I love or care for my body and dishing out punishments and rewards accordingly. This thing with my gallbladder just happened. The same way I just happened to get the genetic disease while neither of my brothers did. I don't believe I'm being punished, but I do feel like *I'm* the failure, not my gallbladder. It feels like I haven't done enough. Maybe if I'd just done more – but isn't that always the feeling with unrequited love? Something's wrong with me if they don't love me. I need to do more of this, less of that. I need to be better. The first thought is never: well, sometimes that just happens, is it? Even if we get there eventually, we don't think immediately after rejection: not everyone is going to love me and that's okay. Or maybe some people do. I imagine they are much happier than I am, and I'm happy for them.

After that lunch with my mom and dad, I went to my sister's house to babysit for an hour. This is always a tougher job than I appreciate until I'm in the middle of it, with a four-year-old demanding that I play with him and *only* him and a two-year-old wailing inconsolably because ... well, I don't know why, actually, and the best I ever figure out is that he's just tired. He perks up a little, though, when I instigate a game of hide and seek. And no, two-year-olds aren't old

enough to understand hide and seek, which is why all three of us ended up hiding together, in the corner behind the crib, draped underneath a blanket. I told them that when their mom, my sister, emerged from her room – I was babysitting so she could take a nap – then we'd reveal ourselves and surprise her. As I said it, I had one of those moments you start getting in your twenties and which I imagine will never go away: I realized that despite all my safeguards and contingency plans, I am becoming my mother. There's a woman who finds endless enjoyment from jumping out and scaring people. She used to do it to us all the time. She still does. It filled our house with screams but also laughter. So much laughter.

The gallbladder is a bright green, pear shaped organ. It makes me think of a vase I saw when I worked at the glassblowing studio. Maybe when the surgeons slice me open to take my precious green gallbladder, I'll ask them to plant a seed in its place so that I will be no less empty. Flowers require diligent tending the way organs, typically, do not. I will be forced to sun and water and fertilize my new blossom and my body will be forced to know – every day until I die – that this is my love, bursting loud from inside.