

Dear Hozier,

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Recently my family – parents, sisters, brother, sisters' husbands, sister's sons, me – assembled to have our photos taken. The gathering itself was an accomplishment, because we are rarely so close, geographically speaking. My younger sister moved two states away just days after her wedding, a year and a few months after my brother returned from his missionary work in Madagascar. He left while I still lived in New York. The six members of my immediate family have been kept apart by mountains, oceans, pandemics, business trips, screaming toddlers, and the crushing weight of obligation since almost the day my older sister left the house for college, thirteen and a half years ago.

This is another letter about my nephew who died. I'm sorry I pour so much grief into these letters – no one need listen if it's too much, if you've had enough – I just don't know where else to put it. Yesterday would have been Caleb's second birthday. In another life I would have bought him presents and picked up a dozen high float balloons. I would know what his voice sounded like and what sort of things he enjoyed. Instead, a void. All around me, the things that aren't. No parties, no sugar thick Costco icing that tells us 'Happy birthday, Caleb!' No Caleb.

When my sister left, I was thrilled. Her leaving meant I would finally have my own room again, for one thing, but our relationship in the years before she left had also been strained. As a teenager I was terrifically awkward, introverted, and moody, a counterpoint to the way she charmed everyone she met, made them laugh, made them love her. Unlike me, she didn't seem to struggle to disguise her true, ugly emotions when other people were watching. She hid them so cleverly that she didn't seem to have ugly emotions at all, while I was drowning in the riptide of my anger, my resentment, my melancholy. She never had to work to make friends. She had a million of them. I was lucky if I could cling to the same friend for an entire school year. To rein in my envy I did my best to annoy her or, when that failed, ignore her entirely.

Grief is often likened to madness. They've gone mad with grief, et cetera, et cetera. I get it. When you're "mad," your reality is different. It's the same with grief. I think often of a line from *Tiny Beautiful Things*, a compilation of letters from the Dear Sugar advice column. The person who wrote in had lost her child and is struggling, feeling like the people in her life don't understand. Sugar responds, "They live on Planet Earth. You live on Planet My Baby Died." My entire family has been on Planet My Baby Died for one year and eight months and things look much different there. The gravity is stronger, bone breaking; the landscape is like some German expressionism film, bleak and elongated and colorless; the wind is always screaming. The planet's a bit like that. If you're not mad before the shuttle touches down, you will be soon after. The planet is unbearable. The grief is unbearable.

When she left, it was like I woke up in a different hemisphere: there wasn't a single familiar star in the sky. She is the life of every party, the loudest person in the room, and her absence was

the loudest too. Without her there, I was supposed to be in charge, and I didn't have the leadership instincts or the emotional generosity to do anything beyond the bare minimum of keeping my younger sister and brother alive, which they were old enough to do on their own at that point anyway. When they got tired, sitting in our pew in church, they tried to rest their heads on my lap, as they had with her, and I shoved them away, the weight and texture of their casual neediness unbearable. Worst of all, I missed her too but couldn't be caught dead admitting it. I missed her laugh in movies. I missed how steadily she shielded us from the prying of aunts and uncles at family functions. I missed how she'd gossip to me and my younger sister about the boys she liked while I pretended not to listen.

Every time she came back, even to do laundry, was like Odysseus's homecoming, minus the bloodshed. We all pretended not to recognize or remember her for a bit, not wanting to make her think that we couldn't live without her although we really, really couldn't, and then slowly settled back into our old orbits. It was annoying but bearable when she moved to Idaho for a semester. It was much more devastating when she left to live in Europe for eighteen months. In that year and a half, she would be obliged to follow the strictures of a Mormon mission, which meant her only communication with us besides a call on Christmas would be through letters or emails. I still have a stack of her handwritten letters, sent to my various addresses with unswerving dedication. In return I wrote to her rarely, maybe half a dozen times, maybe less. I never knew what to say.

Yet, I am alive still so I must be bearing. And bearing and bearing and bearing. It doesn't feel that way, especially on Caleb's birthday. It feels like I'm coming apart at the seams. Grief hammers at the back of my skull, but I've only cried once this week, and then only briefly. It's only ever briefly. A handful of minutes and a headache and I'm back on Earth again. "The words hung above/But never would form," as you say. I haven't spent any less time on Planet My Baby Died than the other members of my family, but I seem somehow less assimilated than everyone else. Like I have one cosmic foot on Earth and the other on this alien planet with too many lightyears between for my stance to be balanced.

Growing up, I was unkind and occasionally cruel to my younger sister. I don't remember the reason for my malevolence; probably there wasn't one beyond the usual psychological damage inflicted upon children when suddenly they cease to be the center of their parents' universe. Except, being the second child, I'd never felt that I had more than half my parents' attention at any given time, and the reduction to one-third must have been excruciating. When you start out with less, losing anything is intolerable. But I'm making excuses, the way Cain must have about Abel, though this isn't a story that ends in murder; it isn't a story that ends at all.

My parents are both introverted, though they're able to throw on masks to hide their discomfort around people, their longing to be somewhere quiet by themselves. It's the same with my older sister, though she's a tougher nut to crack. Regardless, I was well-versed in spotting the thin line of daylight between reality and fiction, fluent in falsehoods before I mastered English, and I think what really bothered me about my little sister was that there was no line at all. She was – is –

sincere in her affection, her delight, her laughter, her hurt, her frustration. Her honesty makes her vulnerable and, in turn, makes her easy to love. It's incredibly dangerous, being her, but she never seemed to see it. I saw it, like I saw everything, and maybe in some horrible way I was trying to thicken her skin. Maybe I was trying to turn her into me, armored and venomous. Or maybe I was just, as always, jealous.

I've never grieved loudly for Caleb. I've never given over to or been consumed by the grief enough to go a little mad. I know this because I've seen my family lose their minds over and over again. I've heard the recording – cruelly captured on a Ring doorbell because programmers don't teach cameras about private moments – of Caleb's mother screaming as the paramedics loaded Caleb into the ambulance. On her knees in the front yard, wailing. All the grief and horror of a Greek *kommos* pouring out of her, spilling onto the lawn, flooding down the street, rising above the frequency of the sirens. The recording froze me. It was horrible. Violent. Visceral. The type of agony you never hope to hear in your life, and it kept going. One scream following another. Horrible, but true. That was grief, raw. Straight from the hive. There are other examples, too, but those people and stories are more private, so I'll keep them in the family, but those, too, contain unfiltered grief-madness.

I'd grown up enough by the time I left the house that I was no longer getting disappointed looks from my parents every time I spoke to my sister. Somewhere along the line, I'd crossed directly from bullying to fierce protectiveness without passing Go. When she had an accident in middle school involving a pencil and a heavily bleeding scalp wound, I was the one to pick her up from the nurse's office and ease her over the line from crying to laughing. When she was diagnosed with diabetes during my sophomore year of college, I went to her hospital room burdened with books and DVDs. While she watched *Mean Girls*, I read Wikipedia articles about her illness and the unregulated costs of insulin. I've never been the first person she goes to when her heart is broken, but often I am the one to pick her up from the airport.

But me? I, as this song so deftly puts it, couldn't whisper when you needed it shouted. I cry infrequently and alone. I write letters to a man who doesn't know I exist. I spent the days, weeks, months following Caleb's death doing things like cutting watermelon for the funeral reception and finishing my year end reports at work. In a phrase: keeping it together. In part, that's just how I'm made. I was raised to keep it together, a Southern matriarch, nose to the grindstone attitude passed down from my mother that ensures I'd make sure the silverware was set and the guests were fed no matter what personal tragedy or Biblical plague. Other people get to fall apart. I have to keep it together. *It*. Whatever that is. Appearances or the clock or my family's fracturing reality. I hold my mother's hand while she talks to the police. I stand in a corner and become a receptacle for all my stepmother's guilt and confusion about being around when she's not "really" family. I hug my father after the funeral service. I buy bagels. I play with my nephew (Caleb's brother). I take on new projects at work. I help my other brother (not Caleb's father) move to Washington. I keep it together. I am dependable. Being dependable has become mutually exclusive from losing my mind.

My brother is an alien creature: he loves the outdoors, loves playing rough and dirty, loves the adrenaline punch of his body both cutting through and being consumed by the world. As a child he was an escape artist, driving our babysitters to tears when he ran down the street of our idyllic suburban street naked, cackling madly, evading capture. From that moment on his feet have been blackened by asphalt, his skin tan and scarred, his muscles straining. By the time he was ten he knew precisely how to get around my parents' rigorous rules. He could persuade them, like my older sister with her silver tongue, or manipulate them with big-eyed sweetness like my younger sister. When that failed, he could follow my map, which involved a lot of lies of omission, blending into the shadows, and emotional outbursts. And all things being equal, there was always the strength of his own unwavering logic. We joke that he's spoiled, that my parents went easy on him, but really if he had it easier it was just because he was more fluid than the rest of us. He had more strategies to pick from.

He counterbalances this with moments of elegance and intellectualism. In high school, he used to recover from his cross country team practices with long bubble baths. Unlike the rest of us, he isn't afraid to have political opinions where our dad can hear him. He spends all his free time traveling but never seems to get bad grades. He parties with his friends and dutifully visits our grandma. He has tattoos on his upper thighs where he can easily hide them, but he grows his hair long as if to spite everyone who's ever recommended he wear it short. Sometimes when I talk to him I feel like I'm interviewing for a job. Sometimes when I watch him and my mom interact, the way they tease each other with the hard-won camaraderie of two people who lived basically alone with my dad's workaholism, I laugh so hard I cry.

Is something wrong with me, that I have never shouted my grief? My therapist says it's about control. That to lose myself to grief in that way would require giving up control of myself and the situation, which is not something I'm able to do easily. But I want to do it. For Caleb if not for myself. How else can I prove that I loved him? Four months on earth is not long enough for me to know much about him. He loved music therapy. He had a congenital heart defect. I loved him. These three facts are just about all I have and it's not much to base memorials on. I have a playlist of songs that make me think of him. I donate to organizations that support medical research or support children in hospitals and their families. But what is that? Those are things, those are pantomimes, they can't replace the lifelong project of loving a child and watching him grow. How do I honor *that*? How do I prove to the world, and more importantly to Caleb, if he is out there somewhere and able to see me, that I was ready to be his aunt through all the phases and mistakes of his beautiful life, loving him all the while? Loving him until the day I die, which was supposed to come first. I have all this love stored up, Caleb specific, sixty, seventy years of it, and nowhere to put it. How else can I give it to him except by grieving?

It was my brother, I think, who used to tease me by telling me he loves me. If you think that's an odd way to tease someone, you're correct. To understand it you have to squint through the murky waters of sincerity and artifice underpinning it. You also have to remember my inability to let my siblings rest their heads on my shoulder or my lap. In an earlier letter I talked about how

bad I am at giving hugs. Know this: My discomfort with physical affection is matched only by my discomfort with verbal affection. So when my brother would seek me out before he went to bed – him, barefoot, pajama-clad, grinning slyly – me, adolescent, spotted with acne, hunched over a computer – and say “I love you” in a sing-song voice, of course he meant it, but he was also doing what younger siblings do best and provoking me. How would I respond this time? Would I manage a gruff, “You too”? Far more likely, would I give him the evil eye? I was, in those days, bigger and stronger than him, but he could be sure of winning this particular interaction. Anyone who tells you that sibling rivalry is just vying for parental attention doesn’t understand the nuances of competition. Having siblings is like being released onto the set of a reality TV show with no rules, no prize, and no alcohol.

I should be impaling myself on thorns or running to that god, that man, that holy ghost with his crown of thorns, grabbing him by his shoulders as I scream and scream with every despicable ounce of my fallen humanity. Where is his grace in this? What value is there in this unanswered prayer? Where is my nephew? Where is my nephew?

I have always loved my brother, despite how mysterious he is to me, and I loved my sisters even when I was snarling at them, but I couldn’t say it. Couldn’t show it. It’s like the song: “I couldn’t utter my love when it counted ... the words hung above but never would form.” It was more embarrassing to be sincere, to be vulnerable, than to be so obviously inadequate. I no longer know if I was withholding something from them or from myself. Certainly if they ever went to bed wondering whether I did love them, whether I was in fact capable of it, I went to bed as many nights thinking that I wasn’t allowed to love them until I loved myself. It’s in the Bible, which my family read every night, huddled around the coffee table: Love thy neighbor – or thy brother, or thy sister – as thyself. Every day as I got older I learned better how to make strangers, acquaintances, even friends think that I was self-assured and untouchable. False confidence was ready-made armor, but I let it slip at home. With my family I was at my rawest, which meant my angriest, my most scared, my most terrified of loving anyone the wrong way.

The only thing I ever gave Caleb was a bouquet of flowers that he never got to see. It was for one of his surgeries. To wish him luck and let him know I was thinking of him. I commissioned a local florist to make it, but they couldn’t have flowers in the CICU, so it sat on a desk at home until it wilted, unwatered, because no one waters flowers while their baby is in the hospital. It was silly. Was it silly? No one could visit Caleb in the hospital except his parents; COVID protocols. All I had was gestures, empty and unhelpful as they may be. Nothing’s changed. I am still armed only with gestures. I have a photo of the bouquet. Sometimes I think maybe I’ll get it tattooed over my heart.

After my family posed for our photographs, everyone teased me about my physical stiffness, how difficult it was to squeeze me with the rest of them into the same frame. I hovered my hands over their shoulders when I should have been pulling them closer. I am twenty-nine years old and still fumbling the simplest forms of casual affection. It’s easy to kiss my nephews’ hot sweaty foreheads in a way it has never been easy to hug or be hugged by my siblings, maybe

because they, unlike the rest of us, don't know about the unanswered letters, the vicious words, the distance. They are unburdened by baggage.

Because I won't go mad with grief. I know myself better than that. My therapist is right that I don't give up control easily and, besides, I'm not sure I believe in catharsis anymore. I don't know if wailing or weeping would do any good. Instead of going mad with grief, I'm going weary with it. That's the stronger gravity on Planet My Baby Died worming its way into my bones. I struggle to focus on anything. I have nothing in me to offer creatively; every word I've put on the page since that day has taken as much effort as holding up the sky. I'm isolating. I know I'm isolating, but I'm tired. I don't have the energy for other people.

Most people, somewhere between eighty and eighty-five percent of us, have siblings. It's a common human experience, even mundane, but it's so rarely represented correctly, so infrequently encapsulated in words. Most of us don't want to admit that some of the longest and most important relationships of our lives have nothing to do with our personal choices. We're born into families whether we like it or not. That sort of powerlessness is devastating, and you're lucky if you can ever come to terms with it, let alone achieve a truce with these fools you're stuck with. By all laws of history and warfare, my aggressive isolationism in my formative years should've left me lonely and without resources, except that here the metaphor fails, and we're not countries sharing borders after all. We're people, born with the love built in, helpless to that too, even when words and gestures, over and over and over, fail. By some miracle of nature, we keep coming back together despite the miles and despite my silences. Thank God, because I love them. I'm sorry I didn't say it sooner.

I know it's not fair to myself to grieve forever. I've also written in other work specifically that you don't have to grieve someone forever to prove that you love them, so I should know better. But I'm not talking about forever. I don't how I'll feel in five years, in fifty, should I be lucky enough to have that many. But one year and eight months after his death, I still feel so heavy and so sad and so laden by the project of remembering. I just want him to know that I loved him. It's something I'll never get to say and have him understand. He'll never come on the family lake vacation so I can never buy him an ice cream cone at the old gazebo. He'll never meet my cats and befriend them as his cousins have. These are the things I think about, and immediately after I think I'm selfish, grieving in the wrong way. Making it about me. But I'm learning grief is as much about us as the other person. It's an emotion that takes two – the person lost and the person left. I might have written that in another letter. It sounds familiar, or maybe it just sounds true so it feels familiar. Either way, I'm trying. I'm trying to grieve and love and remember, even if it's quiet.