

Dear Hozier,

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I've been dissociating for as long as I can remember. It must have started when I was young enough that disappearing into a different non-reality was considered imaginative play. In fact, one time my Aunt Dana complimented me (to my mother) about how good I was at using my imagination, unlike her kids – I just remembered that. The compliment made me happy. I wanted to be a fiction writer one day and I knew I'd need a good imagination for that. And the compliment made me feel normal, superior even, for disappearing so often. It was an easier habit to hide when it was socially acceptable to play with toys, to be in the backyard with the dogs for six hours a day. But I started growing up, tragically, and severed these things from my life since I was supposed to.

At lunch with my family the other day, the topic of love languages came up. You know the five love languages? It's a concept pioneered by a guy named Gary Chapman, in which people have different preferred methods of expressing — and receiving — love. The theory isn't limited to romantic love but applies to all forms of affection, and it's not necessarily conscious. One's love language is just a facet of one's personality, inborn or a result of upbringing or some combination of the two. According to Chapman, the love languages are: gifts, quality time, physical touch, verbal affirmation, and acts of service.

But the need to not be here, that immediate, all-encompassing non-feeling of *disconnect or die* only got stronger as I got older. Middle school is a tough time in general, but my parents were separating and then divorcing; my mental disorder was making its formal debut, exploding onto the stage it had been auditioning for during elementary school; and I was spending a lot of time in Louisiana with my mother's family while we tried to navigate my grandmother's Alzheimer's disease. It was scary and exhausting, flying back so often to watch my grandmother's brain atrophy in front of me, while also trying to navigate the wounds and egos of a very, very dysfunctional Southern family.

Chapman's no scientist; he's not even a psychologist. In fact, he's a Baptist minister, and his book about the love languages has all the hallmarks of patriarchal religion. He draws his anecdotal examples from his practice as an ecclesiastical counselor, so by definition, all of the people he spoke to were also engaged in those patriarchal, heteronormative thought patterns. And he uses his theory to enforce parochial gender norms. About half the time, he's berating women for not letting their husbands get away with the bare minimum in terms of housekeeping and child-rearing. See, if a man's love language is acts of service, then when he does the laundry, it's a grand romantic gesture, and his wife should treat it as such. Never mind that it's not *service* to take a turn doing the laundry in an equitable partnership: it's just fair.

On one such trip, we got stuck in a hurricane. We were at my uncle's house in Lafayette and every day we would drive to the airport, hoping they'd let us on the plane, and for six, maybe seven days, we would wait in line with the other travelers until the airport kicked us out. I haven't been to that airport since my mother and uncle stopped speaking fifteen years ago, but I remember the layout almost exactly. Which is odd, because I spent all those hours at the airport the most dissociated I had been to date. I was using my

new excuse: a blue CD player and a stack of CDs either purchased from Target or burned from Napster by my older brother Perry or the cool, older neighbor girl, Megan. I was a moody teenager, so I could get away with sitting on the ground with my earphones, not talking to anyone.

On the fifth or sixth day of this hurricane purgatory, I went to the bathroom while my mom talked to the airline agent yet again. I peed, I washed my hands, I was drying them off, and then I started crying (the body, the score, et cetera). I don't remember as much as I'd like about this encounter. Just an upfront disclosure. As I was crying, an older woman stopped and talked to me. I'm sure she asked me if I was okay or what was wrong or if I needed help. I remember laughing through the tears (how well I was conditioned), saying I was alright, I just wanted to go *home*. I said it so painfully, so powerfully. I was sick of that airport and my uncle's house and my uncle's drinking. I wish I could remember what she said to me, this wonderful woman, but it made me feel so much better. Probably something like, "You'll get home soon, honey" or "It's all going to be okay."

So the author's background is troubling, and the book itself is laughable, but there's still some merit to the theory. People do have different ways of giving and receiving love. Are they limited to the five areas Chapman outlined, or combinations of them? Probably not. After all, different cultures have different standards that affect people's desires and behaviors. But understanding that and understanding a particular person's preferred methods of giving and receiving love is important so that you can love them on their terms. It's another facet of healthy communication.

It doesn't really matter what she said, just that she stopped and checked on me. It felt like such excessive kindness to my twelve-year-old self. I am thirty now and in hindsight I imagine seeing a twelve-year-old girl crying alone in an airport bathroom probably sent that woman into hyperdrive, the way it would any normal, empathetic person. Checking on that child was so basic and obvious. In fact, I think she walked me out of the bathroom and back to my mom, keeping an eye on me. That seems obvious, too. But, again, to me at that moment it felt like she had moved heaven and earth to figure out if I was okay.

When the topic of love languages came up, someone asked me what mine was, and I said I didn't know. There's a quiz you can take online or in the back of the original Five Love Languages book, but I haven't taken it, and my inability to self-reflect means I don't wonder about this type of stuff until someone else brings it up. My brother joked that it definitely wasn't physical touch — my aversion to hugs and similar forms of affection is well-documented — and my dad added that it wasn't words of affirmation either. Also well-documented, in these letters, is my inability to express love to people I do, I swear, love. And of course — hold on.

I had a similar encounter about a year later, in a Books-a-Million in Lake Charles, Louisiana. I had spent the day with my mom and aunt in hot church, decorating for my cousin's rehearsal dinner. The wedding was stressing everyone out for a lot of chaotic family reasons, and I'd been subject to sharp orders all day about how exactly to arrange flowers or cheese or plates. My nerves were raw. My mother took me to the bookstore as an apology/peace offering. I was left alone to wander through the YA section and again I started to cry. As tears fell, blurring the book covers, an old woman walked by and said, "Oh, you have such pretty hair!" This made me laugh and I felt the pressure valve release. I felt better, like I could make it through the wedding the next day.

Thank God for old women.

Why is this letter so difficult for me to write? I've drafted a dozen paragraphs, some really profound shit I assure you, about my parents and my overdeveloped sense of emotional regulation and healing my inner child or rather how I'd rather not see my inner child, let alone heal her. None of it is meaningful in the context of this letter. I've said all of it before, in different words and variations maybe, but nonetheless it's repetition. And now I just want to press the "delete" key over and over again because I'm realizing I wasted so much time and, worse than that, it's so ironic. The song is called "Talk." The song is about words, the words we use when we're trying to cast ourselves in better lighting, the words we use to hide. And all my words add up to nothing.

How does this connect to this song, Talk? In the first verse of this song, you use the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice as a device to set up the song's themes: desire, devotion, love. In another letter in this series, I also used that myth to talk about my relationship with Emily. In that letter, I ultimately posited myself as Eurydice and Emily as Orpheus, as my image of myself has never aligned with heroes of any kind. Too hapless for that, much more likely to die, to need rescue. But as I've been considering this song, I've been reconsidering myself and heroism. It's not fair, after all, to ask the other person to always be the hero. Everyone wants to, needs to, should be rescued as often as possible.

As I have mentioned, my family is Southern. Both my parents grew up in small Louisiana towns in the 1960s and 1970s. You *talked* to people in these towns. You both had to, and you wanted to. These were your neighbors, but it's also very cultural in the American South to just chat. Chat and charm. My mom is the more obviously social parent. She *loves* to talk to people. Everywhere she goes she's chatting and helping and asking questions and charming people. But even my grumpier, more introverted father does this Southern chatting. A little less in his day to day that I've seen. For him it seems to mostly take the shape of making friends. The man has an unbelievable number of friends everywhere across the globe. He makes friends on cruise ships, at his clinic, in airports, in bars, in Vietnam, in Vegas. He'll chat and charm and chat and charm and next thing you know he's on a private jet or at someone's house in Greece.

All I wanted to tell you is that my dad is right: "words of affirmation" is not my love language. Big surprise. I struggle to verbalize affection, and I struggle to receive it that way too. It makes me so uncomfortable, probably because a secret part of me—the inner child, one suspects—really likes it. Or maybe it's because I don't believe anyone is ever really telling the truth. This song's narrator has a clear ulterior motive—sex—but so does everyone, right? People tell each other nice things to soothe themselves about their moral standing or to be polite or to feel superior. Or maybe that's just what a person would think after spending eighteen years listening to people praise Jesus and weep over God's benevolence all while giving ten percent of their incomes to an organization that hoards its wealth like a dragon and makes a lot of people, me included, feel really bad about themselves. I don't believe you that you think God loves me because I hear the implicit "despite" in that faux-reassurance. I don't believe that this is what Jesus would do. I don't believe anything anymore.

So, I've always thought I just got it from them. I chat, too. I chat and I charm. Without thinking about it. Without wanting to, sometimes. It's how I was raised. It's how I was taught to move through the world. When you are in public you are polite, you are social, you are kind, and you are helpful. Last week at the Tokyo airport, I realized I gave the wrong information to the woman behind me in line, so I walked back to where she was to correct myself. She didn't care (self-sufficient), but an older American couple did, and I was able to help them find an agent to get their luggage questions answered. This was all reflex, instinctive.

Emily said, "You're so nice," and I didn't mind because she means it. But so many people haven't. So many people have said I am *too nice*. Too soft. That they assume I am faking it for gain. Or that I don't have a spine, just a pathetic people pleaser. Since I am guilty of a fair amount of people pleasing, for a long time I just believed them. Telling myself, "I am weak, soft, a loser, maybe even a manipulator in disguise. I need to cut my parents out of my social brain." It's taken me a really long time to sort out that some of it is people pleasing, but mostly, it genuinely makes me happy to help people and to be as kind as I can. When I felt grateful my coworker had already taken the time to set up a new spreadsheet because his work helped me with my report, I figured why not send him a Teams message telling him I appreciated it and that he'd done a really great job with it. He messaged me back immediately telling me he really needed to hear that, things had been really stressful between work and moving his three small kids into their new house, and for weeks he'd been feeling like he was messing everything up.

And I remembered that woman in the Lafayette airport, who I think in so many ways saved my life. A few minutes of care and affection in a miserable situation made it okay to be in my body, made it okay to be in a life that was really, really fucking hard.

I think I'm tired of writing these letters like they're confessions. I have exhausted that format because I've exhausted the depths of my trauma. No, that's not true. See, I am not above lying to you after all. The truth is that I could keep dredging through the murky waters of the past for forever or until you stop releasing music, whichever comes first. But at least for right now, I am tired of telling you what I find, despite what a perfect and captive audience you've been. Who needs therapy when I have the echo of my own voice? I do not need to look into a listener's eyes for judgment or sympathy or connection. I don't even need to worry about whether a listener exists. I just talk, and there's no response.

I've been thinking about all this as my mental health confrontation – as I called it in the last letter – creeps ever closer to a full-blown mental health crisis (if it isn't there already). I've felt the most like my teenage self than I have in years. Meaning a bundle of raw nerves, anxious beyond capacity, exhausted, afraid, small, and unable to stay in my body. My dissociation has never not been "bad." I would use the word *excessive* since I know it exists to save my life in these critical moments making it "good" in certain cases. Only now, I'm working to stay present. I can't just keep disappearing. As much as I want to, as much as it has helped me in the past. So, the confrontation/crisis feels so much worse because normally, I'd just disconnect. But the body, the score, et cetera.

As I fight to stay present – armed with Trader Joe's Super Sour Scandinavian Swimmers to jolt me back into my body – I am appreciating anew the moments when people, especially strangers, are kind to me.

Like the barista who complimented my name. I have spent my whole life struggling to connect to it when it isn't really mine; it's my mother's. You can imagine how difficult it is to have dissociative tendencies and not feel like you have a name. But that barista was beautiful and fun and complimented me earnestly. My name hasn't felt like such an intruder since then.

If you're out there, whoever you are, I want you to imagine me. You have the sound of my voice, but what do I look like? What do I dress like? Do I move with grace or clumsiness or some peculiar mixture of the two? Do I avoid eye contact the way you know I avoid hugs? What am I like to work with? What sort of friend am I? What kind of daughter, what kind of sister, what kind of aunt? If we were trapped on an island together, would I keep us alive or would I just keep one of us alive? Would I tell you to eat me? Would I eat you? Would we escape together?

"When you are in public you are polite, you are social, you are kind, and you are helpful." This has always been the way, but now I'm being intentional about it, not reflexive. Emily and I went to a play a few months ago and when the old woman next to me complimented my hair (a running theme it seems), instead of just saying thank you, I told her how much I loved her manicure. We talked for the ten minutes before the play, and I learned she had just moved here from Texas to live with her daughter but was originally from Louisiana. This of course gave us a lot to talk about. I will never, ever see that woman again, but it was fun to hear about her life and I hope it made her night out at the theater feel a little less lonely. This week, I went to an art installation at a local university. Since I went in the middle of the day on a Wednesday, a field trip was there. It was loud and chaotic as children ran around. I wove through them as patiently as I could to look at the stained glass. As I did, I noticed one girl moving apart from the rest of the children, actually looking at the art unlike most of the kids. I debated how awkward (or even worse, cringe) this would make me, but eventually I figured I might as well. I walked over to her, and I told her it was really cool to see her actually looking at the art and enjoying it. I learned she was a year older than the rest of the kids for some reason (I couldn't quite hear her in the chaos) and that she felt she could look at the stained glass all day. I had a mask on, so I'm not sure she saw me smile. I told her I agreed and then reiterated that it was cool to see her enjoy the art. I didn't mean to "kids these days" her classmates, but when I was in seventh grade, I would have liked someone to tell me that I was being cool and artsy about my field trip, so I offered what I could to her. Maybe she'll never think of me again. Maybe she will, either positively or negatively.

Do you have me in your mind? Good. I want you to know that none of that is real. I am not whatever you've pictured, and no matter how you shift the permutations of your imagining, I will never be. Not because I am unknowable but because our only interactions are these letters, and these letters may feel real, but they're not. They are the words I've put on paper, words I've decided to put on paper at the expense of leaving others out. I have both told and omitted truths, and the omissions cancel out whatever forthrightness I've managed to give you. We are left not with outright lies but with a cardboard cutout of vulnerability. Imagine being loved by me.

So, to end us on heroism. What is heroism? All the definitions point us to being noble, courageous in the face of adversity, having great strength or divine abilities, being at the center of the story. Conceiving of myself as a *hero* in this archetypical way feels a bit too grandiose, even for my ego. But there's always an element to heroism of saving people, of rushing in a little too soon, a little too often to try and help as

much as you can. Even if its foolhardy or not well-received, a hero tries anyway. In the spirit of the old woman in the Lafayette airport and the even older woman in the Lake Charles Books-A-Million, I am trying to be a little more like that. It really does only take a moment and maybe it will save someone, even just a little bit, to just talk.