

Dear Hozier,

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I think about this song a lot. I especially like the line “I once warmed my hands over a burning Maserati.” It’s so evocative of youth, of extravagance, of waste. It makes me think of my brother. He is six years younger than me and a lot better at being twenty-four than I ever was. At his age, I lived in New York and worked at an unglamorous job in a clothing store. I managed a stockroom, or actually three stockrooms, all of them in a constant state of disrepair and overabundance. They smelled like sweat, sawdust, and linen. They were always either stiflingly hot or biting cold. Still, they were better than the alternatives, like ringing up customers or managing the line for the fitting rooms. Every other night, a massive truck parked next to the front doors, and I and a half-dozen of my coworkers unloaded it, packing the front aisles of the store with boxes that needed to be sorted by stockroom and then wheeled to the elevators on rickety black dollies. We had to scan each and every box to be sure the delivery matched the shipment order. Messing up meant we would have to stay later than eleven p.m., which was when our shifts officially ended. I think I made sixteen dollars an hour. That wasn’t enough for rent, so I walked dogs too. I frequently had tendonitis. My arms were always sore.

I’ve been feeling restless lately. Though ‘restless’ doesn’t feel entirely adequate. The feeling is so embodied, so miserable, so *radioactive*. It burns through my bones, makes me gnash my teeth. Has me questioning every decision I’ve ever made. The restlessness is both very profound – “Tell me, what is it you plan to do / with your one wild and precious life?” as Mary Oliver so nicely put it – and at the same time the restlessness is pathetically juvenile – am I a loser?

A few months ago, my family and I went on a trip to Greece and Istanbul. To make sure we didn’t get separated when we ventured into busy cities like Athens, we shared our phones’ locations with each other. Since then I’ve checked the app a few times, and every time, the dot indicating my brother’s phone, my brother’s presence, is in a different country in the world. Mexico, London, Italy. In the winters, he is usually stateside, but he skis anywhere the snow is good. Colorado, Lake Tahoe, Montana. He flies standby and sleeps in hostels. He pays a physical tax for all the travel and adventure, however cheaply he gets it. Once or twice a year, it seems, he ends up in the hospital for a shoulder injury, a broken collarbone, something like that. These things don’t stop him. I don’t know if anything would.

I really like this song. I like the music, the melody, the lyrics, the tenderness, the recklessness, the “oohs,” the “woos.” I’ve liked it from the first time I heard it, back in 2019, when the album was first released. But since that first listen, this song has also haunted me. A few lyrics in particular: “I’d be appalled if I saw you ever try to be a saint / I wouldn’t fall for someone I thought couldn’t misbehave.” Those lines cut sharply, but for years I was too busy turning away from them for them to cut very deeply. But the years have dragged on and I can no longer turn away, I don’t want to, so the lines have bored a hole in me, and I can’t stop worrying at the wound.

I'm not jealous of my brother so much as I am befuddled. We're very different people, and our lifestyles reflect that. I'm a homebody with a limited-use bachelor's degree and a hell of an idealistic streak. He's an adrenaline junkie who, fresh out of college, has a job that promises to be soul-crushing but financially solvent. He's a pragmatist, so I know that on some level it'll be worth it to him. A full bank account means more of what he actually loves, skiing and travel and fun with his friends. He values those things highly, so he's not wasting time or money, nor is he destroying his body for nothing. I remind myself of this often, because I don't want to alienate him with my bewilderment. I can't conceive of spending my time the way he does, but it's not my life, so what does that matter? I can't deny that what I view as wasteful because of the long-term costs is worth it in the moment. If a Maserati is more available than firewood, why not burn it if you're freezing?

I've never been someone who could misbehave. Being "in trouble" was the worst outcome I could imagine as a child. When faced with anything like a reckless choice, death or injury fell far short of disapproval when it came to the reasons I would decide against such recklessness, or mischief, or, god forbid, rebellion. I always followed the rules, always did the "right thing." I was always "good" and "responsible" and "mature for my age." There I was, trying so hard to be a saint. I am, unfortunately, no different now. I went directly from being a "well-behaved" child to being a "well-behaved" adult. I went to college, got a degree, settled into a career. I get raises and promotions; I am terrified of getting "in trouble" at work. I am saving to buy a house. I pay my taxes. I have health insurance. It's nothing short of a miracle I avoided the marriage and kids part of this Perfect Citizen conveyor belt. None of these are objectively bad things about me or my life. I appreciate the stability, and I know I am lucky to have it. But when I look back at my life, especially my teens and early twenties, it's all so *dull*. I did one "right" thing after another after another, and now I have no stories to tell.

I am a little jealous, though, that I'm not the type of person my brother is. We can't pick our personalities like we're video game characters confronted with a host of dropdown menus, and believe me, in middle school, I tried. I'm stuck with my fear of injury and my unwillingness to deliberately put myself in uncomfortable situations. Discomfort and danger abound when you're in avalanche country, no matter how skilled and experienced you are. My brother knows that, so he won't be asking for my company on one of his adventures anytime soon. I don't know if he knows that discomfort and danger abound in settings as banal as airports, taxis, and public markets when you are a woman. In her song "Fire Drills," Dessa compares the hypervigilance required of traveling women to a life of constantly running fire drills. She says, simply, "That's not a way to live." And I agree, even as I know that today, in the twenty-first century, it remains the only way to live.

There have been no drunken nights in my life, no regrettable dates, no wild sex, no first time getting high, no spontaneous trips, no petty crimes, no major injuries, no speeding tickets, no tattoos, no piercings beyond the ear piercings I got at seven at Claire's with my mom and aunts. As much as I tell myself that "wildness" or "recklessness" aren't necessary to make good

memories or good stories or a good life, I can't help but find myself incredibly boring. Again, that horrible question, with a much longer half-life than high school might have you think: am I a loser? I have been so, so, *so* focused on being good and I can't for the life I didn't have figure out why. There are possibilities, sure. Childhood trauma, anxiety, some uppity superiority complex. Whenever I try to puzzle it out, I hit a wall. There doesn't seem to be any particular reason. I just wasn't drawn to it, to misbehaving. I never craved to place it between my teeth and let it melt like hard candy. Until now. Maybe.

When I was twenty-one I slept in my first and last hostel. I was studying abroad in London that summer, and over a long weekend, I took a train up to Edinburgh with about a dozen of my classmates. The hostel was because we wanted to save money. I agreed to it because I didn't know any better. If I'd had a preview of the communal bathrooms, I probably would've lobbied for the Scottish equivalent of a Best Western. But it didn't end up mattering because I had a bad cold for that weekend trip to Scotland. I had this hacking cough that made me sound like a woman in a Victorian novel, one who has the consumption. It didn't stop me from hiking Arthur's Seat because, again, I was twenty-one. And I didn't let it stop me from sleeping. I took a sleep aid called Night Nurse. In the U.S., it's called Nyquil. I don't know if they're actually equivalent, but when I asked a pharmacist at Boots for Nyquil, dripping pathetically and Victorian-ly, Night Nurse was what she gave me. It did its job, and I was more or less comatose, both nights at the hostel. I don't even remember if anyone else in the large, bunk-bedded room snored.

There's a teenage part of me that craves a rebellion I never got. That says let's pierce our nipples or start a big fight with our parents or quit our job and run away to Europe. Anything with enough teeth would satisfy this part of me, but then *I* come along, thinking, "That's silly. Why would we do that?" Or "I don't have enough money for that." Or even just an apathetic "Yeah, maybe" with no action to ever follow up on it. The closest I ever got to any of this "excitement" was moving to New York City after college and, though everyone around me tells me not to do this, insists I have it all wrong, I consider myself as having failed quite miserably at that whole endeavor. Yes, I got an internship and then a job, I made some new friends, I learned how to use the subway, I paid my own rent, I fought with our shitty landlord, I met Gloria Steinem, I worked my first private fundraising event, my first gala – all these hard and interesting things, but I just couldn't hack it. Turns out I'm not made of New York Stuff, and I find that hard to swallow (again: am I a loser?). I didn't even last a year in the Big Apple and though at the time I wanted nothing more than to leave, now I want nothing more than to go back. At least then I might be interesting.

This story is not about the hostel. I think I wish it was about the hostel, because everyone already knows hostels are unpleasant, because I knew that hostels were unpleasant, and the worst part about this story is how surprised I was. This story is about the airplane I took after leaving the hostel. It was something like seven a.m. I had a window seat. I'd bought a new purse at Primark the day before, black, rectangular, supremely functional. I remember this. I remember there was a book in my new purse for me to read. I don't remember what it was. I

remember that the man sitting next to me, who seemed about my age, somewhere in his twenties, was reading *American Gods* by Neil Gaiman. He was carrying an overstuffed bag, the sort of thing backpackers wear, and I remember thinking that he'd probably seen his fair share of hostels. Somehow he managed to stuff his giant bag somehow under the seat in front of him, though it left little room for his feet. I thought that sort of thing was a safety hazard, but the flight attendants didn't notice, or they didn't care.

As it is now, I live in the perpetual fear that having spent (almost) one year in New York City will always be the most interesting thing about me, the most interesting thing I've done. I did that at twenty-two years old. Since then, I've done very little. I have my boring job which holds all external markers of success and accomplishment, but I don't feel any fulfillment from it. As important as the grants I manage are, this is *not* what I want to do with my one wild and precious life. I'm getting promoted in January, if all goes according to plan, and every time I think about it, I'm hit with a wave of "God, I don't want to do that." But I've got good health insurance, I make good money, and I get to work remotely. How, in the reality of twenty-eight years old, do I walk away from all of that? What a wonderful dream, to spend my savings on some cabin upstate (it doesn't matter which state) where I can hole up for a year and write an amazing novel like I have always wanted to do. But there are two problems with this. One is the obvious one: it's an infantile dream, to cut ties with all responsibilities and just fuck off. I would never actually do it. The second problem is worse; I can't guarantee I'd write anything *at all* in that year upstate, much less anything good.

I struck up a conversation with him about the book. I've never been one of those people on public transportation who's out to make friends, but I was trying to do the sorts of things you do when you're traveling abroad. I'd always been told that leaving your comfort zone can be a good thing. Educational. We had a brief conversation, made briefer because he had an accent, and I only understood one in three of his words. It mostly consisted of him chattering and me smiling and nodding a lot, the way I always do when I'm having trouble hearing someone. The way everyone does. When the plane took off, I leaned against the window to try to nap.

What the man sitting next to me did was mild. A more permissive person, the sort of person I would like to punch in the face, would probably call it a bad attempt at flirting. First he tried to get me to lean my head on his shoulder. Weirder out but not alarmed, I refused. Then he pressed his leg against mine. Manspreading is annoying but not a crime, and he had that giant bag. I shifted to make myself smaller, and his leg followed mine. His hand followed his leg. He stroked my thigh. It took me a while, I don't remember how long, to slap his hand away, like it was a bug or a spider. If it had been a spider, I would have screamed and jumped up, run down the center aisle to the back of the plane, as far away as I could get, because I am very arachnophobic. But because it was a man, not a spider, I kept pretending to be asleep and hoped, hoped, hoped he'd just leave me alone. After that, he did.

I've been working on the same project for the last decade or so and I can't even say I've finished that. It humiliates me to say it, because it's what all *failed* writers say. They just can't finish a

book because there's always something to work on, blah, blah, blah. But I really can't get it into quite the right shape. There's always a plot I haven't thought through or a character that's falling flat or something else I've missed. It's like there's concrete in my creative mind and to work anything out, I have to chisel it away with a toothbrush. Things just take me a really, really long time. And, lest I get accused of it being a victim complex standing in my way, I've made peace with the fact that I work slow. I've set up habits and rituals specifically around giving me time and disconnecting me from hard deadlines, so that I have the right structure for me to think and play and write. So, the problem, when I really get down to it, is that I haven't given myself enough *time* over the last ten years. I couldn't even do what feels like the simplest of human misbehavior: make time to be creative.

Spiders feature in all my nightmares. Last week I dreamt that I was being followed by a man whose head was an enormous spider. The blind terror in these dreams is connected to what I might see: something horrendous, monstrous, grotesque. In my dreams I keep my eyes squeezed shut and run. Sometimes I cover my eyes but vision lingers, and I can't shut it off. These dreams end when I realize that I am asleep and force myself to wake up. *Wake up*, I chant to myself in them. *You just have to wake up*. It is a wrenching, wrestling struggle to land back in my sweat-drenched, half-conscious body before the monster catches up to me, before I look over my shoulder and see it there. This is a metaphor for something. This is a metaphor for everything.

*Make time to be creative*. It does feel so simple. Children do it. Depending on how we define play, animals do it. My mean grandmother did it. Making time to be creative is just part of being alive, yes? Some ineffable, beautiful piece of the soul is drawn towards it. A month to a flame on the long and very dark night of life. I feel it, too. Despite the failures, the horrors, the grind of capitalism, I always come back to some sort of creative practice. Simple, but also not so simple. "The grind of capitalism" sounds almost too much like an internet joke for it to have meaning, but "the grind of capitalism" is all too real. It saturates life, it saturates this letter. All this talk of responsibility and career, of being well-behaved and having health insurance, all that comes from the story capitalism tells us about what it means to be good. And when all I've craved for so long is to be good, to be that little saint upon the earth, of course I will grind myself and my dreams to dust in the cogs of their machine. The perfect worker, the perfect citizen, and for what? So someone will love me? So I'll win some award? So I'll finally be *good enough*? It sounds so foolish when I write it all out, but, boy, does that narrative have its claws in me. It's taking a long time to pull them out.

I don't know if my brother knows this story. I don't know if he's noticed that I avoid the window seats on planes. It's not the sort of thing I would tell him outright. He is twenty-four. I don't care if he knows, but I don't want to watch him searching for the right way to react, I don't want him to be uncomfortable because it would make me uncomfortable, and wasn't I uncomfortable enough when I was trying to press my body into the body of the plane, as though I could disappear into it? This adds inertia to the carousel of blame on which I am trapped. I know that

my brother respects women and that he doesn't need a reminder not to grope them, but is he as conscious of his size and his space and his voice as I am conscious of every strange man's size and space and voice, all the time? Am I failing him, and am I failing at feminism, if I don't remind him that women in public, especially women in strange places, are constantly running risk assessments and that men are always the most pervasive and unpredictable threat? Why am I more afraid of being a buzzkill than of saying that unlike you, Hozier, I will never do everything or be everywhere because my gender is a fucking cage?

I was so idealistic once, so hopeful, so in love with storytelling, and so driven to make something out of it. To build a life for myself where that was a central point. I haven't entirely failed – I have things like this project, which I love so dearly. But I crave so much more; my ambition has always been the only reckless thing about me. It's something to keep an eye on, but maybe, against the advice of all the stories, it's something to finally feed. I've been trying to direct it at Work with a capital W and it's finally become obvious that it's starving to death, my beloved ambition. Emaciated and angry, it's throwing itself against my ribs in a final plea for help. Thankfully, I'm listening, though I hope I've made it in time. Since, again, I can't actually give up my comfortable salary and stable job, we're going to have to get a bit creative to feed a creative ambition. Circling back to the beginning, on this issue of restlessness. Maybe you've pieced this together already, but I need to say it aloud for myself: I don't think I'm a loser because I've got no wild stories to tell, I feel like I'm a loser because I haven't been telling the stories that are running wild within me. Was that a bit too cheesy? Belaboring the point? Oh, well. My letter. My rules.

I'm alright. I promise I'm alright and that I am not trying to reduce the man's crime or my emotional response to it when I say that I'm alright. It was almost ten years ago, and I've long since made my peace with it. I am not afraid to travel; I am not afraid of planes. I did not meet the man on the plane so he could teach me a lesson, yet I learned it. I am not afraid, but I am vigilant; I am often if not always running fire drills. There is no Maserati, and it is not on fire, but I have been burned, so I know the importance of running. I know. I know the disappointing truth of this story, that I will never understand why that man felt like he could touch me; whether he has touched other women; whether it would have happened if I'd said or done things differently. I know, too, the worse truth: that it doesn't matter because the story still exists and will never stop existing, whether I tell it or not, whether I change how I tell it, whether I tell it to someone who can look back at me, someone who knows me, or not. These truths are maddening but not unbearable; I live with them. I live with the story, and I am alright. I still dream of spiders, not men on planes.