

How to Raise a Baby (How to Ease the Grief)

Ignore the ghost in the bathroom. If you never look in the mirror, you'll never know she's there.

Hold him at night and he won't cry as loudly. When he stops crying, so must you. Don't wake him or he'll wail.

Buy groceries with the cash from her suitcase. Don't rest your face against the satin lining. It doesn't smell like her.

Sing to him. Write him a lullaby and play it every night on her old acoustic Ibanez.

When your callused fingertips bleed, don't bandage them. Don't touch his face with your roughed-up hands.

Adjust to his circadian rhythm. Wake to his crying, not your own hoarse, screaming voice.

Disregard the ghost in the bathroom. Wash your hands in the kitchen.

Decide on a name.

Scrap it.

Write another lullaby. Rewrite it when it sounds too similar to the records you'd dance to with her. Play 'til your fingers are raw.

Speak to him often—he has half as much external input to develop from now. Recite multi-syllabic words he won't understand.

Redefine what it means to be alone. You're never alone with him, but he won't know you for many years. No one knows you.

Stem the tears when you pick up her guitar. Put your ear to its soundhole. Do you hear the ocean? Do you hear her voice?

Let him babble. He's on his way to forming words, you can see it in the shape of his mouth.

When the sunlight falls through the window onto his baby blanket, his cherubic face, the backdrop of your house, the empty shape she left behind: don't picture her silhouette. Close your eyes. Open them when her forgiving face stares out expectantly from the blackness of your eyelids.

Hold him, stroke his downy hair. Coo at him like you would a puppy, someone who doesn't know better, who doesn't know yet, who hasn't felt it.

Buy a sketchbook. Experiment with negative space. Trace your hand, like the cavemen, and fill the outside in so your hand seems to illuminate the page. Feel inexplicably connected to her.

Give him finger paints. Let him make a mess. Hang his masterpieces everywhere you remember her body inside this wretched house. Draw the two of you (him, not her) within a pastoral landscape.

Grow tired of the Ibanez. The lullabies. Tuck it away, into the closet she kept that suitcase in. Resolve not to open it—the closet. The memory.

Wake from the happiest dream you've had, where her bloodied hands were holding you and her bruised tapestry of skin was flush with yours, and trip over your feet on the way to the closet. Look away as the ground hurtles towards you. Muffle your cry when a sharp corner bludgeons your forearm. Don't bandage it.

Take a hammer to the bathroom mirror. She's in your periphery every day, at your heels like a stupid dog. Like someone who doesn't know better.

Dig through her box of thrift store jewelry for the ancient rosary beads she bought in Georgia. Wrap them around your hands so the gorgeous faceted red crystals become pomegranate seeds

spilling from your knuckles. Clutch them tight until your fingers hurt from the beads digging in—red against white like blood vessels in sclera. Pearls of blood on pale flesh.

Buy a pomegranate. Halve it. Spend an hour picking the seeds from the fleshy membrane. The red juice staining your fingers doesn't resemble blood. Pomegranate seeds weren't her favorite. (Don't feed them to him:

They are a choking hazard;
He has enough of her in his veins.)

Keep track of his mumbling. Don't cry when his first word is "Mama," looking up at you with her sweet calf's eyes, a tiny furrow between brows like hers, her angelic smile. If you cry, he will.

Write him more lullabies, with short monosyllables he might learn. Instead of speaking to him as you would a friend (as you have been, giving a soliloquy for his uncomprehending ears), speak slowly and clearly.

Replace the bathroom mirror. Watch her figure take shape in the corner. Match the smile she gives you. When she dissipates, sob inhuman sobs against the cold tile floor.

Decide on another name and whisper it into his sleeping ears. Tell him to internalize it, wake up with a sense of self. "Hazel." His eyes in liquid gold sunlight.

Sing yourself a lullaby while he snores. Continue past your trembling voice. Wade through the shallow water lining your thoughts. Fall asleep before you reach the other shore.

Leaf through her shelf of cookbooks and make a new recipe every night. Sit where you used to, perched on a stool beside the island, his chair beside you. Don't anticipate her asking you to pass the salt and pepper. Look at his face closely enough to remember her crooked nose.

Pick up the Ibanez on a warm night and pluck out her favorite song. Let the notes linger in the air, a sweet melodic smoke you would inhale if you could. When he reaches for it, curious, let him hit the strings. It is not discordant; it is love.

Watch his eyes light up when you bring home oil pastels. Draw a bright blue ocean, then watch him anoint it with brown and pink and yellow scribbles.

While searching for her sweaters, unearth expired formula from the first months of his life. Thank whoever is up there for tugging you through those sleepless nights.

(Mostly you believe it was her. The idea of her leaping along in front of you, graceful even in its destructive haunting of your life.)

Choose to enjoy the rain. Make a game out of it: heave him in the air like you'll drop him, pull him close to your chest and cradle his body while he squeals with delight. Let both of you get drenched and don't worry about sickness because it is summer. Allow your mind to dart back to running through a damp August morning alongside her. Close your eyes, feel the tears fall, and pretend it is the rain. Grin despite yourself.

Drive out to the woods for a day. Sling him across your body and, armed with mineral sunscreen, take on the world. When you summit, gaze at the beauty: of the mountains, of the wonder in his eyes. Test out the thought of her and when you do not cry, decide she can stay in your memory for now.

On the last page of your favorite of her cookbooks, pen the recipe the two of you invented. Scrawl your names in its title. Draw her face next to the line that says "the secret ingredient is love." Marvel at how it tastes sitting next to him.

Water the plants first thing in the morning, before he's awake, before you are either. Water the plants in your dream, and walk into the living room to find her playing solitaire and humming along to a record. Pull her to her feet, lean in, and sway. Feel her chin on your shoulder, her arms around your waist, the hair at the nape of her neck. Feel her breathing slow to match yours. Feel your heartbeats, syncopated.

(Consider you are lucid dreaming. How would you know to savor this without knowing her absence?)

Deep clean the bathroom and cry, not from pain but from catharsis. Wiping away, fresh slate.

(Don't lie to yourself. He is your fresh slate, has been ever since the beginning—her end.)

Finally put words to your pain. You wish she would've left a note, not stubborn bloodstains on the bright white tiles. Your hands are raw when the bathtub sparkles. Your tears drip onto the porcelain. She watches as you close the door behind you so it doesn't make a sound.

Think about how you will explain this to him. The words you will use, the care you will take. Wonder if he will cry the way you have. Will he mourn her? With nothing to mourn? He doesn't understand but he will, with so much of her in his veins.

Forget her on some days. Miss the memory as it slips from you, grains of sand falling to the other side of the hourglass. Be glad to see her go. Curse yourself at that thought. Decide she will never be gone from your mind. Her empty outline will outlive yours and his. She is forever, and you are becoming alright with that.

Live the life she wanted in her honor. Create it from thin air for him, for the brown eyes they share and how his hand curls around a single one of your fingers. Shoulder her mantle of courage. Pretend it is not a lie. Pretend it is not your invention.

Ease yourself into everything: lavender-scented baths; sharp painful memories; paint-stained jeans; fearful, prayer-like hope.

Greet the ghost in the bathroom. If you keep your eyes on the mirror, she will stick around longer.