

Recipe for Every Shade of Nothing

Ingredients:

Dead daughter

A spoiled birthday surprise

Twelve guests

1.

Hear muffled movement in your daughter's room. Let your heart skip eight beats. Put one foot in front of the other, repetitively. Expect nothing. Nothing at all. Carry yourself up the stairs, through the hallway, and to the door. Breathe in deeply—through your nose. Place your hand on the already cracked open door, wait a moment, and push. Witness the disaster before you.

2.

Assess the room. Allow grief to stroll up to your face and crack its bony hand across your cheek. It'll sound like a gunshot, echoing between newly barren walls. Part your lips, just a bit. Feel the blow of the hit as needles pricking your skin. You can't speak yet. Fear your words like a monster fears his own reflection.

See the birthday banner and the cone shaped party hats. Notice the contrast of the painfully colorless room against a weak array of unprepared yellow and blue decorations. Once the tension slathers every crevice of the bedroom like icing—then, and only then, may you slice the silence.

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“Adam, what have you done?” you quiver, finding his eyes, ignoring the awkward guests that stuff the room.

Push yourself further in. Graze your palms along the bare, bone white of your daughter’s formerly baby pink walls. Transport yourself back to a sunny morning, mid-April two years prior. Lay out the scene in front of you. You, in your old jeans—the ones you didn’t care about—paint clad and giggling at something Lily had done. The two of you had put on some music, letting it flow throughout the whole house like light. Lily, pretending to help, held a small dry roller and painted the undone walls with every color of nothing.

Now, gingerly prod at the emptiness of the room. Hold your body stiff as a board, as if breathing in would destroy what little remains. Take more steps, although you don’t want to, although you can’t feel the floor beneath your feet. Reach the closet and slowly skim your fingertips down the door frame. Marked measurements of Lily’s height are now buried under a bone white act of betrayal. The room is a husk, it’s a fruit that’s been carved and hollowed of its sweet insides.

Your heart will now start to pound so hard and so fast, you can’t feel it anymore. That’s when you may begin the next step.

3.

Stand still. Furrow your brow so deeply that you can feel your face crumpling into itself. Wish away this moment. Wish so hard that your skin pulls away from your body, until you’re left a delicate wound of a being. Every inch of you is an open sore, your outer layer, your armor, shucked clean.

4.

Further acknowledge Adam (your husband, her father), lingering in the middle of the room. Stand spiritless in place as he walks over. Feel him lean in, just inches from you. Recoil a bit, pulling your face away with resentment.

Hear him whisper desperately, “*Diana, say something. We have a crowd.*” The wrinkles around his eyes deepen.

His words land on the tip of your nose, his breath hot against your cheeks. Feel inclined to forgive. Feel obligated to understand, to listen, to hear him out even! After all, Diana, we do have a crowd. His arm is outstretched, gesturing to the gathering of people that fill the room. The crowd staggers its breath, remaining impossibly quiet. Some go as far to remove their rainbow striped party hats. A murmur spreads across the room as your friends and family shift uncomfortably. They had expected cake, laughter, and a rehearsed “Surprise!” But most importantly, they had expected closure. An ending to a chapter, the start of a new one.

Your husband stands there, frozen for a moment, taking in your reaction. Arm still partially raised, a beam from the yellow dome light on the ceiling glints off his wedding ring. Let it catch your attention before he begins to speak.

“I know what you’re thinking,” he’ll say. His voice is cautious and low, slathering so smoothly over the silent tension, you think it may be the only voice meant to be spoken.

The most important ingredient in this recipe: Forget that the cluster of people exists. Ignore the twelve guests standing uninvited in your daughter’s room.

5.

Ask Adam, “What have you done?”

Louder this time.

Expect that at any moment he’ll laugh! Maybe he’ll say, “It’s a joke Diana!” and a curtain will drop, revealing your daughter’s bed—her nightstand, her dolls, her pink walls, and her closet full of colorful recital dresses. Her black, worn out ballet flats will be placed into your palms; you’ll run your thumbs along their leather-like exterior with relief. You’ll be able to press the throat of those shoes to your nose and breathe in, just one last time.

“The closing date is set. This was going to be a surprise for you.” He pauses to look at your eyes. His discomfort grows, and he continues to coddle, “You’ve been hurting so long. I thought this might...move us forward. Together.” Notice his fingers pulling at the hem of his shirt. His voice gets softer the more he speaks, like he’s begging. Don’t respond.

6.

Watch the Happy Birthday banner hung upon the bone white wall flutter to the carpet.

Non optional: Suffocate under the obligation of forgiveness.

You should be calm, *lady like*. You should say, “It’s okay, you did what I wasn’t strong enough to do, Adam. Thank you, I love you.”

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Instead, imagine a moment you never lived: him carelessly tossing Lily's combs, thoughtlessly donating books. Imagine Adam pulling down her drawings, peeling princess stickers from the baseboards, lazily running a white roller over her shades of pink, coating the walls in every shade of nothing.

7.

Stare at Adam. (Her father.) (Your husband.)

8.

For this step in the recipe, you want to scream, wail, and beat on Adam's chest with your closed fists like an animal. You want to claw at him until your ache is his—and for him to stand there taking it.

Open and close your hands. Press each fingernail into your tender palm, one by one. Breathe in deeply—through your nose. Adam will watch you, his eyes flicking from your gripping hands to your pinched brows. He turns to his guests, “You guys can head out, thanks for making it.”

They whisper hasty goodbyes and slip out. The door clicks shut as the last guest exits, and the room darkens.

9.

Non optional: Resist the urge to rush into Adam's arms. You can long for the familiar embrace, but do not give in.

“I didn't ask you to erase her.”

“Babe, I didn't,” he pleads, his voice cracking as he slips further into regret, desperate for forgiveness. “I just thought...you know, we talked the other day—you said...”

“I didn't *ask* for this. You had no right.” Point an accusatory finger at him like you're bearing a weapon. “You. Had. No. Right.” Stab your finger to his chest with every staggering word. Let it feel good. Keep poking, stabbing, pushing. His shoulder bucks back, his jaw tightening as your finger digs deeper with each poke. But he doesn't stop you, he stands there and takes it. Take harsh steps towards him. He steps backwards, looking down at you as you force him to the back of the room. Your anger will dig its fingernails into him, and soon you stop hearing the words that fly out of your mouth, but you know that they are bullets. You can see it in his eyes.

Visceral and raw, hear your agony tear through your throat faster than you can speak it. Adam's back will reach the bone white wall with a thud. The room falls silent as you catch your breath. His mouth opens and closes, and he lets out a croak.

Drop your pinning finger from his chest. Take a breath and realize, there's no veil. There's no joke. Let your knees weaken and your shoulders fall.

10.

Succumb to it. Feel the comforting glow of sorrow's warmth approach you. She'll cup the round of your face in her hands and you'll feel like you finally fit. The last ingredient to your recipe. But sorrows heat is searing. Her palms melt to your jaw, and your flesh meshes together in a sticky, desperate burn. Sorrow climbs into you, welcomed now, seeping into the sockets of your eyes, the gaps between your teeth, and settling deep into the crinkles of your hands. You are one. When you speak, you taste her on your tongue. When you touch, you feel her sting.

Sink to the floor, palms pressed to the carpet. Let Lily's absence burn and breathe with you, a scorching you cannot release.

And then you're done.