

# Keeping Vigil at the Party

By Joy Einstein – Bethesda, MD

No one ever talks about how sad first birthdays can be. They tell you to celebrate, inventory your miracles, count the ways you survived the longest, shortest year. But when she exhales upon that single, trembling flame and smears blue frosting in her hair, I do not feel triumphant. I feel the slow, sad burn of goodbye. I am not celebrating, I am mourning.

I know what the end of year one means. It means that pretty soon she won't be my baby anymore, not like this—giggly, soft, and wild. It feels like a small vanishing. I can hear the future breathing in the next room, clearing its throat, like a speaker ready to take the podium. I am not ready to stand and let it in.

Lately I've been keeping vigil, fearing the slightest shift. I hoard her laughter, her baby belly laugh, as if I could tuck it in a drawer and open it again later. As the truly bereaved do, I record everything, living in fear that this or that might be the last time and I will forget to capture it.

I've been reevaluating religion too, just like I imagine people do when staring down death. Suddenly, I find myself reevaluating Buddhism and the idea of time circling back on itself. Reincarnation begins to sound less like theology and more like a vow: I will live, and live, and live again until I live the life that brings me back to her. Other times, I call her my angel and wince at myself, and then do it again, because somehow it is true. I can almost believe in angels and heaven, both of which I long since dismissed, because love like this keeps insisting on an origin I can't explain.

I've been bargaining lately too, like I suppose the truly sorrowful do. Give me one more baby, I say out loud to no one. I won't spend so much time at the office with this one, I promise to the void. I won't put this next one in daycare, I swear in the darkness, if you could just give me one more. I'll be softer, slower, more grateful. But the night does not respond. The quiet knows what I know: I am older and more tired now than I want to admit, and another is not a possibility. And besides, even the next one would have a first birthday too.

Instead, with my fragile, shaky heart, I pose for pictures and lick cake off of her chubby fingers. It is a small ceremony with balloons and plastic toys yet underneath, a wake.