

Birthday Buddy

by Steven J. Kolbe

His birthday buddy was like a wife to him: they were born a day apart.

This was coordinated, he believed, in the womb. Well, to be more accurate, *wombs*. She was due two weeks earlier but waited; he was due two weeks later but cut his womb-time (as the kids call it) short.

The first year that they discovered they had a shared birthday, they celebrated separately. She celebrated at a college bar with friends; he, wishing to eschew all traditional modes of self-aggrandizement and thereby diminish his then-rampant egotism, celebrated at his house. Alone. It was, as his birthday buddy would years later say, a terrible idea.

What did his birthday buddy remember from her 22nd birthday? Her friends making her a t-shirt, a boy from a cruise ship, camaraderie. What did he remember? Smoking a cigarette on his front porch, sitting directly on the concrete steps because he was too cheap to own a bench.

The following year, they decided to celebrate their birthdays together. It became a kind of tradition.

His birthday buddy was like a wife to him: they traveled together.

When their birthdays fell near a weekend, it became a traveling affair: Topeka, Kansas City, St. Louis.

These birthday trips went so well, they decided to take other trips--Chicago, New York, Cancun--and to celebrate more important holidays--Valentine's Day, Easter, Christmas. They met each other's parents and extended family. They began to align their future plans more and more closely.

They even celebrated their wedding day together.

His birthday buddy was like a wife to him: they babysat together.

Nieces and nephews at first. When that went well, they decided--like a young couple leaving a farmer's market and determined to start their own vegetable garden--to babysit their own.

First they babysat their first child together, then their second, and then their third--until it seemed they were always babysitting.

Their birthday celebrations grew in kind, from two birthdays in one shot to five spread out across the seasons, so that every couple months was a time of looking forward, looking forward to cake and presents and banners on the wall.

They found themselves suddenly in a constant state of festivity, exchanging their checkbooks for giraffe-shaped balloons, their pillows for piñatas.

His birthday buddy was exactly like a wife to him most of all because--when he thought of his future self strolling down a French promenade or exploring ancient archaeological sites or meeting the Pope--she was always there with him, sipping a café au lait, photographing a Hebrew inscription with her phone or reminding him to not call the Pope "Papa Frankie."

That's what a birthday buddy was for him: someone to celebrate with, to travel with, to build with and, most of all, to dream with.

