

# Joy, In Disguise

by Erica Vega

*"Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds,"  
James 1:2, ESV*

The day before I found out my daughter Dakota died, my boyfriend Derek lost his job. Even though Derek made most of our money, I didn't stress about it because I was happily pregnant, and Derek always figured it out.

At the ultrasound the following day, we heard the horrendous, *There is no heartbeat*. Those four words-of-fact propelled us into another dimension.

What?

How had this happened?

How could my baby die?

I labored 35½ hours and had Dakota on February 4, 2022. The doctors seemed surprised every time I declined pain meds or alternative methods to quicken labor. Why hurry it? What was I hurrying to? My daughter's funeral?

A crying baby is the reward of labor for many. No such reward awaited me. The reward would have to be the labor itself. *I get to give birth*, I told myself. *I get to do this*. I was training my mind.

During labor, I stayed as physically and emotionally anchored to the experience as possible. I enjoyed it.

Joy. Yes, that's right. I was in a state of joy. Not happiness. Not excitement. Not contentment. Joy is a thing of the Soul. I knew instinctively that submitting to The Great Mystery that governs all things, and feeling into the raw emotion of my loss, would bring me to the incredible depth and richness of Life.

And it is from that mindset that I labored into my grief. I would feel it all.

I cried day and night the first months. Such intensity of pain. Rage, envy, bitterness, hatred, loathing, shame, despair. I wanted to be dead so I could be with Dakota, but I didn't want to die. What emotion is that?

I was like a wild, rushing river.

Weeks passed before I could look at Derek, *really look* at him in his pain. And even more time passed before he confessed that he waited until I fell asleep to bring his grief into the altar of our living room and sob deep into the night, alone.

During the day, he buried himself in electronics, frantically looking for work. When Dakota's due date came and went, a switch flipped. My concern was no longer on my loss, but on survival.

We had almost no money. I pulled myself out of bed and went to work. I finally landed a job in October 2022. Weeks later, my mom was diagnosed with stage IV bile duct cancer.

A jolt into another dimension...again.

But this time, it was different. I welcomed the jolt. I stepped into my role as caregiver, daughter and POA with a heightened sense of appreciation. *I get to do this. I get to take care of my mom.*

Instead of feeding Dakota, I fed my mom her last meal.

Instead of waking in the middle of the night to tend to Dakota's needs, I woke to administer my mom's pain meds.

Instead of listening to Dakota's first cry, I listened to my mom's death rattle until her final breath.

Moments after Dakota's birth, the labor room filled with an invisible presence. This spiritual presence, like my grief, was almost uncontainable. It pushed against the walls, pressuring them to expand. I could hear silence. Nothing moved, yet everything grew.

That same presence was there for my mom's death. The entire home, expanding with a hovering chill, and twice, I caught glimpses out the corner of my eyes of my grandmothers, who passed years ago.

The ancestors had come to journey my mom home. What for them was a celebration, for me was a sorrow. Just like when Dakota made her descent Earthside.

The ancestors came and carried me, so I could carry my living family. I was the breadwinner. A bereaved mom. A dutiful daughter. Derek was still searching for a way to untangle the wiring that crossed when he lost his job and then immediately lost his daughter. It took him 17 months to untangle it enough to get consistent work again.

It was hard. It still is hard. On days when I don't want to get out of bed, or struggle to brush my teeth, or hate everyone, I have to remind myself: *I get to.* I get to have this day. I get to brush my teeth. I get to hate everyone.

Dakota's heart may have stopped beating, but mine has not. I get to live. I get to feel and experience and think. I get to ride the pendulum of life from grief to gratitude. The swinging of the pendulum, that's it. That right there. Count the swinging of the pendulum, count it all joy.