

Birthday Parties in Heaven: **Thoughts on Love, Life, Grief, and Other Matters of the Heart**

1. In this collection of essays, writer Ana Veciana-Suarez explores the topics closest to our hearts — love, grief, a need for security, and the overwhelming responsibility of children. Which is your favorite essay? Why does it resonate with you?
2. In the opening essay, “My Lowly Thatched Cottage,” Veciana-Suarez explores the importance of place and the need for rootedness. What does she mean when she writes that it takes time, “both in number of days and quality of hours,” to feel at home somewhere?
3. The closing essay, “Moving Up, Moving On,” examines some of the same issues of home but in a different way, as the author comes to terms with some of her childhood ghosts. How do our earliest experiences influence the adults we become? Did you have a teacher like Mrs. Scott in your life?
4. “My Father, Mi Papi” and “Stitchwork” are studies of the author’s messy, confusing, loving relationship with her parents and her need for approval. “Part of the journey of growing up and having children,” Veciana-Suarez writes, “is arriving at a point where you give your own parents the benefit of the doubt.” What does she mean? How do you arrive at acceptance of a mother’s and father’s very human traits?
5. In the lighthearted “Bugs in My Teeth,” the author chronicles her attempt to learn how to drive a motorcycle. Do you think she continued this pursuit? Have you ever done anything your friends would consider totally uncharacteristic?
6. The title essay, “Birthday Parties in Heaven,” Veciana-Suarez narrates her struggles with grief after her first husband and the father of children dies of a heart attack at the age of 37. Which of her anecdotes touched you most? Have you ever experienced a great loss? How did you deal with it?
7. Do you agree with the author that “love arrives with stealthy steps and when you least expect it” as she writes in the “Second Time Around” about her remarriage? Can people have more than one great love?
8. In “Ritual and Refrain: Scenes of a Miami Summer,” the author describes her fascination with this season, when she feels “suddenly, almost wantonly, like a young pupil awaiting the recess bell.” Do you have a favorite season? What do you like about it? Can you understand why Veciana-Suarez “clung to the ritual and refrain of my Miami summers”?

9. In “Now you’re off to a world of rathskellers and fraternities and dorms and study halls. Soon we’ll know how well I’ve taught you — and how much you have learned,” Veciana-Suarez writes in an essay to her oldest son as he leaves for college. She lists several points of advice. What would you tell your own child who is leaving the nest for the first time?
10. “Small Tomatoes” is an essay about marital fights. The author calls lovers’ spats “perversely intriguing.” If you have a significant other, what do you fight about? Are there certain triggers? Do you agree with Veciana-Suarez that reconciliation often follow a pattern?
11. After Veciana-Suarez’s first husband died, she “inherits” her mother-in-law, who has been recently diagnosed with Alzheimer’s Disease. The relationship is complicated, the responsibility demanding. How do in-law relationships vary? Are we obliged to continue caring for them post-marriage?
12. Which essay do you think was the most difficult to write? Which was the most fun? Why? If you were to write about your own personal experience, what topic would you choose and what would you say?
13. These essays provide an intimate look at some very personal situations. How does the author’s honesty influence your reaction? Should certain circumstances be off limits to writers?