

Good Measure

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In the summer of '76, my little sister and I were shipped off to Camp Rim Rock, set beside the leech-infested Cacapon River in the woods of West Virginia. I joined the other ten- and eleven-year-olds in the Cherokee camp, a jumble of rickety cabins at the top of a steep hill, while Patti—at nine a lowly Shawnee—was stationed closer to the lodge.

I remember the overpowering outhouse smell and the way the berries in my strawberry shortcake bled into the tiny dollop of cream. I remember the gnat that flew into my ear, buzzing there for hours until it finally died. I remember horseback riding and camping and playing tetherball for the first times in my life. But what stands out most from that summer is the song my sister and I learned there, “Obalaba Koobalaba”—one of those nonsensical chants of youth that burns into your brain and never leaves.

“Obalaba Koobalaba” had no theme and made no particular sense, sprinkled as it was with references to outdoor toilets, Czechoslovakia, whiskey and gin. It was a Camp Rim Rock original, and Patti and I quickly became masters of it. We could perform it faster than anyone, and as the years rolled by, we only picked up speed. Our voices rose and fell like monks reciting a mantra, our hands crossing, whipping under and over and back together in perfect unison. As we entered our teens, we raised the chant to another level: We performed it silently. In our heads we kept track, making all the motions at all the right times, finishing off with a triumphant slap of hands.

Nearly two decades after summer camp, on a cool, rainy afternoon, Patti and I re-enacted our mantra. I was now just shy of thirty; Patti was twenty-seven and nearing the end of her month-long

visit home from Namibia, where she'd been teaching English for the past year. We were grownups now, living worlds apart, and together again for an eye-blink.

We had just trudged up a mountain near Charlottesville, Virginia, in a steady drizzle. The trail had begun wide and graveled but soon gave way to obstinate boulders. We'd passed impressive stands of oaks and pines on our ascent before navigating rain-slickened rocks for the trip back down. But first, to my dismay, Patti crept along the wet stones to the cliff edge to peer down at the fog-shrouded valley that unfurled below us like a Thomas Cole landscape. How typical of my sister, gobbling up the world in huge bites, and of me, hanging back, thinking not of the beauty of the place, but only that she might slip and tumble over the edge.

Now we were back on smooth blacktop again, soaked but exhilarated. Our sandals, woefully inadequate for the hike, were caked with thick, red mud. It might have been the piney woods smell, or knowing that we wouldn't be together much longer, but in that empty parking lot, "Obalaba Koobalaba" entered my head again. I hadn't thought about it in years.

I wiped the rain from my eyelashes, gave Patti the look—raised eyebrows, expectant smile—and held up my hands, one palm up, one palm down. "Let's do it," I told her.

My sister needed no further prompting. She took the ready position, her palms hovering over and under my own. "*Obalaba Koobalaba Koobalaba FEASTDAY! Ob, no, no no not the feast day!*"

As the rain pelted down and crickets buzzed around us, we were eleven and nine again "*...Eeeny-meeny deci-meenie you fall down the eenie!*" We clapped hands together, palms first, then backs.

*"...The pages of the book have gotten mighty thin,
Take your mind off the subject and talk about GIN!"*

On "gin," we slapped our hands together one last time, and broke out laughing. And then, standing there in the sodden parking lot beside the mountain we'd just climbed together, we did the whole thing over again—silently, for good measure.

How could I know it would be the last time we'd perform that song together? How could I possibly know?

Eight months later, I woke up shaking. Not because I forgot and then remembered; Patti had been dead for weeks already, and the eviscerating shock that greeted me those first few days had mostly worn off. My anger at hepatitis A—a disease that rarely kills—had softened by now. No, on this particular morning I shook because I suddenly remembered the camp song we'd shared, no, *owned*. We owned “Obalaba Koobalaba,” and now that Patti was gone, I had no idea what to do with it.

Grief erupts in a series of spurts—first remembering, then forcing yourself over and over to come to terms with it. It seeps into every crevice of your being like thick, leaden paint, the pain dulling with each new layer but becoming ever more ingrained. Indelible.

Memories can't be trusted. We bend them, stretch them, examine them through the undulating prism of years. Sometimes all we have left is a snapshot, a whiff, a clenching in the pit of our stomach. So when the recollections we once shared suddenly belong only to one of us, what then? They become even more suspect. They remind us of our diminished life history. The rug might remain functional, but the colors have lost their vibrancy. The stitching is more ordinary. Some of the threads have been snipped.

The morning I remembered our camp song, I stumbled out of bed and padded my way to the full-length mirror across the room. Still half asleep and trembling, I stared at my tired reflection. I assumed the ready position but already, I knew: *This is futile*. The recitation Patti and I had perfected over the course of our lives was now only mine. And what good was that? I could do it with my eyes closed, without the words even, but I couldn't do it without *her*.

I decided to try anyway. I began slowly, raising my hands perpendicular to my chest. I summoned forth the impact of palms smacking.

“Obalaba Koobalaba Koobalaba feast day!”

Her hands weren’t so different from mine, really, with long, skinny fingers and delicate wrists.

“Oh, no, no no not the feast day!”

She always wore a bracelet or two. I imagined the ones from the summer before—a purple and pink one, woven by a favorite student, faded from the sun.

“Eeeny-meeny deci-meenie you fall down the eenie.”

Her head would bob up and down with the beat, her eyes focused on the movements, on not losing the thread.

“...take your mind off the subject and talk about gin!”

As I clapped my hands to the mirror one final time, it occurred to me that I hadn’t finished properly, that my movements had gotten ahead of the words. Without Patti facing me, backing me up, my timing was gone.

Two decades later, I squeeze my eyes shut. For a moment or two, I conjure her. I evoke the high, lilting voice, and the way she pinched her lips together whenever she fell deep into thought. I see her perennially bronzed skin. I mentally trace my finger over the jagged, vertical scar on her forehead where she slammed into the hall door at age eight and the hollow indentation just below her shoulder, where she broke her collarbone at twenty-four. She sits beside me on the warm concrete of our hotel balcony in Charlottesville, wiping the sweat from her forehead with a washcloth. She chews Trident gum. Spearmint—tasteless by now. Her shoes and socks lie in a heap beside her, exposing her calloused feet. But as quickly as I pull all the pieces together, they break apart again. The picture blurs and bleeds at the edges. *My sister is gone.* The details slip away even now, like water through clenched fingers. ☹