

THE FLIP

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If You Know, You Know

By Kim Miles

I really should know better. It happens every year. It shouldn't catch me by surprise after all this time and yet somehow it still creates a lump in my throat, a pit in my stomach, and a little bit of a hole in my heart.

DREADED SUMMER CAMP DROP-OFF DAY.

Oh, wait...do you think I'm describing the feeling I have when I drop *my* kids off at summer camp? No, no, no ... I'm describing the feeling I get when I see all of my friends on social media dropping off *their* kids at summer camp. Allow me to explain...

Big sigh. You see, I don't have children. (more on that later.) I have 6 beautiful nieces whom I love to spoil. In addition, I truly feel as if all of my friends' kids are like my kids. You will often see me at their soccer games, theater productions, graduations, you name it. I love to support all the little babies whom I've had the privilege of watching grow up right before my very eyes. I love to celebrate their successes, and I like to think that I'm here for them as a shoulder to lean on when things aren't always so celebratory. My best friend once said to me, "Kim, kids will never get all that they need just from their parents, that's why you play such a special role in their lives. Never forget that." And I never have.

So what's the big deal about summer camp drop-off? Why is this so different from other milestones like the first day of school or high school graduation or college drop-off day? It's hard to describe but there is something incredibly visceral about seeing the next generation of campers being dropped off by their parents at my childhood summer home. These parents are the same

"kids" who were my bunkmates summer after summer and now they're dropping off their children to embark on the very same adventures that we, as kids, enjoyed every year.

When I see these pictures, I'm literally transported to that spot right in front of the bunkhouse where I couldn't wait to get out of the car and hug my friends, unpack my stuff, and usher my parents off to leave me at my most favorite place in the whole wide world. Camp was *the best*. If you had the privilege of going away to summer camp, you know the freedom that I'm describing—that special bubble that embraces you for 8 glorious weeks of a single season. It's 8 weeks of silliness and singing; double dares and dances; sports and sailing; campfires and color war. It's where first kisses and crushes take shape. Sometimes it's even the backdrop to your very first heartbreak. And if you had a summer birthday that took place at camp like I did? Bonus! There's *nothing* like a camp birthday celebration. It takes the cake. No matter the memory, you look back on those days with such nostalgia and you can close your eyes and feel all the feels all over again. When a song comes on the radio from those summers, you smile because you remember where you were and with whom, and you just know that when those friends hear that same song, they're smiling, too.

Strangely, there's a unique sense of mourning that I experience when I see my friends at our summer home leaving their children to do what we did. I think it's because I always saw us doing this together, as a group, watching the next generation build that same bond. A



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bond that rings true to this very day. It doesn't matter where I am in the world or how much time has passed, if I reconnect with an old camp friend, it's like no time has passed at all. The jokes are still funny, the stories are crystal clear, and the walk down memory lane is always welcome.

My sadness lies in the fact that I realize I'll never have the next generation with whom to share this experience. I'll never have the opportunity to listen to my child tell me about their reign during color war or watch their eyes light up when they regale the tale of which team prevailed in the famed day-long relay race. I'll never be able to show them my old yearbooks and have them read what my friends wrote to me on the last day of camp—the magic being that these are the friends who would have been the parents of their friends at camp. It's a passing of the torch and another chapter that sadly stops with me. While most people enjoy the rites of passage such as the first day of school or graduation from high school and many go on to college, these rituals seem a bit more commonplace, hence those pictures don't affect me the same way. The difference with camp drop-off is that not everyone goes to camp and that's what makes it so special. That tiny community that becomes your whole world, your summer family: that gift is what I ache to have been able to give to my child so that we could have shared the experience together.

Despite this incredibly singular event, I've come to peace with not having children. So much so that I was invited to deliver a TED Talk on the subject. In my talk, I describe how I embrace my child-free life and explain that I am child-free by choice. There are a lot of life experiences that led me to the choices I've made, but I celebrate them and throughout my talk, I encourage other women to celebrate their choices as well. Whether

those choices revolve around marriage, having children, career paths, it doesn't matter. Women should be open-minded enough to learn about others' paths and the decisions that support those choices. We should be lifting each other up and celebrating one another instead of speculating and judging. My favorite quote from my talk is: "Bridging the gap between our perceived, projected future self and our actual present-day self is an act of self-love and acceptance." This is my wish for all women who struggle with their choices, and it is the mantra that I embrace and rely upon if ever I'm questioning my own.

All this said, I'm not sure if I'll ever feel differently when the seasons change, the sun starts to shine, and the countdown to camp drop-off is on. I may still feel that pang while scrolling through social media and watching the annual ritual unfold. But that's okay. As I listen and take comfort in my own words and bridge the gap between my nostalgia and my new rituals, I realize that I can celebrate my feelings by sharing memories with people like you: my readers, my audience. Perhaps this resonates with someone who was a lifelong camper and is feeling all the feels with me as I type these words. So to you, I'll smush my s'more and scroll through social media when the summer days are upon us. I'll even press "LIKE" when I see your child in front of their bunk with a huge smile on their face just because I know exactly what they're feeling in that very moment. They may not remember to verbalize their gratitude, but allow me to speak on their behalf: Thank you for the gift that is summer camp.

Summer camp spirit lives on and on and on. (And for all my fellow Camp Tevya-ites from Brookline, New Hampshire...if you know, you know.) 🪑

