

Oshkosh

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The journey to Oshkosh begins on a runway, the air humming with the engines of a hundred small planes. That day, like every summer before it, as we waited to take off, the Beechcraft Bonanzas and Barons lined up three planes across. They're small aircraft—lightweight, six-passenger planes with either a single or double engine.

I broke the airlock on my family's Baron's door so I could take a photograph of the spectacle. My dad leaned over to help me hold the door open against the tornado-like gusts shooting down the runway. Then I crawled out onto the wing, camera in hand, and stood, bracing myself against the plane's frame. Ahead of us, T-tails and V-tails converged on the horizon, and familiar tail numbers trembled like a mirage in the distance. I lifted the camera to my squinting eyes to capture the photo that still hangs behind my dad's desk. I believe anyone that's been on that runway could look at that picture and still hear the whir of the propellers and feel the anticipation that surges through us as we waited to take off.

From Rockford, Illinois, the world's largest formation of civilian aircraft takes off in groups of three—one leader and two wingmen in a triangular formation. Assuming the weather doesn't take a turn for the worse, or someone's instruments don't fail—disruptions that have happened in the past—the forty-five-minute flight is usually uneventful. We break through the clouds and descend into Oshkosh, Wisconsin, home to the world's greatest aviation celebration.

I've made this trip since I was five, when my mom would strap my siblings and me into boosters in the back cabin before climbing up front next to my dad in the cockpit.

One after another, formation groups touch down on the runway in Wisconsin. In order to allow our armada-sized group to land, the air traffic control tower has to enforce holding patterns for other aircraft. Our arrival seems to be one of the most anticipated events of the week—of course, this is next to the Blue Angels or the AeroShell aerobatic team's performances during the air show. When our planes land, other pilots, aviation enthusiasts, families with children, and ground patrollers line the runway, collecting in a crowd waving frantically to catch our attention.

When I was young, I reveled in the celebrity treatment as I peered out from the plane and waved back. As I got older, I tried a little harder to hide how much I enjoyed the attention. Ground patrollers directed our plane from the runway onto the uneven terrain of sunburnt grass. The patrollers, who wore camouflage and reflective aviators, dipped their chins in acknowledgment as they waved us forward with bright orange batons and organized each plane in our caravan into orderly rows. On that airfield next to an active runway, we pitched tents, tucked between our Barons and Bonanzas and under a Wisconsin sky.

Though it feels like I've spent my whole life there, my reunions with Oshkosh only last four short days and three nights in a tent under the Milky Way. Hardly a love affair, and yet every year at the turn of July, I find myself right back in that town's embrace.

Ever since the age of five, I have welcomed this routine, because with summer came Oshkosh, and with Oshkosh came boundless freedom that only children knew how to use and abuse. By the age of eight, my parents severed my leash, and I spent long days running wildly through an untamed field, darting in and out of tents after my friends, and playing mischievous tricks on our parents. It gave us unbridled joy.

Oshkosh was, and is, a breeding ground for reckless activity. As the sun dipped below the trees, the voices of my friends rose until we yelled over one another, our tumultuous laughs silencing even the incessant cricket chirps. Everything seemed perfect, and even though at eight, nine and ten years old I didn't really understand forever, I knew that I wanted my summers here to last forever.

The following year when I was eleven, I became the designated babysitter to seven kids. My siblings, Sarita, Sydney and Colby, and their friends, Ricky, Katie, Gia, and Natalie had somehow all fallen under my care. The parents, including my own, decided that I was responsible enough to keep track of the younger kids, which, I came to find out, abetted their kid-free agenda for the week. My parents also knew I wanted to start babysitting soon and thought watching the seven youngsters would be valuable practice—a speech I got before they ducked into the “adult tent” to get “adult drinks” before the camp-wide BBQ. Long games of freeze-tag, evenings of lazy card games, and nights of nursing root beer disappeared into summers past.

Now I gazed down and saw seven kids staring back at me. The first couple of hours were anything but smooth. Sarita and Natalie wanted to play hide-and-seek, Sydney and Katie wanted to watch a movie in their tent, Colby and Ricky wanted to run off with some other boys, and Gia had decided that she belonged firmly on my hip. They scattered like ants.

Suddenly, all the hazards of Oshkosh that I had been ignoring for years seemed dangerous again. After all, we were camping in a field full of airplanes, some of which would roll out to participate in various airshow events of the day. I felt my grip on Gia tighten every time a propeller roared to life, and I immediately did an inventory count of what had effectively become “my kids.”

When they weren't in my sight, my anxiety spiked. My days alternated between taking Gia to the bathroom, looking for the girls, taking Gia to find something to eat, then looking for the boys. My existence in Oshkosh shrunk to a continual game of hide-and-seek, but I was always *It*.

As the days passed, my transition into premature motherhood became less daunting. By the fourth and final day, the parents hailed me as a professional. And so, caretaking became my new normal in the following years. I still stole glances at my old friends as they went from playing juvenile games to pitifully flirting with each other. I often wondered how my summers in Oshkosh would have been different had I never split from that crowd. Would I have been happier surrounded by kids my own age instead of babysitting? But I silenced those nagging thoughts whenever my

younger charges called on me to mend a fractured friendship, or when Gia asked me to lift her off her feet and spin her around and around.

Once I turned fourteen, for several years I didn't go to Oshkosh. I had made it on my high school's volleyball team, and knew I wanted to dress Varsity by the season's end, so volleyball took precedence in my life. I would stay at friends' houses while the rest of my family made the annual pilgrimage, returning with stories of that year's adventures.

As I became more involved in volleyball and other high school clubs, Oshkosh started to fade into a distant place in my mind. I was finally able to return when I was seventeen, and I didn't realize how much I missed it. I couldn't wait to see what had become of my childhood and summer home. Even though I knew what to expect, I still found it hard to believe that "my kids" were all self-sufficient. They didn't need someone to walk them to the bathroom, or settle an argument, or keep an eye on them anymore. Even Gia was too big to rest comfortably on the curve of my hip.

I no longer spent whole days chasing rambunctious kids around an untamed field; instead, I found myself, with only a book as my company, nestled in a soccer chair on the flight line. Every time a plane behind me grumbled to life, I couldn't help but twist in my chair to make sure no one was in its path.

The dormant anxiety associated with watching seven kids slowly disappeared, but only emptiness replaced it. I had come to define my time in Oshkosh as time spent babysitting. So now that I had no kids to watch, Oshkosh appeared to lose its charm. I watched as it all continued to turn about me, but *without* me, and I kept asking myself 'what now?' I realized was too old for childish gossip, and too young for the adults' alcohol-charged interactions. I existed in a limbo.

During one of these nights, when my dad asked me where the other kids were, I jokingly replied that my indentured servitude had ended. It took me a second to comprehend what I'd said. Surely by admitting that I no longer felt an obligation to babysit, I'd also declared that my time in Oshkosh was drawing to a permanent close.

On what I thought was my last night in my summer home, I sat outside my tent and tried to commit the scenery, smells, and sensations to memory. I tried to remember what a plane's silhouette looks like backlit by a setting Wisconsin sun, or how much the Goodyear Blimp poked out over the trees as it swayed from its tether to the ground. I tried to remember the smell of fuel mixed with grilled corn dipped in butter, or the scent of a storm on the horizon that splits the sky with ominous clouds. And I tried to remember the sound of a chorus of crickets that sang me to sleep each night, and the thunderous, sputtering T-6 engines that woke me in the morning.

As I resigned myself, Gia appeared. I remembered helping her get dressed in the mornings and making sure she brushed her teeth at night; how she would slip her tiny hand into my own, because I think she just wanted to feel the security of someone holding on to her. As she stood before me in her eight-year-old frame, I remembered that, like the others, she no longer needed my constant presence.

But then she asked me to pick her up and spin her around in circles, just as I used to do. And when I did, her uncontrollable giggle made her sound like a three-year-old again. And when we collapsed into the chair together, her delicate frame fit perfectly into my arms, just as it always had. She told me about school and her friends, and everything I had missed while I had been away. The day's heat had worn our energy thin, and we soon fell silent and just gazed up at the stars.

Eventually, the others found us and for the first time in a long time, I felt as though I had returned to the "old" Oshkosh.

Since that night, I have returned to Oshkosh intermittently over the years, my last venture north being last summer when I was twenty. My family still set up its palatial tent, consisting of four compartments so large that each could accommodate a queen-sized mattress. The grass was still yellow, brown, and brittle after baking in the July sun. When I walked, grasshoppers shot out of the grass like popcorn kernels in a kettle.

We still trekked across the airfield, wary of landing planes, to our pilgrimage site: Durango's Mexican Restaurant, where the staff still regarded our party of 25 apprehensively and found tables for us anyway. We still wore our B2OSH tie-dye shirts, and greeted the other formation pilots and their families who wore the same attire. The rumbling sound of T-6 engines or the piercing, shrill sounds of F-16s still woke me in the mornings. At the start of our day, we still walked the half-mile from the campgrounds to the cake donuts stand before we split up to look at the hundreds of displays that filled the hangars.

I still knew exactly how to get to the NASA tent, and where the WWII relics were parked; I knew how to find the Fly Market, the Food Court, the central air traffic control tower, and how to get back to the flight line for the airshow. Acrobatic bi-wings still did daring loops in the air, and a formation of WWII bombers still flew overhead with Red Tail P-52 escorts as sirens screamed out to simulate an air raid.

Still, I felt that something wasn't right. Everything was familiar, but nothing felt the same. An unbridgeable distance remained between the kids I used to babysit and me. I had realized over the years that our friendship had been built upon a foundation that dissipated as they grew older and didn't need me around. Not to mention, the gap in our ages seemed to widen as we aged. Conversations about high school dances couldn't measure up against the things I had witnessed in college, but I definitely wasn't about to relate those stories to them. We existed in two separate spheres that, I thought, their developing maturity might merge, but didn't.

As I watched the same stunts streak across an unblemished sky, I grew increasingly depressed and lonely. Oshkosh had lost its luster, and I didn't know how or what could bring it back. I had seen the same stunts for over a decade. Pilots that intentionally stalled their planes to make it appear that they were spiraling out of control towards the Earth, or two bi-wings flying at each other threatening a collision no longer thrilled me. I began to wonder if the best part of Oshkosh was

just the journey to get there, because everything else made me feel like I was trudging towards some departure that I'd longed for days before.

I reflected on all this when, towards the end of the show, a black jet, sleek and as threatening as a wasp, slid into view. The booming voices of the commentators had fallen silent, which made me sit up straighter. The jet started as a speck, and slowly drew closer. I watched with curiosity as the fierce-looking bomber grew on the horizon. Its silent approach captivated me, and I didn't understand why I couldn't hear its thrusters by the time I could appreciate its true size, almost that of a commercial plane.

I realized my mistake too late, and before I had time to cover my ears, the B1 had thundered past. A split second after flying overhead, its supersonic thrusters rattled my heart against my sternum. Vibrations threatened to tear my skin from its bones. The air compressed my ribs as if trying to fuse them together. My eardrums screamed. Through it all, an uncontrollable laugh burst from within me as the black jet dove back into the cloud cover. Time seemed to freeze as the B1 arrested the attention of the thousands in attendance that day with its monstrous sounds. I thought the fabric of the air must have surely been damaged with sound waves like the ones the B1 produced. Its second pass was even more exhilarating than the first.

My core trembled with the air, and I looked around at everyone's faces. Many gazed upwards with their mouths opened wide. I couldn't help but laugh, completely overwhelmed by the joy of being surrounded by so many others who had seemingly fallen in love with gazing skyward with wonder too.

It was in that moment that I remembered what drew me back to Oshkosh every year. I realized the experience of getting to watch aviation push the limits of the atmosphere, space and speed ignited a passion in me that my dad had sparked over fifteen years ago. Surrounded only by the people witnessing the same feats and spectacles, and sharing in a collective moment of amazement is a sensation to which I have become addicted.

Despite the years that muddled my memories with the responsibility of caretaking, my reason for returning became clearer to me then than in any other moment. Everything Oshkosh had been, was, and will be to me, pulsed in my heart and burst forth in the form of a triumphant holler as the B1 passed over my head for its last flyover.