

Like a mother and child

By [Laura Kelly Fanucci](#)

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I was 12 years old and away at summer camp for the first time. She was the counselor assigned to my cabin. I remember her long dirty blond hair, wavy and wild. Her weathered hiking boots and the lilac shirt she tied around her waist each morning.

Her birch-bark name tag read *Marion*, but we all chose French pseudonyms for our two-week [cultural immersions](#). So I never knew her real name.

She was blessedly kind, with that standard-issue camp-counselor caring heart. She let me snuffle into her shoulder one lonely night when I was feeling homesick. She probably did the same for every girl in our bunk, though we were all too cool to admit it in daylight.

She didn't care when we giggled our way through quiet time. She ignored our whispering in English when we were supposed to be practicing French. She laughed when we gossiped about the boys in the bunk next door.

**And every night she sang to us:**

Who knows where she got the song. Whether her mother cooed into her own ears as a baby, or a beloved grandmother hummed while they rocked together. Who knows why she chose to sing us a child's song, when every other counselor crooned camp ballads or classic oldies or old folk tunes to wind down their charges for the night.

**But she sang us a lullaby.** And even though we were awkward and eager girls on the cusp of adolescence, we let her.

Last night I crooned these words into Joseph's ears as he screamed and fussed. By the fifth time through, just when I thought my head would explode if I didn't get back to sleep soon, he was silently sucking his fingers and staring up at me with those unblinking round owl eyes.

The song had worked its magic again. **It always does.**

Is it odd that one of my favorite lullabies comes from not from a beloved relative, but from an almost-stranger I once knew for two weeks? I have sung this song to every child I baby sat. Every niece and nephew I rocked. Every newborn of my own.

And each time I hum its melody, I reach back to this young woman, singing softly to a cabin of girls tucked into the settling summer woods, distant loons calling to each other on the dark lake beneath our windows.

I don't know what happened to Marion. I wrote to her eagerly the rest of that summer and into the fall. She sent me one letter from college, short but kind, postmarked from Madison. I came back to camp for three more summers. She never returned.

She probably never knew that the song she sang each night at lights-out would imprint itself on the mind of a young teenager and carry into her own motherhood. **But she taught me something about being a parent.** Even when I was miles away from my own family, even when I was only 12 years old.

She taught me that tenderness is an offering, an openness, a gentle hospitality to whomever needs our love. She gave this gift that sweltering summer to 12 girls tucked into creaky wooden bunk beds.

Maybe one day, a child will remember I shared this song with them. Maybe it will be one of my sons. Maybe it will be a niece or nephew or neighborhood kid I babysat growing up. Maybe they will sing it to a child of their own. Lullabies are sung to be shared, after all.

My hope is that they (and I) will remember how sharing these small holy moments—when day meets night, when waking meets sleeping, when cry meets comfort—can shape us over time into gentler people. People who make space for what is tender and vulnerable and in need of love.

Like a mother and child.

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