

# Enjoy the Scenery

Scott Emison

The Smoky Mountains in winter are a sight to behold. Draped in the white blanket of winter, their faces are dotted with firs that seemingly catch every flake of falling snow, pronouncing to the world their rugged beauty as they carpet an endless sea of rolling peaks. That winter, no one appreciated that rugged beauty more than eleven-year-old Scott. As I marveled at the landscape from the window of my family van, little did I know those mountains had a lesson to teach me.

My family took vacations often. Twice a year, every Christmas and early summer, we'd find somewhere away from home for a little rest and relaxation. Sometimes the destination was halfway across the world. Sometimes it was an hour up the interstate. My dad, a career military officer, and my mom, a mother of five kids too smart for their own good, found the trips desperately needed. For our part, aside from occasionally reminding Mom and Dad that recess from work doesn't mean respite from us, my siblings and I played along well and ran into the experiences head-on. We had reason to. Mom and Dad made the trips engaging, educational, and enjoyable. Realizing every good hamster needs a wheel, they centered our getaways around places historically significant and naturally beautiful. Then, once we got there, they put our bodies and minds to work. At the end, we would return home with a deeper appreciation for some person, place, or period of history. This year, after our trip to those rolling peaks, eleven-year-old Scott departed with a little more: a deeper appreciation for life.

Not long before we left, Mom found it prudent to acquire a 15-passenger, navy-blue Chevrolet Express. As we came of age, the traditional minivan began to feel cramped, so this full-size van was a welcome addition. With the extra legroom, the air was especially cheerful on the way up, and as the landscape grew more animated, so did our spirits. By the time we spotted our first flakes of snow on the rolling peaks bordering Tennessee, the cheer was palpable.

When the Emison Express finally came to a stop, we were surprised to find our destination a Catholic retreat. We grew up regularly attending mass, but a monasterial family vacation was unusual. A week later, as I clung to a tree branch for dear life, I wasn't too upset I'd spent the last

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week growing closer to God.

After a week of devotionals and at least a thousand Hail Mary's, we left the retreat for some hiking in the Smokies before heading back home. While the reflection brought us closer as a family, it couldn't break one universal truth of Emison family excursions: if we're outside, my older brother, Josh, and I splinter off. There was no better place for us to roam than the side of a mountain. Breaking off the trail, we ventured forth into the tangle of firs blanketed in snow and lightly dusted with the sweet scent of pine. The world was ours.

We traversed uphill for at least an hour before slowing to take in the experience. Mountain vacations were always my favorite. The forest towered a hundred feet over our heads and smelled like a well-lit Christmas candle. Around us, it was serenely silent but for our footsteps and the occasionally rustling branches. This was worth a week of praying the rosary every day. Hiking higher up the ridge, I relished in a rare occurrence in my life: snow. It shone pure and white under the mountain sun and capped the moment well. Almost too well.

In my state of euphoria, I would have asked Josh to pinch me if not for at that very moment, fate finally decided to smack me off cloud nine. As I looked down at the snow, the face of the mountain gave out from under me. A web of branches, dead leaves, and frost, concealing a crack in the mountain's face, gave way as I stepped above. I plummeted down a mountain chasm with no end in sight.

I fell for roughly a full second in reality and an hour in perception before my right underarm felt like it was smacked full force by Sammy Sosa at a home run derby. I'd crashed onto a heavy tree root extending into the chasm and now, supported by my armpit alone, I dangled over a seemingly bottomless fall. Looking up, I saw the opening of the crack, and Josh staring agape at my precarious situation. "Don't let go!" he yelled, disappearing behind the rocky wall imprisoning me. "Great advice, Josh," I thought as I leisurely swayed in the breeze. While Josh searched for any artifact to assist in my recovery, I lost patience. I hoisted myself onto the root, hastily balanced on top, reached up, and pulled myself out. I clambered over the ledge to see Josh's face of relief. "We should probably

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head down,” he observed. Great advice again, Josh. My heart still beating as if a mountain lion were on my tail, we followed our footprints back down.

Besides a brief explanation of how I fell, Josh and I didn’t speak much about my brush with death. There seemed to be a mutual unspoken agreement to not raise the issue. Being responsible to Dad for my safety, Josh preferred not to spill the beans that I came within a couple feet of splattering, and I wasn’t dying to revisit my fall either. We reunited with our family at the base, assured them our trek was delightful, and boarded the Express back home. It was my first and thus far most intimate flirtation with my own mortality.

There are two takeaways from my Great Smoky Mountain Trip. One, you’ll never sleep better than in your own row of a fifteen-passenger van after flaunting death itself; and two, we don’t control our fates as much as we like to think. When it’s time for the mountain face to fall from under you, it will, and there’s nothing you can do about it except enjoy the scenery.