

Shadowed Places



by
Smoky Zeidel

Copyright 2017 Smoky Zeidel

All rights reserved. No part of these stories may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means without written permission from the publisher, with the exception of brief quotations in a review.

This book is a work of fiction. Characters and incidents are the product of the author's imagination and are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to events or persons living or dead is purely coincidental.

Thomas-Jacob Publishing, LLC
USA

Table of Contents

[Leap](#)

[Breathe](#)

[Good-bye, Emily Dickinson](#)

[Lesser Offenses](#)

[More Books by Smoky Zeidel](#)

[About the Author](#)

Leap

THE VIEW FROM up here is incredible and makes me feel so alive—cliché, I know, but when you consider I've come up here to die, you'll recognize the irony in the statement. Maybe I'll go out on a whole string of clichés. I feel fit as a fiddle, happy as a clam, strong as an ox.

Crazy as a loon. I know that's what my children are thinking right now. By now they've probably found the note I left them. I wonder if they've already begun their pursuit.

The river roars past me, slamming a fallen tree branch against a rock and splintering it into shreds before rushing over the granite shelf that is the top of the falls. Spray defies gravity, and water droplets hang mid-air in a momentary state of suspended animation before plunging to the deep pool ninety feet below.

I edge closer to the rim and look down. The pool looks different from up here, a bowl worried out of the granite over millions of years. Wondrous stuff, water. Soft enough to glide through without creating much more than a ripple, yet hard enough to shape the rock.

This is my favorite place in the world, this waterfall tumbling down the side of this mountain. This is where I choose to die.

I close my eyes and take a slow, deep breath. These mountains have a scent all their own, a signature perfume. I've smelled it every time I've come here, but this time, I realize I can break down the individual essences perfuming the air: rotting rhododendron blossoms mixed with moss-covered granite and cold, crisp water. I've never before noticed that granite has a scent—like the air just before a storm, vaguely electrical—or that water smells cold. I smile. Now *this* is a near-death experience. No bright lights at the end of a long, dark tunnel for me, thank you very much. Give me the mountains, *my* mountains, anytime.

The sound of the water almost drowns out a rumble of thunder tumbling over the ridge behind me. It always is raining somewhere in these mountains. If you don't like the rain, just get in your car and drive to the other side. More than likely, the sun will be shining.

I laugh, realizing I've just come up with the ultimate allegory for my life. It's raining on this side. I'm ready to drive to the other side.

Raining is somewhat of an understatement. I've been caught in a deluge. A hurricane, *terminus existica*. Inoperable brain cancer. I thought I was getting migraines from spending too much time sitting in front of the computer. I asked the doctor for some Imitrex. What I got was a death sentence.

The oncologist told me I had options. Radiation. Chemotherapy.

Vomiting, diarrhea, hair loss. "No thank you," I said.

The kids weren't happy. "It'll give you another few months," they said. *Weakness, fatigue, burned scalp, loss of appetite.*

"How can you be so selfish?" they asked.

Pain. Constant, unmitigated, excruciating pain.

"How can you?" I replied.

I used to bring them here when they were small. Justice liked to look for salamanders in the river downstream from the falls. One time, when he was maybe seven or eight, he turned over a rock and found himself staring a two-foot long hellbender straight in the eye. Startled the blazes out of me, but Justice just reached out and grabbed it, slippery as it was. He got a hold of it for only a few moments, but it was one of the highlights of his childhood.

Artemis, on the other hand, hated the woods. I never could understand how any child of mine—especially one named for the Greek goddess whose dominion was the forest—could hate the wilderness. We'd always put a book in our daypack, and she'd sit on a rock, sulking and reading, while Justice and I explored the river.

They're grown now, caught up in their city lives, working fourteen-hour days to pay their rent and maintain their upwardly mobile lifestyles. To them, vacation means flying to Jamaica in January, or going to Carnival in Rio. Cruising the Mediterranean, maybe. Not cruising the mountain trails of their youth. Neither one had been to the mountains in over a decade.

But they came when I asked them to. I told them I wanted us to be together, one more time, here. "Indulge a dying old lady," I said.

"You're not old, Mom, you're fifty-seven years old," Artemis pointed out. "And you wouldn't be dying if you'd take the damn treatments."

Despite their grumbling, they came. I took them out for a trout dinner last night—a tradition held over from their childhoods, whenever we came to the mountains—and silently said my goodbyes. Back at the motel I asked not to be awakened in the morning. "I'm exhausted," I told them. "I'll probably sleep until noon."

That is what I said. This is what I did: at five o'clock in the morning, I crept out of bed, pulled on my jeans and sweatshirt, and slipped out of my room. I went the long way around to the parking lot so as not to pass either Justice's or Artemis's rooms.

I got in my beloved old Volkswagen mini-bus and drove to the trailhead.