

HIKING MY DREAMS

at Grotto Falls

by Barbie Perkins Cooper

In June 2005, I kissed the corporate world of America goodbye. Tired of planning and coordinating events, answering to corporate rules and schedules, I decided it was time to follow my dreams

So, off my husband and I go to Gatlinburg, Tennessee where I've scheduled my first research trip for my new career as a travel writer. While driving through the mountains, we discover a sign. Grotto Falls just ahead. I tap Phil on the shoulders.

"Let's stop and take a hike. Phil looks at my feet, still embraced in sandals. "Don't you think you should change your shoes?" He asked.

Reluctantly, I rush to the back seat to get my socks and sneakers, furious that he is still telling me what to do. With digital cameras ready, we stroll up the mountain as a slight rain kisses our faces with raindrops. At first, we could stand under the trees and not get wet. The more we plunge into the falls, the wetter we get. Taking our time while gasping for breath, I shoot several photographs, continuing our 'easy' hike. Decaying trees, fungus and moss, along with the thickness of the woods make interesting images revealing a story my fingers itch to write.

What seems to be an endless walk going nowhere takes us at least an hour just to see the first tease of the falls! Stopping at this trickle of water, we are revitalized. With this first tease of rushing water, the falls can't be much further! Now, the rain isn't just kissing my face, I'm drowning, at least my face is, and I look more like a raccoon with blackened eyes than a human. I must look like a squirrel, but I dare not ask my husband. I wipe the rain pouring down my face. My hands are covered with black mascara. Phil stops to remind me to be careful; he was concerned I might fall. He knows

what a clumsy woman I am walking on hardwood floors, or simply walking. Breathless, but determined, I refuse to go back. I enjoy a nice hike, but this was almost torture.

A family of hikers, dressed with back packs, sticks and bottles of water in their hands meet us on the narrow, slippery path. I look at the tiny boy drinking from a bottle riding on his father's shoulders. I can almost taste the moistness as he gulps the water bottle dry. "Hello," I say, wishing they'd offer us a bottle of water. We move closer to the edge. The softness of the path moves under my feet. I look down, thinking if I fell, the doorways of Hell would open up and swallow me.

That's when I realize rules are made for a reason, and some rules should be followed, like the rules of hiking. Be prepared – we were not. Carry equipment – like first aid kits, bottled water, and wear good hiking shoes. Sneakers are comfortable and they certainly beat sandals during a hike, but some rules should be followed! What would happen if Phil or I were bitten by a snake? What if I broke a leg? Some rules, even those made by the Corporate World, should be followed!

Phil nods to the family asking, "How much longer?" The small boy atop his father's shoulders whimpers, "A long, long, LONG ways!" His father snickers. Phil scrutinizes me as I lean on a tree stump. "You okay?"

Huffing and puffing, wishing I had my inhaler I nod. "OK. Let's go." "Take a break," he responds, listening to the wheezing in my chest. "You've got your inhaler with you. Right?"

My look says it all. Knowing me as he does, I can almost read his mind. I'm certain he's thinking, 'Your inhaler is in the car. You should've remembered it!'

The endless path to nowhere continues as we plunge our bodies forward.

"I think someone lied to us," Phil says cynically. There's nothing ahead." "I'm not stopping. If there's a waterfall here, I intend to find it."

Phil grows more irritated with me every moment. Perhaps he doesn't like this determined woman I am now. Corporate America has changed me for the better in many ways.

"Look over here," I said, leaning over a bit. "If someone wanted to get rid of somebody, this would be the perfect place. I bet it goes all the way down to Hell. Who'd know?"

"Eventually it would smell. You trying to tell me something?" He asks, lifting his eyebrows suspiciously at me.

"No, just thinking out loud. Suppose it's the writer inside me, asking those what if questions."

"Whatever. Let's go. Time's wasting."

Reluctantly I stretch my aching legs.

"You wanna go back to the car?" He smirks. Phil and I continue the pursuit. Now, he's gasping for breath too as we climb steeper, placing our feet carefully along the slippery mud puddles. The rain is torrential now, as if someone turned a water faucet on high.

What seems to take forever, a stroll all the way to the Heavens feels like it was hours away. My arthritic knees ache, but I am determined. I will not be defeated, even if it is the last adventure I complete in my lifetime. I inhale, exhale, stretch my legs, and plunge higher. I hear the sound of water. "It's just the rain running down the mountain," I say to Phil. We hear the sounds of falling water and move closer. The falls are just ahead. I feel a sense of accomplishment! Glancing at my sneakers, I discover my legs, socks, and sneakers are covered with mud.

Startled at my determination, Phil sees the new and improved me standing before him. Excited to see the world as a new adventure, I'm energized, like the non-stop Energizer bunny. I grab my camera, zooming in to capture the pure, flowing, sparkling falls. This is heaven. I wipe the splashing water from my eyes, unaware if it is rain, or my tears. ■

