

Mule ride

Once Mary said yes to the angel, she signed on for a trip with no way out.

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December 12, 2001

WARNING: Pregnant women not permitted on mule ride.

Before my 11-year-old son Hans and I could begin a trip down the Grand Canyon on mule back, I had to sign documents indicating that I understood that the National Parks Service did not guarantee the safety of any participant and was not responsible for any injury, major or minor, brain damage or death, that might result from our journey. I had to state that we had no known serious health problems or heart conditions and that I was not pregnant.

These admonitions were repeated during an orientation session that was geared to weed out the weak-kneed. “If you are afraid of heights, have recently had open-heart surgery [someone in the previous week did and neglected to mention it before passing out], or are prone to whining—get out now and get your money back. If you are not willing to hit the thick-skinned mule with your crop [we were told to call it a “motivator”] in order to keep him within a yard of the next mule—get out now and get your money back.

“If you are not willing to drink your water on command and get hosed down halfway through to prevent heat exhaustion and dehydration—get out now and get your money back. If the switchback turns, where you will find yourself hanging over a 6,000-foot drop, will make you dizzy or upset—get out now and get your money back.”

We were instructed on how to sit, how to hold our motivator—let it dangle from the wrist like a bracelet until you need it—and how to brake the mule. When the mules stop, “They should face outward toward the canyon’s edge. This is desirable

because if a mule is spooked, its instinct is to back up. You want to make sure your mule backs up away from the drop rather than into it.” Indeed. We were not to get on or off the mule by ourselves. If any problem should arise, we were to cry “Help!” and our guide would respond. “If you cannot follow directions in English—get out now and get your money back.”

I entrusted my son’s life to a good-looking young mule named Cricket. Mine rested with the more shabby, experienced (and worn-out?) 20-year-old Blackjack. Hans and the other child in our group were led up front, closest to the guide. I was three long mule-lengths removed from Hans, but I realized that the guide might be of greater assistance to him in any emergency. We hadn’t gone more than a few yards along Bright Angel Trail when the motivator bracelet slipped off my wrist. “Help!” I cried out obediently.

“Are you going to be one of those high-maintenance women?” our guide asked as he dismounted to help me. “No, I’m not,” “I replied with uncharacteristic meekness, and clasped the motivator as if my life depended on it, which perhaps it did.

Bright Angel Trail was far narrower than I had imagined. Because there was no room for both a person and a mule to pass, hikers were warned to stand back against the canyon wall and let our mules pass. Hikers were warned not to move suddenly and spook the mules. I was also surprised by the roughness of the trail. The way was often both deeply pitted and stony. The mules seemed surefooted, but how sure could one be? At certain points, for reasons unclear to me, Blackjack hesitated. At such moments I was supposed to apply the motivator, but I wondered at the wisdom of hitting an animal who might be hesitating for good reason. I hoped our guide wouldn’t look back and notice my disobedience. The mule in front of us never seemed to hesitate and kept closer to the cliff wall. I was relieved to note that Cricket did also.

Why didn’t Blackjack do this? Blackjack plodded right along the very edge of the cliff, less than an inch between his hoof and thin air. “No one has been lost in 90 years,” the guide promised. “The mules know what they are doing and so do I.” This was comforting—to an extent. But can’t a mule have an occasional off day? There was very little margin for error here, and in Blackjack’s case, no margin. Nevertheless, I was eventually drawn away from my focus on the edge. After all, we had not embarked on this trip to spend it staring at mule hooves tamping down the red dust. We did it to see a wonder that was wrought over a million millenniums, one

that traced our planet's history in multihued waves of stone, towering mountains eroded to their roots, and shifting continental plates squeezing valleys toward the clouds. The top rim of the Grand Canyon bears the trace of ancient waters—the fossils of shells, coral and worms that once lived at the bottom of the sea.

Somewhere in the midst of the grandeur, I thought of Mary on her way to Bethlehem. Once she'd said yes to the angel, she signed on for a trip with no way out. No chance to "get out now" and get her money back. I have preached about Mary's bumpy donkey ride on many Christmas Eves, and I'd understood it in my heart without imagining the deeper impact of knowing it in my muscles. On this trip, however, when I finally dismounted and gratefully patted Blackjack good-bye, I felt as I did on leaving the hospital, stitched up after giving birth to my first child. Ana had to be left at the hospital to lie under the lights that would cure her slight jaundice. Instead of cradling my firstborn in my arms, I left in tears carrying the complimentary blow-up donut to sit on, and wondering if I would ever walk normally again.

Of course, Mary was younger, probably more limber and accustomed to riding, but she was also nine months pregnant. I am amazed that she didn't deliver the child long before she reached her destination. True, she wasn't traveling down the Grand Canyon, but Mary's journey was just as uncomfortable. She traveled on the edge, where injury and death are likely eventualities. The knowledge already pierced her heart. Did she turn her fearful gaze from her feet to the larger view—the seismic shifts in her womb, spectacular as a canyon carved with the signature of heaven?

Blackjack seemed tired on the uphill way back. Unlike the other seven mules in our party, he was breathing heavily. We'd led the mules to a trough of water before our lunch break and all of them drank except for Blackjack. Can mules become dehydrated? The mules' stamina was uppermost in my mind. Cricket, of course, was young like Hans and appeared to remain energetic. "How often do they work?" I asked. "Five days a week on a rotating schedule," I was told.

Our guide also pointed out a rattlesnake napping between red rocks—and then, minutes later, another one. Do rattlesnakes leap from their naps to bite the legs of passing travelers? Hans leaned over toward the rocks to get a better look. His saddle slid. "Sit up straight!" barked the guide. Do they ever bite mules? Do rattlesnakes spook mules? They spooked me, but I didn't bother to ask. It seemed like a high-maintenance kind of question.

“WARNING: Pregnant women not permitted on mule ride.” No wonder. And yet we ride on, pregnant with impossible life, on a path that hones to the edge, in a world that offers no guarantees and plenty of risk . . . entrusting our days to the stubborn, plodding mules of duty that bear us forward—or is it the promise of our guide?—“I know this path. I have gone before you. Just listen to me. You’ll make it.” Lift your eyes from footsteps in the dust to see the sure advance of a river opening the earth’s hard crust, this miracle of upheaval and realignments, this magnificent of shifted faultlines—a stone testimony that nothing here is set in stone.

Midway on the journey we came to a plateau. Spring flowers studded the desert plain spread before us. There were yellow starbursts inside white primroses, magenta blooms of beavertail cactus, pale orange petals on the mariposa lilies fluttering in the wind, and ruddy stalks of Indian paintbrush—each one magnifying the Lord and echoing around the canyon walls.