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## Stubborn as a Mule: Distant Thunder Prompts Self-Reflection

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# Stubborn as a Mule

*Distant thunder prompts self-reflection*

**Elissa Ely**



IT'S A RARE HIKE THAT STARTS WITH LOCKED KNEES, BUT DESCENT has been the way into the Grand Canyon for 5 or 6 million years. Poles help—though not if you are a mule. Mules in the canyon look neither happy nor unhappy. Their sway-backed expressions neither watch nor sleep; they are clearly used to a stoic day's labor for a practical day's pay.

That fall morning, waiting for the bus to the South Kaibab trailhead, I was thinking about mules and how dutifully they follow trails up and down. I had traveled a long way to feel an awe they did not.

Rain started falling when half a dozen young people—maybe in the middle of their college years—ran to the overhang by the backcountry office. They wore skirts, cut-off shorts, and high-top sneakers. Somewhere below us, mules were carrying packs and people. I was carrying a backpack full of food, water, sunglasses, sunscreen, emergency medical supplies, and a headlamp. The young people carried small plastic water bottles and cups of coffee.

Their spirits ran high; they were uncontainably communicative. Sitting next to me on the bus, one young woman explained in the friendliest way that the group intended to walk down the South Kaibab Trail to Phantom Ranch—7.5 miles of knee-lock—and then all the way back up the Bright Angel Trail: 16.6 miles in total. A Grand Canyon experience, they felt, would be incomplete without touching the river. How foolish these young people are, I thought. Any guidebook warns against day-hiking this distance (even if you are a mule). They must have known that.

By the time we reached the South Kaibab trailhead, the rain had stopped. Their little group leapt off the bus and disappeared in high-tops down the trail. I followed. It was not quite three quiet miles to Skeleton Point, where I planned to turn around.

A few minutes later, I heard thunder.

A ranger walking up from below pulled alongside me and stopped. He looked just out of college himself: clean-shaven, wide-brimmed against the sun. All day, he patrolled back and forth from the South Kaibab trailhead to Skeleton Point, checking on hikers and conditions.

—Great job, he said, pleasantly. His voice was resonant and probably carried long distances. A baritone that floats on air is a useful prerequisite for the position.

I asked his advice about the thunder.

*The Grand Canyon, from the South Rim: a place where it's hard to hide in thunder.*

MARC CHALUFOUR

—Well, he said, no place outside's safe. You could try to make yourself small. You could crouch on the balls of your feet with your heels touching and your hands over your ears. Or you could decide not to hike today.

But I had come by plane and car to hike and did not want to hear advice I already knew. What I really wanted was reassurance he wasn't offering. Instead of going to Skeleton Point, I secretly decided, I would turn back at Cedar Ridge, only 1.5 miles away. It was a silly compromise; when lightning hits ground, it doesn't care whether you've shortened your trip or not.

To redeem myself as a sensible thinker (in my own eyes), I asked whether he had passed the young people heading all the way down and back. Now *they* had made a poor decision, I said. He nodded. He had already learned their itinerary, noticed their clothing, commented on their limited fluids, and warned them against the distance.

—All I can do is advise, he said. He continued walking up the trail, and I continued lockstepping down.

I can't tell you what happened to the long-distance day-hikers. I bet, at least, they finished their coffee. I can tell you that Cedar Ridge was beautiful, and the thunder faded quickly—though it just as easily could have been otherwise.

In the Grand Canyon, mules do as they're told. Humans, not always, since we have choice. But choice makes us foolish: the foolish young ignore distance; the foolish old ignore weather. Seeking awe, forsaking prudence, we lock knees and risk everything.

We like to call this free will. Mules know better.

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