



Chris Eagle\*

## PACKHORSE PURGATORY

*For Ian Moore*

Wallace Stegner rode the fourteen-mile trail down to the Havasupai Reservation in 1947 on a stunted packhorse, its legs too short to keep his own up off the ground. Edward Abbey, in his customary hurry to find solitude, walked the very same steep and ankle-twisting switchbacks sometime in the 1960s. I took the helicopter. This was an unusual decision for me, born of poor planning and sore calves. See, this visit was to be the final stage of a two-week-long hiking trip across the Southwest, and I'd been consistently underestimating the terrain for going on eleven days now. Only twenty-four hours prior, I had packed up camp at Phantom Ranch, deep in the more frequented part of the Grand Canyon, thirty miles east of the Hualapai hilltop where the Havasupai trailhead begins. I then hiked the seven miles and nearly five thousand feet of elevation gain up to the South Rim, slept amidst some Wendy's wrappers in a Peach Springs motel, and was on my way to the next trek the following morning. At that point, I was still fully intending to walk the same (and only) trail down to the village of Supai, the trail once taken by Stegner and by Abbey, by the Franciscan priest Francisco Garcés in 1776, by Joseph Christmas Ives in his 1857 military expedition, by the schoolteacher Flora Gregg in 1900. Here we were a few days before Christmas in 2015. Lured by the same cerulean waters of Havasu Creek, I was going to take the trail, much more comfortably equipped of course than those I've listed, but in otherwise traditional fashion. That was still the plan as I creaked out of the rental car, got myself standing with the help of my hiking poles. It ceased to be the plan the moment I heard those helicopter blades whirring up out of the canyon.

Researching for this visit, I'd read about the Air West helicopter service. It sounded oddly extravagant for one of the poorest areas in all of North America, a remote reservation with a population of around five hundred Havasu Indians, many of whom live on government assistance. The reservation itself is already far into Indian land, with the trailhead beginning sixty miles north of Historic Route 66. The chopper service is run by the locals, though the pilot hovering fifty feet overhead, I noticed, was white. For an unspecified fee, I'd read that the chopper would fly properly permitted tourists through the canyon straight to the village. So I walked across the parking lot to the Air West office, past a half-dozen Indian kids horsing around long-abandoned cars, past parents who seemed to be fussing aimlessly with packages in the trunks of their unabandoned cars. The Air West office was a red cargo container with a list of policies papered to the outside. Crossing the lot, I tried to hide my hobble for fear it might raise the unspecified fee. Beneath the chopper, I noticed a young Indian man communicating something to the pilot via walkie-talkie. Another hooked the chopper's lowering sling to a cargo net full of what looked like forty-pound bags of horsefeed. I was watching them work when a husky voice from inside the container asked me if I needed help.

The woman appeared to be in her twenties, wearing tight and exaggeratedly ripped jeans below a gray sweater that read "*Baby, It's Cold Outside!*" down the front in cursive. Since I hadn't been facing her when she spoke, she flicked her long black hair a second time and smiled at me flirtatiously. Her face was broad and flat, the color of black cherries. She was taller than anyone else around, exceptionally tall, I would learn, for a Supai woman. Her facial features and upper body were vaguely mannish, and her flirty mannerisms,

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from her way of fondling the latch on the container door to twirling the clipboard in her other hand, all seemed so stagey that I found myself wondering if she might be transgender. The fee was specified at \$85, which I happily handed over. As I wrote my name and weight on the clipboard she held for me, she went over the priority rules. The helicopter ran slings of cargo until there were enough people who wanted to go down to the village. At that point, tribal priorities applied. Tribal members had top priority, followed by tribal business, vendors, repairmen, etc. Tourists had something she called “last priority.” I thanked her and went to lean against the fuel truck which fed the helicopter, awaiting my turn.

Now I watched every woman and man who passed by closely. The men all had features closer to hers. They wore headphones or stared at cellphones suspended no more than six inches from their faces. Occasionally, they changed the screen with a flick of their pinkies. The women slowly piled cardboard boxes and plastic coolers, children’s backpacks, in a row over by the helipad. Rap music played from an open car window somewhere. An older woman emerged from deep inside the cargo container, wearing one of those fleece jackets with colorful Navajo patterns you can purchase at any roadside tourist stop. Its hood, pulled tight around her pudgy face, had fuzzy wolf ears sewed onto the top. She spat, checked the clipboard, wanted to know who “Tourist Chris” was. I raised my hand. She nodded and spat again. One by one, she called the children over to the hood of one of the cars. She pulled some stapled packets out of a folder, spread them across the hood, and began to read some sort of survey out to the children.

“How important is it to you learning Supai language? Extremely? Very? Little? Not?”

“Vaaaaaaaary,” said one of the boys, sitting crosslegged on the hood of the car. Another boy slapped at him. He nearly fell off the hood slapping back.

“Hanson, you want to learn to speak Supai?”

“Yeeeeeeah?”

“How important is it to you preserving culture and traditions? Extremely? Little?”

The children shrugged, waiting for her to tell them their answers. Like so, this expectorating matriarch proceeded through a list of the most cliché ‘Injun’ questions imaginable, three pages about sweat lodges and teepee construction and headdresses and baskets and pottery. Everything but the raindances was in there, which you wouldn’t want to encourage, since flashfloods are common in this area. She filled an individual form out for each of the children. Eavesdropping, I wondered where these questions came from. Had they been provided by some well-meaning local school, or some church group, or by the Tribal Council itself? As poignant as it was to oversee this last-ditch attempt at cultural preservation, I couldn’t get over how generic the questions were. I wondered what this indicated about the cultural life of the town I was about to visit.

All the while, the helicopter did its slings, returning every 15 minutes or so for another load of horsefeed or building materials. The day was fine. It only got cold when the rotors appeared over the rim of the canyon, at which point the temperature would drop twenty degrees until the chopper vanished downwards again. Noticeably obese women slogged back and forth, lining up packages. They stopped to chitchat. They set the packages down. They were in no hurry. An hour went by. The young woman reassured me my turn would come soon. I didn’t mind too much. I figured the helicopter could do another ten slings and still get me to Havasu Falls faster than I could get myself there. When my turn came, I was guided into the chopper along with a family of five. They loaded so many styrofoam coolers in with us that I couldn’t see anyone’s faces. The ride took all of five minutes. There was a steep, sudden drop into the canyon, where I felt my stomach lunge for my throat for a second, then a mostly level ride along the winding limestone slots that make up the trail I’d opted to skip. The slots resembled a patterned serpent several miles long. For the entire ride, the child wedged in beside me insisted with his finger that I open the door and jump out.

We landed on a chopper-sized square of cement in a dusty landing zone that seemed to have once been a little league field. At the Lodge, I checked in and dropped off my pack. Aware today was the Winter solstice, and sunset comes much earlier to a canyon, I figured I’d only have a couple hours of daylight to spend by the Falls. I’d been reading about their bluegreen waters for years. I’d been googling them for months. The water’s color is so distinctive they named the whole tribe after it. *Ha* for water. *Va-su* for blue-green. *Pai* for people. *Ha-va-su-pai*. People of the Bluegreen Water. Feeling no pain anymore, I grabbed my water bottle and camera, and I marched off at triple speed out of the lodge and down the trail. Momentarily, I was struck by the Havasupai Bible Church, a barracks-style structure of corrugated aluminum with a wooden cross affixed to a chimney style apex. A sign by the door listed the hour of the Sunday service. Visitors Welcome.



**Fig. 1:** The church

Past the church, I overtook two pretty teenage girls who were walking to their home somewhere tucked behind the cottonwoods, mesquites, and willows that lend a little privacy to the prefabricated houses scattered about the reservation. One of the girls asked me how I was doing in a friendly but slurred voice. I said fine and wanted to continue on, but she kept pace with me, talking as she listed side to side, drunk or high or both. She stayed with me for a few hundred yards. She wanted to know my plans for the day. She didn't ask where I was from. It was clear I could propose anything I wanted.

Her friend called her name out once, then a second time after another hundred yards or so. The protection seemed halfhearted in a way that suggested this had become a habit with them.

Soon we came to a fork in the powdery dirt road, and even though there was a sign beside us pointing to the Campgrounds and the Falls, I asked her directions to alleviate my own awkwardness.

"Keep to the right," she mumbled, "there will be lots of lefts. But don't take them."

I kept to the right, looking to my left all the while at each of the squat, modular homes, wondering how many helicopter or packhorse trips it took to build one of them down here. I smiled at the Direct TV dishes. Even though I'd been warned about the garbage, I was still surprised by the mounds of it in every single yard. Sprite bottles and sneakers. Cast-iron bedframes. Buckets and duffelbags. Big orange bottles of Tide detergent. Outgrown toys. One of those Fisher-Price playhouses so weathered and sunk into the dirt it looked like some archeological find partly excavated. The dogs ignored me. So too the packhorses. As I hurried along, I noted all the paths to the left tourists weren't supposed to take, planning to take a few tomorrow.

There was another mile of mild rises and drops before I finally caught my first sight of that blue water, just a short exposed section of Havasu creek where it veered alongside the trail. There was nothing particularly picturesque about the spot, but the color alone made me stop. I scrambled down the rocks to the very edge of the creek.



**Fig. 2:** Havasu creek

Here was the sacred river. It reminded me of Kool Aid. Or this blueberry milkshake I always order in my favorite diner back home. You would rightly suspect photoshopping if you saw this in a picture. Words for rare shades of blue began to pool up in my head. Aquamarine, azure, cobalt, sapphire. None of them were good enough, and I felt grateful for this experience of the utter inadequacy of language. What I settled for was an opaline turquoise, because the cloudiness glows a little from the inside if the sun's anywhere nearby, which it luckily was. I stared straight into the color for several minutes. I was close enough to let nothing else intrude from the periphery until a clump of branches floated by, replicating for an instant Van Gogh's "Blossoming Almond Tree." Travertine's the name of the type of limestone that forms the Falls. It also gives the water its milky quality, and its reflection gives the water its unique tint, although Stegner was right to defy chemistry and optics on this point. Camping along this very portion of the creek almost seventy years ago, he'd had "the wonderful thought that here in paradise the water even after dark is blue—not a reflection of anything but really blue, blue in the cupped hands." I cupped some in my own to check, and he was mostly right.

The rest of the afternoon was spent in one of those forgivable frenzies of touristic pleasure. I went back and forth among the first three waterfalls. I snapped the requisite eighty-seven photographs, the silliest being a rectangular closeup of the water itself, where it sat relatively still in one of the many pools that collect it for a few seconds before hurling it onward. Little Navajo Falls is the first you reach from town. It's a series of "semicircular terraces," borrowing Stegner's words, where for a brief moment, the water loses its blueness while it slides whitely down the rounded stone surfaces before recovering its color (2011, 185). This process repeats through series after series of swirling pools.

Down at the base of Havasu Falls, I pried off my filthy shoes and climbed into the water. The travertine is gluey but so slick that at the very first step, I nearly slipped. It looks and feels like plaster-of-paris as it rises around your toes, giving the blue a milkier consistency until it settles back down on the creekbed. I rolled up my jeans so I could work my way around the fern-covered rocks to get closer to the Falls. They drop a hundred feet into the most perfect swimming hole anyone will ever find.



**Fig. 3:** The swimming hole



I sat on the driest rock close to the spray and gazed around at the arches of sculpted travertine. Some sections jut sharply away from the ledge of the Falls in ruddy brown shapes. Other parts are lumpier. They look like crude sandcastles dripped through a kid's fingers. Only Gaudí could have designed this place. Half an hour or so went by. I could feel the natural temptation to stay put. You're certain you've found the most beautiful place on Earth. Your calves are shot. Why move? It happened to Abbey. He spent five Edenic weeks here, naked as Adam, living off canned fruit and the occasional trout.

Eventually, I continued onward to Mooney Falls, still barefoot through the desolate campgrounds. There was a closed stand that advertised lemonade and frybread. Nailed to a willow, a sign indicated where best to remain during a flashflood. Knowing the next Falls were named for a miner who fell to his death in 1882, I stepped cautiously around and peered at them from the side. Mooney Falls are twice as tall as Havasu. The creek must shift, I realized, because I could see two tiny picnic tables far below, submerged beneath the blue waters. I had the frightening thought that everything was ultimately creekbed here. Halfway to the bottom, my acrophobia kicked in suddenly. The only way down to those drowned picnic tables was to descend an uneven stairwell inside a cave hacked straight out of the rock. That gets you halfway. The rest of the trip involves dangling from a jiggly ladder of damp metal ropes. Jumping the 196 feet off the top seemed safer. So I sat in the only cozy part of the rock I could find with a decent overlook. About 1 hundred feet down, I watched Mooney Falls pour until it was almost dark.

Dawn comes as late to a canyon as dusk comes early. The dogs all know this, so they start their barking a good hour before sunrise. In fairness, Stegner had warned me. Dogs were the first of the "imperfections" he found in his *Shangri-La* (2011, 185). The original sin of Havasu, for him, was how its people treated its animals, from the starved dogs he and his wife hopelessly fed, to the overworked, undergrazed packhorses who brought the town its minimal standard of living. It wasn't his first experience of what he termed "the usual Indian callousness towards animals," but something about its occurrence here alongside such perfect natural beauty struck a tougher chord for him (2011, 186). It made it a challenge, Stegner admitted, "to accept that cultural difference without blaming the Indians" (2011, 186). Descendants of those dogs still howl at dusk and dawn with a comic ferocity that makes your eyes dart around helplessly at the red sandstone walls. "They howl so loud we can't eat," wrote Stegner, and taking their howls for cries of starvation, he and his wife doled out their meager lamb stew to the nearest litter of mongrels. For their "skeleton mother," they reserved what they surely knew was a euthanasic "double dose of chocolate" (2011, 186).

Traveling, I tend to follow the same religious routine every morning that I'd follow at home. I fumble for my glasses, then fire up the portable espresso maker, sole luxury an old back injury permits me to carry on long hikes. For an hour or two, I nursed my espresso at one of the Lodge's picnic benches, watching the stars dissolve and marveling at the ongoing echo of the dogs. I heard a tractor going by. The driver and I exchanged waves. At the first real light, I went for a long walk around the town, taking all the lefts tourists weren't supposed to take. During high season, I suppose I might've been asked to turn back, but it was early and the town was mostly asleep. A chubby teenage girl passed me in an all-terrain vehicle. She barely noticed me. Next, I came across a large-RV, sunk two feet into mud, with plywood windows and buttressed by a dozen twobys. Yardfuls of garbage followed. Saddles and tarps and old coats, bright plastic tricycles, stuffed animals and engine parts. Everywhere plastic bottles in every possible color. Picture frames. Recognizable candy wrappers. The canary yellow of Starburst. The bronze of Twix. It reminded me of the photos one sees of those small mid-Western towns, right after a tornado rips through, reshuffles everyone's belongings, and scatters them evenly across an unbelievably large swath of ground.

In some yards, short horses worked around the garbage, picking at the grass. Their hooves made crumpling sounds whenever they misstepped onto a hollow two-liter. I passed a couple women, leading two little girls along the road somewhere. They nodded shy hellos. Both of them wore hoodies that reached to their knees and shorts so droopy they may as well have been pants. They walked in a slow shuffle made slower by their shower moccasins. The edges of their white socks were reddened by the dirt road. A dog with black and yellow jackal stripes tagged along behind them.

There was a mile of similar scenes before the main road bent back to reveal a lumpy dirt field, bounded with sturdy painted fences, chest-high, and empty except for a couple clown barrels left on their sides. At one end stood a rodeo grandstand. On the front, it said: "Havasupai Peach Festival Rodeo 2015." On the side, it said: "Welcome." Beneath the welcome, the words "Fuck You" were tagged in faded spray paint.



**Fig. 4:** The rodeo grandstand



Stegner had mentioned a rodeo. His guide, a Havasu possessing the unlikely name of Hardy Jones, had caught the showhorsing bug early. He loved to ride up to Flagstaff for the competitions, and he must have had some hand in establishing the rodeo down here.

Up ahead, I could see the trailhead rising out of sight. In twenty minutes, I'd reached the other end of town. I turned around and headed back. On my way, I passed two young white men. They looked too put together to be hikers. Their shirts weren't wrinkled enough. Their shoes were too clean. They introduced themselves and were eager to know where I was from. There was something off to me about their friendliness. Their smiles bordered on leers. I asked if they were also staying at the Lodge. They said they weren't. They had a house nearby, one of them told me, pointing in the general direction of the Rodeo. Mormons, I thought, and then I remembered the cleanest building I'd seen all morning. It had white slat walls and a slat roof and a little black sign with fine lettering I hadn't bothered to read that probably said something about saints in these latterdays of ours. I let them get back to their mission.

The actual town square of Supai, where I was headed, has one (but only one) of each of the institutions one would hope. There is a clinic with a bulletin board stressing flushots and other generally hygienic practices. The official U.S. post office of Supai, Arizona is, from what I'm told, the only place in America which still boasts packhorse delivery in both directions. Nearby Phantom Ranch, where I had stayed two nights before, delivers its postcards by mule. There's a diner serving standard diner fare, pancakes and eggs, burgers and fries, along with Indian frybread tacos and chicken fingers. There's the school. It has a brand-new basketball court outside. Then there's the grocery store, where you can truly pick your poison. You have your choice of energy drinks, Starbucks espresso shots, Gatorade or Powerade, Coke or Pepsi. Twinkies are in abundance. So is Hormel's entire line of products. Baked beans. Beans with ham. Chunky Chili. Turkey Chili. In the butcher section, I found a single steak and a couple packages of unlean hamburger meat. All looked about to turn. Behind the meat selection, a woman was slicing up what looked like chicken livers at a bloodstained table. Next to her, there was an equally paltry produce section. Some lettuce. Pomegranates. A couple kinds of chile pepper. Tangerines and overripe bananas.

Somewhere along my walk through town, I had decided I was going to stay put in this square until someone talked to me. So I went into the diner first, smiling and helling everyone I saw. Few returned my ebullience. At the counter, I ordered a frybread and coffee. The heavy girl at the register seemed narcoleptic. Groggily, she confirmed what I wanted. Groggily, she wrote it down. At first, I took it as unfriendliness, that was, until one of the locals ordered curly fries with cheese right after me.

"For here or to go?" she asked him in the same lethargic stupor. He had his headphones on, so she had to repeat the question slowly twice.

Another girl I'd assumed was a customer got up from one of the tables, struggling to stuff her cellphone into her pocket. She shuffled behind the counter to cook our orders. In about ten minutes, a line-order bell rang. The frybread had a lardy tang to it, reminiscent of funnel cake. It is also the heaviest thing I've ever eaten. Halfway through, I heard a man coughing in the bathroom. He spat appetizingly.

"Enjoy your meal," he said to me, as he came out, wiping his hands on a collared shirt that read "Havasus Café."

"Mahfirsfrybreh," I mumbled through a mouthful of the stuff. I waved my next mouthful in the air with my fingers.

"Glad you like it!"

"Ithsinkwehbul."

We shook hands and exchanged names. His was Tony.

"Welcome to Supai!" he said with genuine lowseason warmth in his voice. He went back to watching TV in a sideroom with one of the other cooks. Chewing and looking around, I saw the lit Christmas tree in one corner. On the main wall, painted around the door, there was a mural of pictures and text, explaining the role of the circle in Havasu mythology. Over my shoulder, there was a varnished wooden plaque with a New York Times article mounted onto it. The headline read: "Indian Tribe Wins Fight to Limit Research of Its DNA." I got up to read it. Forty Havasus had sued Arizona State University and won \$700,000. They wanted every tourist who ever set foot in here for a burger to know it. Enough to spring for a fifty-buck plaque.



I carried my coffee outside and took a closer look at the bulletin board. There were a few job advertisements, some tribal council announcements. “Notice to the Havasupai Tribe,” read one printed sheet, “Leave your dogs at home while you’re at work. Parents please tell your children to tie up their pets while going to school. We are getting complaints from the school and there are too many dogs around the store and café area.” Is that progress, I wondered, easing onto the long aluminum bench that lines the front of the diner. With an entire frybread inside me, I figured I could last a week, if that was how long it took to talk to someone.

Watching people come and go from the post office, I now knew where all the frybread and the twinkies and soda went. Virtually everyone over twenty was as round and layered as a fertility goddess. Their walking was labored to the point of slow-motion. A few steps out of the post office, they paused to catch their breath. The men used the axes they lug around with them to tear open envelopes. The women poked fingerholes in their Amazon packages, the easier to carry them three per hand. A child, no older than three, sucked periodically at a squeezebottle of red Gatorade. His fingers were too small to actually squeeze, so he had to tilt the bottle upsidedown to get the electrolytes out. His cheeks were the size of my fists. The town uniform, I knew by now, was the hoodie, one of many signs of how HipHop has infiltrated the canyon. The town is lousy with up-to-date rap music, which blares from all houses and all headphones. The ancient art of tagging is practiced on boulders, mostly along the tourist trail. Some kids wear Jordans or Mitchell & Ness caps backwards. The Nets are popular in Supai. Transplanted to East L.A., these kids could blend in with any crew of Latino gangbangers. Even little bits of overheard conversation revealed the influence.

“What kind of birds don’t fly, homeboy?” I heard a teenager say to a much younger boy as they walked past me out the diner.

“What kind?”

“Indian birds. Indian birds, homeboy.”

The next hour I spent adjusting myself on the chilly metal bench. I could feel the discreetest of looks from passersby. Why wasn’t I at the Falls? Why wasn’t I taking photos of the post office or the dog gnawing on maize in the alley? Even Tony looked perplexed as he swept the dirt off the stairs. Two men hovered near me for awhile, speaking Supai. Although as recently as 2005 linguists counted the Havasupai dialect as the only Native American language spoken by a hundred percent of its indigenous population, the actual cutoff age for Supai as a first language seems to be about twenty-five years old now. It’s a heavily glottalized language, so it can sound a little gargly at times. All the elders were speaking it fluently around me, inserting English only to mention the prices of things. Toddlers babbled some Supai to their mothers. Nobody inbetween spoke a word of anything other than English in my presence.

Another thirty minutes passed. I heard the clacking of a horsetrain coming down the road. Watching it arrive made me think about all the little differences between this town and Phantom Ranch. Administered by the National Park Service, any visit to the latter is regimented to the point of being closer to a Cowboy-themed getaway. As soon as you arrive, a park ranger finds you and delivers precise instructions on how to keep your food away from the deer (locked in old ammo boxes), how to elevate your pack (empty but with the pockets open, so when the bucks climb up to rummage through it anyway, their antlers don’t rip your pack to pieces). The stew dinner is at 6:30 sharp. Before they’ll let any of the ravenous hikers in, the staff instruct them on how to pass their bowls and how to purchase alcohol. Midway through the hearty, hurried meal, the staff give a nice speech on the history of the Ranch and what it means for you to have made it down this far at all. Apparently, less than one percent of all visitors to the Grand Canyon ever make it to the basin. Even less make it back up. They used that joke on us both nights. Then they took questions. I asked how long their average stay was between trips to the Rim. Anywhere from ten days to two months. Any longer than that, and the ranger reported growing “a little rough around the edges.” The impression I got from the guy with spiky green hair at the Supai Tourist office, was that the average stay for Havasupai was anywhere from three months to a year. Many never go up top at all.

Phantom Ranch, as I said before, is supplied by mules. They’re so big for mules you stare at them and swear they’re horses. At Havasu, you stare at the horses and swear they’re mules. The riders differ too. The muleteers of Phantom Ranch dress and act the part. They wear wide-brimmed suede hats, leather vests, and lassoes. They puff their chests up in the saddle just a little. I’m not faulting them for it. Their job’s hard, and it means I get beef stew and lip balm a mile underground. But everything about them announces professional muleteer. Their mules bear proper burlap bags which seem to require constant adjustments.



Every muletrain I encountered, carrying supplies down the Bright Angel Trail or mail and garbage up the South Kaibab Trail, had to stop at some point so the prudent muleteer could tighten some pesky rope. By contrast, the diminutive Havasu packhorses carried their goods in ordinary milkcrates, roped off any which way. The train I saw coming was simply led by the least obese man in town. He wore a baseball cap and shorts. Another of those jackal dogs brought up the rear. As they trotted into the alley behind the grocery store to unload, I noticed what they were carrying: box after fructosey box of Coke and Pepsi.

After another uneventful hour on the bench, Tourist Chris was starting to lose his resolve. It was past 3:00 pm, which meant my side of the town square was fully shaded. I looked around at the four old men, sitting equidistant from me and from each other on other benches around the square. I debated whether to introduce myself. Some kids were playing basketball across the way. If I joined them, we could go three on three. I factored my age against their heft. From the fence outside the court, I felt one of the local's eyes on me. He smirked a little knowingly and started walking my way. He sat at a short distance from me, say four-and-a-half feet, just far enough so that I couldn't be quite sure if he was joining me or seeking shade. I waited. He was almost fifty, fairly fit by Supai standards. He had on a white denim jacket. Little bit of a moustache.

"How come you're not at the Falls?" he finally asked after two or three minutes.

"I went yesterday. They're something. I was just curious about the town too."

He nodded approvingly. Another couple minutes went by. Had he forgotten it was his turn? I held back all the questions crowding up in my head. I wanted to know how long the Mormons had been down here, and why I'd seen two armed Federal Marshalls driving by on a camo-green golfcart as if they were hunting for someone, and was he happy here, and was the tourist season tolerable, and was there only the elementary school, and what did he do for a living. Something told me to adapt to his pace.

"Where you from?" he asked eventually.

"Philadelphia," I said, "but I live in Chicago now."

"They near to each other?"

"About twelve hours by car."

He exhaled with mild shock. Another minute passed before he added, "Detroit. Philly. Chicago. I thought they were all together. We see them on TV, you know."

"You got Direct TV?"

"Yep, what you have? Cable or antenna?"

"Cable."

"They still have antenna, up top?"

"I think that's over. You grew up here?"

He nodded. "Whole life. Go up top now and then. Twice a year. Three times. I stay over by the rodeo."

I nodded. We sat quiet for a good ten minutes, trying to look through each other's eyes at the town and the people in order to see what the other saw. A dog trotted by, searching us for food. I tried not to laugh when it sat by my legs instead of his. Another local in another ill-fitting hoodie that exposed a throatful of tattoos came up to us. The two of them spoke in Supai for a few minutes. The man fished a Marlboro Lite out of a pocket and cradled it in his hand. At one point, they seemed to misunderstand each other. The other man put the cigarette between his lips, so he could bend down and draw a map in the red dirt. That seemed to clear things up. The man sat back then alongside us and lit his cigarette.

Four fairly spotless tourists, tired from the trail, passed by just then, their heads on a swivel.

"Where's the Lodge?" one of them asked the entire square.

We ignored them. So did the dog. Welcome to Supai.

When his cigarette was finished, the tattooed Havasu got up and left. We switched back to English.

"What's your name?" I asked him.

"Desean," he replied. Then he told me he was the town trashman. Every morning, Desean drove a tractor's worth of trash to a nearby landfill where it was compacted to be carried out by the packhorses. He asked what I did. I told him I was a teacher.

"Have you seen the rap movie?"

"Rap video you mean?"

"No. Other day I saw the rap movie with Notorious. . . Notorious. . ."



“B.I.G.?”

“Yeah,” he chuckled, putting his right hand chin-high in the air. “They say a teacher make *this* much.” Now he put his left hand a little higher. “Trashmen make *that* much. Here we are,” he chuckled, gesturing back and forth. We laughed loud enough for the older men to eye us from their benches.

Over the next hour or so, I got most of my questions answered, all at his pace. There’s a campaign to ban frybread in all fifty states. The Mormon Church arrived about seven or eight years ago. There used to be tribal police, but now there are U.S. Marshalls. Desean insisted they were alright. They found the boy they were looking for, whose name I’ll omit, and escorted him up top to his parole meeting. The school only goes up to eighth grade. After that, teenagers attend school up top. If they can, they stay with relatives. More often, they stay at boarding schools. He pointed out two of the boys playing basketball. They were his sons. They went to high school in Oregon. He fell quiet again. We watched his boys shoot jumpers. Their feet didn’t leave the ground.

“What made you come here?” he asked after another while.

I mentioned Stegner. He hadn’t heard of him. I told him about Flora Gregg. He had heard of the white schoolteacher who lived here back around the time Sinyella was the tribal leader. He was unaware she’d written a book about the months she spent teaching seventy-one children of the blue-green water. We figured his great-grandparents must have been her pupils. I told him back in the 40s Stegner nicknamed this place the “Packhorse Paradise.” He liked that. Before he was the trashman, he told me, he’d driven packhorses from the age of twelve to forty. Rubbing his hands on his legs, he asked if I had enough food at the Lodge. The grocery store was about to close, and he wanted to make sure I knew. As he got up to go, a final question dawned on him.

“Other night, I watched Donald Trump on TV.”

The thought alone made me laugh.

“Is he really running for President?”

I couldn’t hold my laughter in at all. I nodded through it, shivering from sitting too long.

“It’s not a show? It’s real?”

“It’s real,” I said, “he’s winning even.”

He shook his head. “I watched him. I told myself, another crazy rich man.”

Walking back to the Lodge, overcome now with chill from four hours spent on cold aluminum, I glanced around the canyon walls for the sandstone God and Goddess mentioned in the pocket trailguide I’d bought the week before in Tusayan. According to the guide, “one is shaped like a father carrying a child on his back. The other is the mother bringing up the rear.” I couldn’t spot them. I never can spot things like that. My imagination’s too plastic. I end up seeing what I’m looking for everywhere and therefore nowhere. The week before, I’d nearly perished in search of the petroglyphs at Hueco Tanks, by obeying the ranger’s handy instructions to follow the rock shaped like a duck to the other rock shaped like a crocodile. Gregg mentions these sandstone deities of Havasu too in her account of the People of the Blue Water. The exposed formations have stood here a lot longer than the 600 or 700 years the Havasupai have occupied this land. She couldn’t believe how these “two great pillars of exposed sandstone, as tranquil and aloof as images of Buddha,” had withstood ages of gale winds and floods without falling down. Legend goes they’re the protectors of the Havasu people, and they enact a kind of border beyond which the Havasu are afraid to dwell. In Gregg’s day, the Havasu refused on those very grounds to attend any school built up on the plateau. Clearly, the gods still exercise some of that same primeval power.

Squinting around the canyon, seeing nothing but amorphous rocks, I heard a few kids emerge from one of the yards. They’d been playing inside a makeshift metal teepee. It was constructed from the same parts I used as a kid to build my own elaborate army bunkers, rusty sheets of aluminum, tree branches, twine.



**Fig. 5:** The fort

The pluckiest kid strode right up to me.

“You’re not allowed to take pictures of the walls.”

“Okay.”

“You’re not allowed, umm, you can’t take pictures.”

“I’m not taking pictures.”

“What’s this?” he asked, sticking his butt out, and preparing his tongue to make a raspberry sound.

“Farting?”

“Yeah!”

“Where are the rocks . . .” I started to ask, but before I could finish, all five kids were pointing at the identical spot up near the rim of the closest canyon. I suppose these rocks looked like something. All rocks do.

“The king and queen! King and queen!”

Over top of each other, they all explained at the tops of their voices the story of the God and Goddess who make the nonexistent crops grow and keep flashfloods to a minimum. Why don’t the God and Goddess do something about all the litter and diabetes, I thought to myself. I could feel my mood already souring into this maudlin grouchiness I get any time I confront abject poverty, the kind of poverty a crazy rich man like Donald Trump would get a big kick out of pointing at and saying “See!”

Back at the picnic table outside my room, I fired up my trusty Jetboil. It was dark by now. Nobody else was around. Per instructions, I removed the desiccant from the dehydrated Chicken Gumbo and filled the package up to waterline #8. With twelve-fourteen minutes to kill, accounting for altitude, I snacked on the last of the fancy jerky I’d brought down from WholeFoods with me. There was nothing else to look at, so I read the front of the bag: “All natural. No artificial ingredients. Minimally processed. Gluten free. Good source of protein. Low fat.” The dogs began to howl, a little behind schedule. Opening the pouch, I could tell I hadn’t put enough water. As I fought down the clumpy gumbo, my thoughts wandered along the predictable paternalistic patterns. What’s wrong here? What would help? There’s a prohibition these days to even posing such questions. The supposition is, of course, that the privileges I enjoy “up top” invalidate my right to pose a single question about life “down below.” In my line of work, I encounter this sort of precious hesitancy a lot,



from people who worry more over the right to ask questions than over asking the right questions. Two days and one conversation into my visit, Tourist Chris doubted this was an argument he could win. All the same, when you witness a community with twice the national average for Type-2 diabetes, with three or four times the national average for obesity, might you also have a duty to wonder what is wrong and what would help in this packhorse purgatory?

Descending the canyon in 1900, Flora Gregg felt none of these compunctions. If her memoir's to be believed, Gregg embodied the best possible version of the paternalistic approach to the natives for her time. True, she understood herself as a full-fledged adult living among "these children of nature," settling the petty disputes that arose among them and sending periodic reports back to the Great White Father (Gregg, 1985, 129). Yet she also immersed herself deeply in Havasu culture. Probably helped by her lack of formal training in ethnology, she came to a fair understanding of their Gods and their customs, of the role superstition played in their everyday lives. She studied pictographs no white man or woman had ever seen before. Eventually, she earned enough respect from the medicine people to be present at a healing ceremony, debating through the songs whether or not to sneak a little cough syrup to one very sick boy. She did. He didn't take it, but he lived anyway. Gregg found it easy to respect the Havasupai because their values in fact were pretty compatible with hers. Unlike the Apaches, they were peaceful, and unlike the Walapai, whom she had lived with the year before, the Havasu managed to be entirely self-reliant and self-sufficient at the basin of a desert canyon. They grew corn, squash, beans, pomegranates, figs, and sunflowers. Women had ingenious techniques for preserving their pumpkins and peaches. Men hunted. Their bodies she found strong and statuesque. Havasu homes were well-kept. Lice and polygamy were rare. For all these reasons, the Havasu formed "a strange contrast to the Walapai community, where hunger nibbled at the edges, and poverty and sickness stalked within" (Gregg, 1985, 111). By the turn of the century, the Walapai had grown accustomed to living off government rations. Some worked odd jobs, but the majority of them, she wrote with frustrated contempt, "lived in idleness on bare sand" (Gregg, 1985, 112).

Fast-forward forty-seven years and the symptoms of this unhealthy modernization had wormed their way down to the bottom of the canyon. "They wear boots and Levis and shirts and Stetson hats," Stegner noticed now of the Havasupai, "They like sugar, candy, coffee, radios, dozens of things that take cash" (2011, 188). During their visit, the Stegners discussed the problems facing Supai with the government's official Indian agent to the reservation, a Mr. Guthrie, and his wife. Together, the four of them weighed the benefits of increased tourism against the costs for the land, traditions, and the people. "We are morally troubled as we talk about it," wrote Stegner, "for how sure can we be that the loose and indefinable thing called 'well-being' will necessarily be promoted by greater prosperity, better education, even better health, when these things may bring with them the dilution or destruction of the safe traditional cultural pattern" (2011, 188). Today, I think that dichotomy sounds about as hollow as a packhorse crushing a two-liter. Stegner was writing at a time when waves of dysentery were the biggest threat to Supai health, not dietary diabetes, and the Havasupai culture and language, thanks to their isolation, were still thought to exist in "purer form" than those of any remaining indigenous group (2011, 188). We're a long way from that. The Havasupai dialect is clearly dying. The canyon reverberates with Beyoncé remixes. Floods long ago washed away the orchards. Peaches come in cans from a cannery outside Arizona. People gaze into cellphones with a level of rapt absorption their ancestors reserved for fire divination. How important is it to try to preserve a few last scraps of traditional culture? Extremely? Very? Little? Not?

The other question I found myself debating along with Stegner is whether or not increased tourism might actually help. Might it actually restore some of those fragile connections to traditional ways of life? I have no idea, but I know that the thing it is thought to threaten—some "purer form" of Havasu culture—is virtually gone. The average was around fifty tourists a year when Stegner balked at the idea of doubling it. The Guthries, who lived there, were convinced it would help. Today, that number's up to twenty-five thousand. Phantom Ranch gets double that. The deer might get a little tame, but other than that, it hasn't hurt a twig. During three late-December days at Supai, I endured all of maybe ten tourists and two Mormons. Two of the tourists I met wondered if it would be rude to pick up some litter. I saw no tourists at all the day I spent at the Falls, only a handful of locals eating green apples and playing cards on a tree stump. The problem with any talk of increased tourism is that it inevitably invokes the ultimate danger to the Havasu way of life: a paved road. Many crazy rich men have offered to bulldoze one over the years, leading straight from Hualapai hilltop



to beautiful, downtown Supai. Each time, the Havasupai have wisely refused, demonstrating that native pity for wealthy insanity. Still, would a road destroy something essential in a way that constant passes from the helicopter do not? Paradoxically, I tend to agree it would. You're well aware you're cheating Nature when you take the chopper, in the same way that you know you're not an explorer for boarding a flight to Easter Island. An hour-long drive down a scenic 8-mile road, however, would close the distance between life up top and down below in an irrevocable way that a 5-minute helicopter ride somehow does not. I didn't learn fully why until the next morning.

I spent the rest of the evening flipping through Stegner and Abbey, laughing at the bigotry of Ives, going back and forth in my head on this question of tourism versus tradition. Somewhere in the night, I dreamt I was descending a stainless safety staircase, tastefully zigzagging off to the side of Mooney Falls. It left me right by the patio bar. I carried my cactus cocktail over to one of the submerged picnic tables and admired the Chinese tourists soaking in the natural jacuzzis all around. The dogs woke me. They were ready to announce my departure before I'd even made my espresso. Leaving, I noticed my pack was lighter than it had been in two weeks because, unlike Phantom Ranch, Havasu Lodge lets you leave items larger than a toothpick behind. Say what you want about Supai, but they don't mind garbage. I passed the Bible Church, and the town square, looking around for Desean. I checked under every hoodie, but I didn't spot him. I reached the Rodeo, then the Mormon House, and was on my way up. This trail is a much saner venture compared to Bright Angel. Halve the elevation gain. Shave the distance a few miles. But this was the last hike of an unrealistic trip, and for the next three hours, the Havasu Trail punished me for taking the chopper and reminded me over and over and over why there can never ever be a road down here. For the first hour, you walk through a mostly flat patch of cottonwoods, their roots exposed by the constant shifting of the creekbed. You're never one hundred percent sure you're on the trail, but every side track funnels you generally upwards, so you keep on going. The second hour begins those slot canyons I saw from the helicopter. They're red for awhile, then white when the limestone takes over. They reminded me of the Zion Narrows. The mineral streaks on the rocks were similar, and the gravelly beds warned me they could flashflood just as easily as the Narrows too. When I paused to piss on a prickly pear, I suddenly heard the helicopter making its first pass of the day. The final hour is almost all ascent. In under two miles, you gain most of the 2,400 feet you need to reach your car. There the canyon widens out and vaults upwards through millennia of red and golden rock formations. It was so quiet I could hear the pulse in my own ears. Havasu Canyon is processable in a way that the Grand Canyon, owing to its unimaginable scale, is not. The helicopter swept over me again, telling me to which of the surrounding hilltops I was circuitously headed. I overtook another Mormon. We were both too tired to talk. At the top, I gathered myself a second, leaning on my hiking poles like they were crutches. It felt like I had passed through three worlds to get back here. Effectively, I was as far from Supai as from China, because I was up top again. Across the parking lot, I noticed three Indians milling around a van. Its sidedoor was open. There was a little stand set up inside. I walked over to buy a drink.

"Water?" the woman asked me.

My eyes moved past her to the cardboard sign where "Gatorade: 2 for \$5" was written in marker. I handed her a ten, plunged my hand into the icewater and fished out two fruit punch gatorades. I tilted my head back and downed the first one before I'd let her hand me my change.

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