The Freedom of Mules

R. Avy Harris

He looks like the kind of mule you could trust. He's about my height and gazing into my eyes with his dopey brown ones like he's already decided to like me. This is the kind of mule you could befriend, travel with for years if you wanted, and cry when he got old and crippled and had to be put down with a shotgun.

He looks like a good mule.

Then again, I know nothing about mules. The only one I've ever ridden was a hateful old ass out on a trail ride when I was 7 and my parents got the whim to spend the weekend on a guest ranch. That mule hated me – not that I blame him. He spent 6 hours a day trudging behind a line of grander horses, the click of cameras and bad renditions of "My Darlin' Clementine" drowning out the plod of his own heavy footsteps. To add insult to his already-heavy burden, someone had named him Obedience. As if he'd lost the will to be anything else.

I'd bite the kid on my back too.

But this mule is clearly blazing his own trails. He's saddle-free and nuzzling my bare shoulder with a surprisingly soft mahogany coat. I found him – or he found me – back behind the closed-down general store in Klondyke, Arizona. When I press my forehead against the glass to look inside, a spider peers back. There are still some boxes and cans on the shelves, but someone disconnected the phone in the booth out front and the doors are all boarded up. I don't know what I was expecting – a cold beer would have been nice – but at least the icebox is still there, right where the guidebook said it would be. Unplugged and on the concrete pad behind the store.

I've been wondering about this icebox for months, and fantasizing about it for days. Hikers on the 700-mile Grand Enchantment Trail – who are few and very, very far between – cherish our resupply packages. We pack them with M&Ms and extra socks and bottles of blue Gatorade and mail them off to post offices in small towns every couple hundred miles or so. Or, in ghost-towns like Klondyke, where the post office shut down decades ago, we mail our supply packages to "Klondyke General Store, Freezer Behind the Store, Klondyke AZ" and wonder if the legendary freezer actually exists.

It does.

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Refrigeration came late to Klondyke, along with other modern conveniences. Standing in the only intersection in town with just a mule for company and miles of empty dirt road behind me, it's not hard to imagine this place as it was a century ago. For most of its history Klondyke has been a drowsy, placid town – even at its heyday during the gold rush there were no more than 500 miners plus a lady or two. These days it's down to about 40, mostly ranching families dotted throughout the canyons. As I made my way towards Klondyke over the past few days, walking through the shallow waters of Aravaipa Canyon and napping in the shade of its sharp red walls, I could hear echoes of voices every now and then, or cows grumbling in the night. Ranchers have been homesteading these hidden, lush canyons and their mesas for decades and don't pay much mind to passers-through like me. They're in this land for the long haul – it doesn't matter who comes and goes.

One of these families is infamous in Arizona – about the only thing Klondyke is known for, really. I read about Jeff and Martha Jane Power back when I was planning this trip, back when "Rattlesnake Canyon" was just a name and I hadn't yet fought off a Mojave Rattler with my hiking poles. Ironically, the year after Martha Jane died in a horse accident, Jeff built a cabin up in Rattlesnake Canyon where his only daughter was promptly bit by a snake and died. This was 1917 in the low desert lands, and I can't imagine a place further away from the frozen foxholes of German battlefields or a life more removed from the ungainly tanks burning their way across Europe. Still, the Power family had made their patriotic sacrifice: the oldest son, Charley, had been wounded in the war.

I imagine Old Man Power, a widower with one dead child and another wounded, the day the letter came for two more of his sons. He'd have ridden down to town for supplies and the mail, and I can see his shoulders slump as he stands just where I am now, the sun casting long afternoon shadows down the road. I can hear his silence when he read the official letter, imagine the way he folded the paper with sharp creases and firmly placed it in his shirt pocket. Like a man clutching a grenade to his chest and carrying it far away from the people he loves. I imagine the long ride back to his cabin, this bomb near his heart only deepening his resolve. It's a romanticized version of events, I know. But Old Man Power is a legend, and legends have their way of growing half-truths around them like layers of calloused skin.

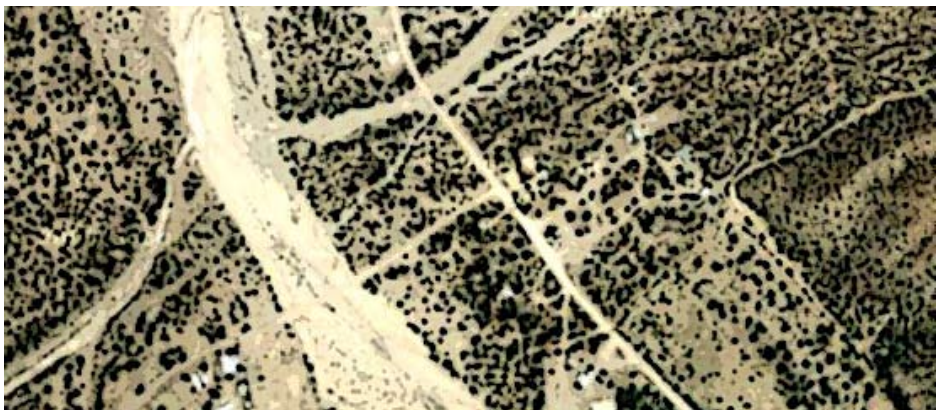
He'd have told his boys that they weren't going to war, and Tom and John would have agreed. Someone needed to stay home to see after the Old Man, and their land. It would have been a short conversation, the stoic nodding of three cowboy hats, and an irrevocable decision. Tom and John refused to register for the draft. They kept to the cattle and the cabin and the calls of raptors circling above.

It was a few weeks before Sheriff Robert McBride and his posse closed in around the cabin. They came at dawn, when the sunlight hadn't yet tipped and trickled over the canyon walls and the air was still cold. The shootout that morning, February 10, 1918, lasted only a few minutes. By the time anyone knew what had happened, the Sheriff and two of his deputies were dead. Tom, the youngest, was bleeding from his forehead and the Old Man wasn't going to last long. The reports say his sons made him comfortable – I like to think they laid him at the banks of his favorite spring to watch a last desert daybreak wash over his boots – then packed up and fled South with their ranch-hand Tom Sisson. It was just the three of them, a couple of horses, and an old pack mule.

I've never killed a man or broken too many laws, but I know the way your heart swells up into your lungs and your throat when you're running from something. I know the way the wide, empty horizons of the Southwest make you think, for just a minute or a day, that everything has to end in freedom after all. Maybe the Power brothers and Tom Sisson and their mule felt the same. But they still couldn't outrun Arizona's largest manhunt in history. They surrendered to a U.S. Army patrol less than a month later, just barely across the Mexican border.

I've claimed my supply box from the freezer and am eating M&Ms in the shade of the community bulletin board that once boasted the "Wanted" poster for the Power gang. Now it is advertising the sale of the general store and a tractor in good-condition. The mule followed me from the freezer and is nudging the box beside me with his wet nose. I'm still eating M&M's when I spot dust down the road, a cloud rolling up above the crunch of tires on gravel. A well-used pickup stops just short of the bulletin board and the man inside looks past me and straight at the mule.

"Rusty, what in the hell are you doing out here?" He leaves the engine running as he steps out in Levis and a t-shirt, swings a rope around Rusty's neck, and loads him into the back. He nods at me through the rolled-down window and pulls a u-turn in the road. Rusty looks back at me with his wide brown eyes and is gone.



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Tom Sisson died in prison. The Power brothers spent 42 years behind bars in Florence, Arizona, just a few counties away from the now infamous Sheriff Joe Arpaio, who keeps Iraq War resisters imprisoned in old army tents in the deadly heat of the desert. Sheriff Arpaio is under investigation by the U.S. Department of Justice for human rights violations, but that hasn't stopped him from reportedly abusing war resisters or military deserters in his jail. I wonder if the Power brothers would have survived for 42 years had they been imprisoned under someone like Arpaio.

As it is, Tom and John both died free men, in the very land for which they once ignored a war. Someone had to see after it. I'll walk past the Klondyke cemetery a few miles down the way, where the brothers are buried next to their sister and mother, beside the bones of the Old Man. I won't spend much time studying the headstones – the sun is plunging low in the sky and it's time to move on.

Some people say we're all running from something, one way or another. From wars and calls to patriotic duty, from a lasso around your body and fences keeping you in, from the click of tourist cameras and the advance of modern conveniences. I suppose those people would say that I'm running, too. That I'm hiding out here in the creases and folds of the canyons. I don't mean to hide, really. I'm just here to lay a few desert wildflowers on the graves of nearly-forgotten legends. And, if I can, I'd like to see after the land.

Avy Harris grew up in the foothills of Colorado where she became passionate about exploration and environmental justice. She's carried her backpack everywhere from Arizona to Thailand, and is currently wrapping up her time teaching in South Korea. She will move to Ethiopia this summer, and you can follow her travels at http://AvyAroundTheWorld.wordpress.com/.

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