

NO STRAPS

By Jacob H., Peoria, AZ

A young boy, barely 7 if that, scuffs his feet along the trail, stirring up little clouds of dust, leaving fresh footprints behind. He carries a bulky, red backpack nearly as big as he is, with a sleeping bag tied to the bottom. His clothes are dirty and raggedy and are completely soaked through with sweat. His face is full of determination and maturity, completely oblivious to the spectacular views of one of the 7 wonders of the world that surrounds him. The Grand Canyon. He's a backpacker and has already spent two nights at the bottom of the canyon. Now, he walks along one of the numerous trails that venture into the gorge. In front of him are his parents. They too have large packs and wear sweat stained clothes. The boy follows closely, focusing intently on foot placement, and trying to conserve energy. He walks with a purpose, not just for walking sake, but is powered by some inner force, driving him, motivating him, forcing him to continue on. Five more miles, that's it. Almost there. Just got to keep up with mom and dad. I'll prove them wrong; I'm strong enough to hike the canyon. They trudge on, slowly making their way across the Tonto Plateau having just climbed out of the inner canyon.

The plateau is an ugly, barren place, home to sagebrush and prickly pears. There are no jutting rock faces, no raging rivers, just gradual grades that connect the inner canyon to the outer canyon. It's relatively flat compared to the vertical cliffs that encompass it. The trail winds through water run offs and makes multiple stream crossings, requiring some crafty rock hopping. The foot treaded path climbs and falls with the terrain and is surrounded by green trees that thrive in the oasis. From there, the trail climbs steeply out of the canyon in long sweeping switchbacks passing through the different rock layers each telling a story of the canyon's creation.

The man stops and looks at his wife through worried eyes. Maybe we shouldn't have brought him; maybe he is too young. Poor little guy, he looks dead. I shouldn't have listened to him; I knew he wasn't ready for this. Son, do you want the straps? I told you, if you get tired, I can strap your pack to mine and I can carry it for you. Hiking without that extra weight would be a breeze for you. You wouldn't believe the difference it makes having no weight on your back. No, I can do it. I can do it. There's nothing wrong with letting me carry your pack; you would still be hiking the canyon. No, I can do it; I want to do it on my own.

They continue on to Indian Gardens, a campground halfway between the rim and the river. It lies in a water run off fed by a spring. The campground is covered in lush Cottonwoods living off the abundant supply of water. The green patch is visible from the rim and provides a great rest area and much needed shade for exhausted hikers. Hikers refill canteens and soak shirts and hats with water. Butterflies flutter through the air and squirrels climb the Cottonwoods. It's a peaceful stop. They sit and rest, watching mule trains lumber by carrying tourists too lazy, or incapable of hiking on their own.

We need to get going. Five more miles. If you don't like hiking in the dark we need to go now. They put their packs back on, weighed down by the extra water supply. They continue on the trail occasionally looking up at the towering canyon walls still ahead. The trail is littered with mule manure and is becoming dusty. Mule hoofs and hiking boots pound and scrape and eventually turn the hard packed dirt into powder. Then when the rain comes, the water rushes down the trail taking the powder with it, leaving trenches of washed out trail and exposing rocks. Here it comes. The toughest part of the hike.

From here on out it's just steep switchback

Jacob's Ladder. An infamous series of steep switchbacks ascending through a break in

the Redwall Limestone layer. The steepest grades of the entire trail. One step at a time. Just one step at a time. No straps. I don't need straps. I can do it. One step at a time. They sweat and grunt at the steep grades. They no longer greet the descending hikers with a quick hello or how's it going. They're too tired, too concentrated; they have no breath to spare. Small goals. Small achievements. Just get to the end of this switchback. Good. Now just get to the end of this one, and we'll take a break. It's slow going, even for the best hikers.

Along the trail are occasional steps, a foot maybe two feet high, designed to divert water runoff and prevent the trail from being washed away in the next big rain. The steps may be saviors for the trail but are killers for hikers. One. Two. Three steps are harmless, but after hundreds, they begin to take a toll on the legs. Each time lifting the entire body weight and weight of the pack with one leg. Compared to the boy, these steps are nothing for a grown man, but at forty-seven inches tall, some of the steps are over half the height of the boy. Pulling, crawling his way up the steps drains his energy. Every muscle in his body aches, but he continues on. He has to prove himself; he has to prove to himself. No straps, no straps. He keeps hiking.

Finally. The three mile resthouse. At the end of a switchback lies a small bathroom and a few water faucets. The resthouse is 3 miles from the trailhead, and is a popular finishing destination for ambitious day hikers. There is a considerable increase in the number of people on the trail and the sense of solitude begins to diminish. The boy and his mother sit on a rock, taking the weight of the pack off their shoulders. You're doing great. I'm so proud of you. Thanks mom, but we're not out yet. They sit in silence, exhausted. The beautiful canyon and spectacular vistas are old news; they don't care about that anymore. They're sick of the canyon; they're ready to be done. All they can think about is two scoops of ice cream and a four-hour ride home in an air-conditioned car. You sure you don't want those straps? No dad I'm fine. Well let's get going then. Six and a half miles down, three to go. Reluctantly, they get up and plunge forward up the trail. Switchback by switchback they climb fighting throbbing muscles and shortness of breath. They pull over at the end of almost every switchback now, drinking water to avoid dehydration and to lighten their packs. They watch a mule train with a full load of tourists cruise by with ease. It doesn't seem fair that they don't have to work to see the bottom of the canyon. The tourists just sit there, lazy, with no appreciation of the energy needed to hike out. Hours, days seem to pass by. One switchback after the other, after the other, after the other. The never-ending trail.

At last, they come up to the one and a half-mile house, the last major checkpoint until the trailhead on the rim. Quickly they grab a drink and start forward again, motivated to finally get to the top. The tourists are all over the place now, as thick as the wildlife in Yellowstone. So inconsiderate and caught up in their own world. They don't even notice the barely conscious seven-year-old trying to get by as they block the trail. Coming a mile down the trail in flip-flops thinking they own the place, and saying their stupid remarks. Oh, you're almost there sweetie the top is just ahead. Shut up lady, don't tell me how far I am, how about get off the trail so I can get by.

Just keep going, almost there. No straps, no straps. Each step is a major effort now; each step an accomplishment. Looking for the easiest possible path on the trail, requiring the least amount of energy. They look across the canyon at the opposite rim and wonder why they're not at the top yet. It looks as though they should be on the rim. One step at time. No straps. Fighting, giving it everything they have. Finally! There it is! There it is! The sign for Bright Angel Trail. Climbing the last 200 feet, ignoring the excruciating burn in his legs, the boy finally reaches the top. Joy and excitement overcome them all. Glad to finally be done, they sit to catch their breath. Whoa. That a boy son, I'm so proud of you; you're such a trooper. But he didn't need any praise, any compliments, he has achieved something he fought and worked for. He hiked the canyon at age seven, with no straps.