

*Sprung! Ash Stern, Jess Dunlap,
Phil Juliano, and The Dream Journal*

The Blotter

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MAGAZINE



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“Insecurity Cameras”

Technology doesn't scare me too much. In the movie “Minority Report,” based on the Philip K. Dick story, protagonist John Anderton runs from the pre-Law which he himself helped establish; runs through a future that is peppered with eyes looking for him. The eyes – cameras placed at every angle and turn – scan the retinas of passers-by that they might market products and services specifically selected for them, based on previous purchases, activities, events one has attended, and the age/gender demographic bucket into which a person falls. At each instant during an otherwise predictable chase scene, small speakers entreat Anderton to try this or buy that – making potential value decisions for him because he is strolling out of a subway station or past a Subway restaurant. “John, aren't you hungry for a six-inch Italian meat-lovers'.” “John, wouldn't you be more comfortable right now in a Volvo?” Those same cameras tell someone, somewhere, precisely where Anderton is – and that information is instantly relayed to his pursuers. Yikes! *Authority!* The absurdity of trying to sell something to a man on the run is simultaneously chilling and annoying, because at that moment we think we know that Anderton is not a criminal, and the movie plays out in that direction for us.

But what if he had been? Would we change our tune?

It is a rusty irony that we argue for the liberty of privacy (let me do what I want and leave me alone!) at the expense of liberty of safety (please protect me from...everything!), or we argue for safety (hang on, when did *that* become illegal!?) at the expense of being no longer allowed to do anything we damn well please (Hey, ya'll, watch this!). Or we don't fight, which results in our tacit choice and leaves the alum flavored legacy in one's mouth that abstention during the Emancipation vote must have had in 1863. And then we sign on to fuss with each other about it on Facebook via Google using broadband provided by a telephone company. Brilliant. Did any of us read the fine print?

I appreciate the privacy/liberty/safety argument at the coffee table or Facebook keyboard, because it draws us out of our caves to actually think, as opposed to almost every other divisive subject in the American socio-political landscape. But Mr. Franklin's quotable-quote “They who would give up essential Liberty, to purchase a little temporary Safety, deserve neither Liberty nor Safety.” is one of those fun-cyclical logic things that make me think that Franklin was drinking Sam Adams' ale when he came up with it. It's infantile to think that this makes sense. Of course you require both Liberty and Safety, and deserve to trust those who would provide you with both. I grasp your frustration either with the NSA or its leaks. And I find it eerie that Snowden is also the character that Catch-22's Yossarian attempts to patch up during a *sortie* over Germany – unaware that his band-aids do nothing for the big problem. Is that just a coincidence, too?

Anyhow, I guess that under the guise of national security, things have been listened to. That's both good and bad. The government – the authority – has the ability to look through cameras intended for other purposes. They say that they can catch bad people before they do bad things to the country. So here's my question. Can they stop bad people from doing bad things to me? I'm the country. Me and a bunch of other people. To wit: I want my identity protected, and please don't let anyone else shop using my name or credit card or social security number. Please catch them before they take all the money out of my checking account. As long as you're listening in, do some useful things. Bust billionaire Ponzi schemers before they're past the quarter-house turn. Catch politicians taking bribes. A few of those in the stony lonesome before they've been able to enjoy the fruits of their labors might have an effect on our opinion of oversight.

No, I'm not afraid of technology. I also understand that companies want to make things inexpensive to sell. The way to do that is reduce the cost of figuring out what the heck is on my mind. Spam bugs me, sure. So do robo-phone calls at supper-time. And TV commercials, even clever ones. And I don't like cameras that scan my retina so that they know who I am and where I am. Or cookies – the programming ones, not the oatmeal ones with icing on them, I love those. And I love that my folks have a gigantic flat-screen TV and my mom can read the clues on Jeopardy for the first time as quickly as everyone else, and if they go by just a tad too fast, well, she can press the pause button and then keep going when she's ready. That's just awesome. And I do look over the shoulders of my kids while they instagram, just because that's what parents should do – heaven help us.

So I think the time is coming where there's no hiding for any of us. I get it, or at least I think I do. I don't confuse personal liberty with marketing-schemes. However, I still haven't checked the GPS locator in my i-phone. For all I know, it is already engaged and leaving a trail of...trails behind it for the Apple people to try and piece together some picture of me for their nefarious purposes. And I've turned off the password tracker in Google Chrome. That extra work of remembering my passwords is wearing me out. I'm certain it's taking nanoseconds off my life.

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CAUTION

*...and sealing wax
and cabbages*

“The Bad Year”

by Ash Stern

I remember learning in school about how memories are formed. The textbooks compared us to sophisticated computers: data goes in, is stored, and retrieved as needed. But nobody was ever able to fully say where those memories are stored. There doesn't seem to be a dedicated hard drive to hold all those memories in the brain, that you can point to and say, there, that is my seventh birthday, and that is the day I graduated high school. Now, I've never been much good at science, but I do know this. I keep my memories in my body.

My mother, dead when I was five, is under my breastbone. She is that sharp pain that cuts through me when I breathe too deeply, and I have to hold her at bay until the pain is gone. My grandfather is in the dimmed hearing in my right ear, where I once deposited a pussy willow seed after he told me with a sparkle in his eye that it would grow. It never grew a plant, but it did grow an infection down near the eardrum, the scarring from which made everything on that side sound just slightly farther away. My first girlfriend is in the heavy scar on my left palm, where I tore it open on a jagged fence I climbed over running from her father, on the last date we ever had.

But I have no place for my grandmother.

The spring I went to help my grandmother was the year I turned twenty-five. I had just dropped out of college for the second time, having decided that I

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wasn't suited to a life in the theatre after all, just like how the first time I decided I wasn't ever going to live up to being a doctor. My grandfather had died the fall before, and so this would be Nana's first year in shearing season without anyone to help her. My defection from civilized life was only a convenience for her.

I hadn't seen her in almost a decade. Her village held too many memories for me to want to come back, and as I hiked up the dirt road that wound through the mountains ever closer to the dusty hamlets, I prodded gingerly at those memories like a bruise. I expected it was going to hurt. Nana never left the village, hardly even ever left her ranch. “There's too much to do,” she'd say when she rung us from the store, the only building that bothered to get a telephone line strung. “Who would look after the crias?”

Mami died here. Papi turned cold here. Something, nobody yet told me what, made my grandfather drown himself here. And yet Nana remained, because who would look after the crias?

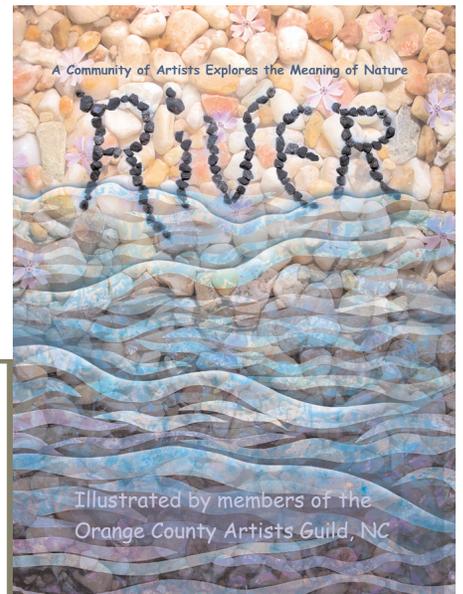
I had walked a handful of miles on the road from the nearest town

before a rickety cart overtook me. A woman drove a dusty mule before her, manipulating the lead attached to his harness with a kind of practiced ease I recognized. She wasn't a small woman, but her spirit seemed larger than her body could contain. She had dark eyes and dark hair pulled into plaits, with a face hardened just past the flush of youth. She slowed the mule and eyed me with curiosity, and I felt in that moment that she was weighing my very soul.

“You're going to the village,” she said. It wasn't a question. The road didn't lead anywhere else. I nodded, and she waved at the open bench next to her on the front of her cart.

“Come on then,” she said.

We wound along the road



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that snaked between two ridges rising high on either side, disappearing into the soft cloud cover that floated over the peaks. Hints of purple buds of phacellia sprung from the ground right up until the rock faces were nearly vertical. In another few weeks their buds would open and the entire expanse would be blanketed in green and purple, and to the human eye the colors would mix and turn it all to a red-purple bruise.

As the mule unhurriedly picked its way along the inclined path, I turned and looked into the back of the cart. The acrid smell of vinegar was the first thing I identified, coming from several large and dirty plastic buckets. There were a few large bags, tightly sealed, stacked up against the back of the bench.

"Salt," the woman volunteered. "Alum. Vinegar."

I thought a moment, wondering why that seemed so familiar to me. "Dye," I offered after a moment, noticing for the first time the bright yellow of the high collar that stuck out the top of her coat, buttoned snugly beneath her chin. She nodded, and again eyed me with interest.

"You've been here before," she said. Again, it wasn't a question.

"Yes. But not for a long time." I hesitated a moment. "I left

after the bad year."

At that moment we crested the rise leading into the valley, and I could see its entirety. The lake in the center, its banks full from the winter thaw. The village was off to the west of the lake, high enough to avoid the floodwaters in spring. Farther past the lake, halfway up the bowl of the valley, was Nana's land. Her house was a distinctive red, set in isolation from the village, its edges blurred by distance but the color clear and bright. Nearby a steppe stretched horizontally along the bowl, a space I knew was edged in wooden fencing and filled with her livelihood: the alpacas.

I watched the woman from the corner of my eyes, but she didn't flinch. She did close her eyes a moment and let the reins slack. "I left after that too, for a little while. My mother was murdered."

"My mother died that year too," I said, with a little surprise. I knew there had been a lot of deaths that year, which was why it stuck in most people's minds as the bad year. But I still, somehow, found it surprising that two strangers would share that fact. "A natural death, though. Mostly. She had cancer."

Suddenly the woman looked at me sharply, in a way that made me nervous.

"Now I know you. You're

going to see Izel."

Hesitantly, I agreed. "She is my grandmother. My name is Cayo."

She turned her gaze back to the road, gently urging the mule on the sloping road as we began to pick our way towards the bottom of the valley. "You may call me Marisol." The harsh look I thought I had seen earlier was gone.

"Marisol," I tried out the sound in my mouth, and it felt liquid and golden. "Why do you sound so sad?"

There was silence for a few moments, as if she were deciding whether or not to tell me. "My mother, her name was Azucena. She was a weaver, primarily."

"I remember," I said, and I did, vividly. "She made that yellow dye. My grandfather took me down to the village with him when he delivered the wool."

"Oh, he came more than that," Marisol answered with a bitter note. "He came to deliver the wool, he came to pick up the cloth, he came to paint the house, he came to weed the garden. He came to build us furniture, and made me little dolls of wood and scraps, and always brought back a handful of candy for me and a hairpin for my mother when he went into town for supplies."

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I frowned. I didn't remember him doing any of those things in our house.

"I think they must have loved each other very much," she said in a small voice.

I wanted to reach out to her, to this woman who was a stranger of twenty years. I'm not sure I even remembered her, specifically. She would have been ten to my five, and probably wouldn't have lowered herself to playing with such a baby at that age. But I felt like there was something there that drew me to her in a way I didn't quite understand.

I stretched my fingers out and clenched them tightly into a fist, a few times. They were red from the spring chill in the air, since I had neglected to pick up gloves for my trip. I guess I had forgotten how the mountains could feel. Finally I said, "How did your mother die?"

At first I didn't think she was going to answer me. Her eyes focused on the road ahead, then finally turned to me, and I felt a tug on my throat at the look in her deep eyes.

"Someone bashed her head in with a shovel."

I swallowed a little bile that had crept up into my throat. "I'm sorry," I began frantically, but she stopped me.

"It's nothing that everyone doesn't already know. You'd have heard it from someone or another, if you asked. Though they might add more than is strictly the truth."

"Were there...rumors? About who did it?"

"There were. There are. I have my own ideas, but I can't know for sure."

I was sure Papi had hidden all this from me. I was only a child,

and we were so preoccupied with our own family at the time. I knew that the village had had trouble that year, but that's all. "Was there more, for the village?"

"Much more. The lake flooded and destroyed many homes, and we had to move farther up the valley. Our crops were rained out, and there wasn't enough to eat. Many children and old people got sick from dirty water, some died. You were lucky to leave, most of us didn't have that luxury."

We rambled into the village, which was really nothing more than the same road doubling back on itself around a large well, surrounded on every side by brightly-painted mud-brick and wood homes. I remembered these too, though before they were painted by natural means, greens and browns and greys. Now the world had brought in synthetic paints, and amped up the color volume. It had started, years back, as a friendly competition between neighbors, to see who could make their home the most beautiful. After a while, it was almost tradition, and now the walls were green with patterns of blue and orange along the edges, or bright purple with yellow geometric shapes, or anything else the residents could think up. It felt homey, to me. Marisol hardly had to guide the mule around a slate-blue house to a small stable lean-to on the back, it seemed to know the route so well. I jumped out when she did, and hesitated, unwilling yet to leave her.

She unhitched the mule and swung the gate to its little shelter shut behind it, then turned and considered me carefully, tucking an errant strand of dark hair behind her ear. "You know my mother had a special dye?"

I nodded. I remembered my grandfather explaining, many families had a color that was special to them, that they felt a certain bond with. Ours was a red ochre, and we showed it as often as possible, painting our house with it and decorating our pottery with it and, naturally, dyeing our clothes with it.

Marisol motioned for me to follow her, and opened the rickety door to the side of the house. I noticed it had no lock, and barely even had a latch. It was dark inside, the windows dirty and letting only a small amount of light in, but my eyes adjusted and I soon saw cloths draped everywhere. Lines strung from one end of the room to the other, covered in yellow; a few chairs sat by a bench draped with scraps in different shades. Two large vats were near the door, empty for now. Each cloth was yellow, and each was a different yellow, but—glancing at Marisol as she shucked off her coat to reveal the saffron-colored sweater beneath to compare—none was the right yellow.

"She died before she could tell me her recipe," Marisol said, fingering the edge of one of the wool pieces. "I've been trying to figure it out ever since. The right amount of vinegar, the right temperature, a little bit of sand or a little more flowers? More stamen, more petals? I thought she might have added pine, but none of those turned out right. It's been a long time."

We went back out into the sunlight, and she pointed to what turned out to be a group of screens, probably taken from old windows, littered with yellow flowers, drying in the early afternoon sun. "But see? I just found this spring's first crop, down around the lake. And I've got

a lot of new ideas. I think I'm really going to get it this year."

I watched her, checking on the screens here and there, with the first real smile and enthusiasm that she had shown since she came up that road. I noticed the slight snaggle to one of her front teeth, and the very faint freckles on the bridge of her nose and cheeks, only a shade or two darker than her skin. I noticed the longest lashes I had ever seen, and the little green glass jewels that sparkled in her earlobes. I think that was the moment I loved her.

I hiked up to my grandmother's house in the waning sun, and the shadows grew long when I came around the bank of scrubby short trees that hid her front door from the road. She was standing there, in the doorway, her red tunic framed by the red of the walls. Nana, Izel to everyone but me, was not a tiny woman. I never remembered her being frail. She matched me for height to this day, and out-matched me in strength of body and of will. She stood there, her grey hair cut past her ears and wisping about in the wind, her arms crossed and her stance hard.

"Nana," I greeted her, stopping just before her, unsure of myself. She stared at me, as if taking in every line that life had left on my body, then finally broke into a smile and pulled me roughly to her for a hug.

"I'm glad you're here," she said. "I was worried when you didn't come earlier. I expected you in the morning."

The unspoken question hung in the air—that was her way. Nothing direct. Nothing to challenge. When I only fidgeted, and didn't answer, she sighed heavily and

bundled me inside. "Come, come, we will eat."

We settled comfortably before the fire, on a pair of pillows she had thrown on the faded rug. Nana was eccentric in that way. It was as if she had to celebrate that her body could still get down on the floor, and refused chairs whenever possible. I think I almost had a harder time getting comfortable than she did.

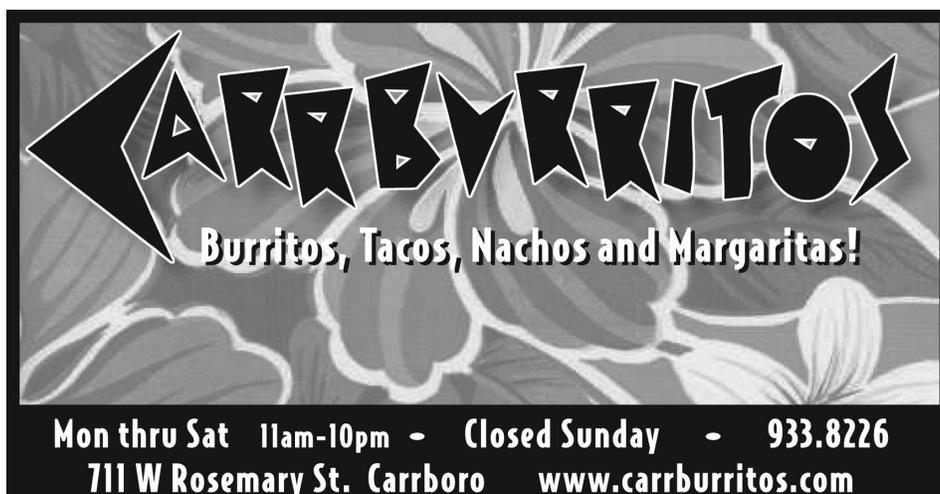
She turned a spit over the fireplace, where the embers both cooked the cuys spitted on its iron pole and gave off heat to warm the rest of the cabin. It was how I remembered: dusty, certainly, and cluttered with tools and clothing, the walls absolutely lined with shelves. It was one room, that being all she had needed, even when there was a whole family living there. It just seemed more open now, with only the one bed back in the corner, brightly colored curtains to draw across it and divide it from the main living space. The kitchen was nothing more than the fireplace, a table and shelves full of crocks and gourds, storing the beans, lentils, rice, quinoa and others that she had used to get through the winter. Sacks of garlic and tubers hung from the ceiling to either side of the

rough stone chimney, and a garland of corn ears strung almost festively back and forth across it.

Nana pulled the spit off the fire and let it cool enough to slide the little bodies of the cuys off. With rough woolen mitts she pulled a clay pot from the embers of the fire where it sizzled and steamed, and fished a few small potatoes from the rolling boil of water, and presented it all to me on a chipped plate. "Pickings are a little slim yet, I'm afraid. We're finishing up the last of winter stores."

"I don't mind," I said, and I didn't. It had been a long time since I had had such simple fare, and the first bite of meat sent waves of memories through my body. This was my childhood, encased in one tiny guinea pig, that I had almost forgotten about in my modern life.

I wanted so desperately to ask her about my grandfather as we ate, but I was afraid to bring up the subject. Everything. Him, the bad year, the woman... it all seemed like something I couldn't approach, that she would simply dance away from it. I had to try, surely, because there were so many questions. I set down the remains of my plate, not much more than a little smeared butter and a devastated carcass, but she cut



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in first.

“So who had you all caught up in the village? A woman?”

Her tone was light, and her mouth smiling, as if it were a gentle joke. The kind that elders have at the expense of their adult children exploring relationships with others. But I was caught by how it didn't spread up to her eyes, which remained impassive. I hesitated, but this was someone I wasn't capable of lying to.

“A woman gave me a ride into town. We talked for a while.”

“Oh? What did you talk about?”

“Cloth,” I said, hoping that would be enough. “It was interesting.”

Izel's eyes narrowed, but she got up quickly before I could see more. “The men of this family, you

are all alike!” She said in a light tone. “Always chasing after a pretty face.” I wanted to protest that I certainly wasn't like that, but her body language effectively closed the subject.

She took me out to the pasture later. The alpacas were gathered around a slowly collapsing bale of hay, picking off pieces of it here and there, and they raised their heads to stare at us as we approached the fence. The adults quickly grew bored and returned to their feed, but a few crias came bounding over to look for treats. Nana offered them a few withered pepinos as a sweet treat, and they eagerly licked them up from her palms.

Their coats were all shaggy from winter, some trailing near the ground. They were dirty from the mud in the pasture, but I could see the diversity of color had broadened since I was here last. “You've got greys and fawns now,” I said with surprise.

“We expanded from just the whites. There's a growing market for natural fibers now. The whites are the best for dye, but you just can't recreate a rose grey with dye, no matter how skilled you think you are.” She pointed to a pair off to the

side of the bale. “Look, there's two more that will drop crias, probably this month. I'm hoping for females again, I lost two over the winter and three of the current babies are males, so they'll have to be pulled once they're weaned. I might be able to trade a pair of males for a female at market, but it's not likely. They've gotten too expensive to outright buy any more.”

The herd was substantially sized, to my eyes, but Nana must judge their numbers more harshly. “Are you worried about not having enough to sustain your herd?”

She shooed the little crias off and they ran bleating back to their mothers. “I worry that there won't be enough births to replace the deaths. I worry that the dogs won't be able to keep the pumas off if they get too hungry. I worry that the market will decline and I won't be able to get enough money for the wool this year to buy their food.” I saw, for the first time, how gnarled her fingers looked as they gripped the rough wood of the fenceposts splotted with dry fungus. “I'm so tired,” she sighed finally.

That night I bedded down in a tiny room just above the barn, after we herded the alpacas in for



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the night with the help of Nana's two sinewy dogs. It was usually reserved for seasonal help, she had said, and so it was perfect for me. Her husband had stayed here often too, at first to watch over the females when they were close to birthing, but later on more and more for no reason at all.

Unlike the house the barn was fashioned entirely from wood, and consequently was draftier than the snug mud-brick would have been. I shivered from the cold as I shucked off my clothing. The heavy layers of woolen blankets were a welcome alternative to the frigid temperature that fell on us when the sun went down. I braved the cold once more to pinch the flame of the tiny candle flickering shadows on the wall out of existence, and settled in for sleep.

But sleep never came. Under the blankets I was warm and secure, but my mind couldn't stop turning over the day, couldn't stop picturing Nana's unsmiling eyes or hearing her heavy sigh, smelling the drying flowers and imagining what the skin of Marisol's shoulders, neck, back or more would feel like.

When I can't sleep, I roll. From my back, to one side, to my

stomach, to the other, trying to find that spot that will let me drift off finally. As I turned to face the wall that the little bed was set against, my arm caught the corner of something jammed in between the mattress and the wood. I felt it in the dark, a little harder corner of—leather? Paper?—just barely sticking out from where it was hidden. It was hard to get a grip on, but once I did it came out easily, and I could tell by feel that it was a little book.

I felt for the matchbook I had left by the candle, and lit it once more. The cover of the book was neutral brown leather, stitched clumsily together with an open binding. I settled back under the blankets to conserve heat and opened the cover.

July

Cria twins born today. The mother died. It's so hard on their little bodies, they're not made to carry more than one at a time, but it happens so rarely I practically forgot about it. Will have to bottle-feed the little ones. Both female.

I want to take one down to the village for Marisol to play with, but I'm worried Izel will see. Azu wouldn't like it.

Not a book. A journal. My grandfather's journal.

I was surprised he would be so, in my mind, blatant. It was almost like he hadn't even been trying to hide his feelings for what was essentially his other family. I'm sure I was at the house when this was happening—I checked the year, and it was about right. Yet there was no mention of Mami or Papi in other entries I skimmed through, and none at all of me. It was as if the three women were the only ones in his life, two he wanted and one he didn't.

Disgusted, I set it aside and snuffed the candle again. I had had enough.

I woke just after dawn, jerked into awareness by my sudden lack of blankets. Blearily I realized I had thrown off my heavy covers, and the cold seeped in like heavy smoke permeating my bones. There was no hot shower I could take, and no nearby fire or hot beverage without heading back to the main house. There was nothing to be done for it but get dressed, and wait for my own body heat to make me comfortable again.

Nana had found me some clothes a little better suited to the climate than what I had come up

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with. Thicker pants, for one, both to conserve heat and protect from the brambles that sometimes found their way into the pasture and around the house. I had been stuck more than once by their sharp spines in my early years, and remembered that well enough to want to avoid it again. She had found me a shirt that would wick away moisture, and fit snugly underneath a heavy woolen coat. Red, of course.

I hesitated when I saw the book on the table, and decided to tuck it into a pocket of the coat, afraid Nana might find it. It wasn't something she needed to deal with right then.

I climbed down the steep steps, almost a ladder, into the barn where the animals milled around expectantly. It was probably later than they were used to, but Nana had left me the task of letting them out to pasture for the day. The big door unlatched with a little effort, and once opened the small herd spilled from the doors like liquid. The crias began to race each other, eager to expend the energy that had pent up overnight. One of the older females nudged me as she went past, mostly out of curiosity, but shied off quickly when I raised a hand to steady myself.

I watched a pair of crias chase each other and disappear around the corner of the barn. When they reappeared moments later, it was with a bundle of foliage

in their mouths, bright yellow flowers dangling from the ends. One dropped its bundle and made a grab for that of the other, and they tugged at each end until they flew apart, the vines giving way and the petals flying outwards. Both forgot their game at the call from their mothers, and went to go feed.

I picked up one of the crushed blossoms, overturned a bucket by the wall of the barn warmed in the direct sunlight, and sat down. The edges of the flower were that distinctive yellow, but the inner velvety portion was pearlescent white. It was the stamen, in the center, that really gave Marisol's dye its kick though, not the petals. The pollen rubbed off on my fingers bright orange, but I knew that if you dried those, with water they would profusely bleed that saffron-yellow onto anything they touched.

I pulled the journal from my pocket again, my fingers leaving hurried orange smears on the leather cover, and flipped through until the pages became blank. I wanted to know the last thing my grandfather wrote.

I've done something terrible.

My breath caught in my chest.

May God forgive me. Izel knew, she knew the whole time. She waited until that poor girl died and Simon left with the boy, and then she caught me and said if I didn't do it, she would rain Hell on me and mine. She said she had been humiliated for far too long. I was so afraid. I should have left long ago, long before this started, when I first knew of the darkness she had inside of her. I thought she might have made Simon's wife sick with her

curse, and I thought she might do it to me, or to Azu, or to little Marisol. I begged her to leave them alone, that I would do anything, but she said it was the only way. She would leave the child alone—the child, she said, never a name—if I did as she asked.

I killed my Azucena to save her from the suffering that would surely come to her and her girl, and it's haunted me these many years. I can't hide from it any more. God will judge me. I only hope he will be more forgiving than my own mind. Tonight I go to the lake.

There was nothing else. I closed the book with a soft snap. I couldn't form a coherent thought. I could barely breathe without conscious effort, telling myself in, out, in and out. I only knew one thing. I had to tell Marisol. She deserved the closure, to know that her mother's lover had been the one to kill her, however misguided his intentions.

I left the ranch without visiting the main house, without even looking back at it to see if the smoke was curling up from the chimney, if a figure stood in the windows. I felt like running but I walked, forcing myself to a steady pace, trying to organize my thoughts into any semblance of sense. The road took me down in the village quicker than I remembered going up the day before. The inhabitants were just waking as well, opening their shutters despite the brisk morning air, beating dust from rugs, watering early spring plants in handmade clay pottery. I rounded the corner into the central circle, and stopped short when I saw the blue house.

I couldn't properly say it was blue anymore. Vines grew up and covered the entire house, first and second story. The roof was covered,

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and tendrils reached out towards the commons as if testing the waters but not dipping themselves in. Only the windows and doors were bare, but even those were thickly framed in vine and leaf and—yes—yellow blossom.

“Marisol!” I called, rushing over and pounding on the door. It gave way at my touch, and I gingerly pushed it open to the interior, darker now that the foliage blocked more of the windows. I called for her again, and in a moment she came down the rickety stairs, pulling a heavy robe around her body.

“Cayo!” she exclaimed, rubbing at her eyes in confusion. “Why are you here? Why are you yelling?”

“Come outside,” I urged her. She quirked her mouth in a way that said she thought I was ridiculous, but I insisted. “You must. You must see this.”

I would have practically dragged her out if she hadn’t forced me to stop so she could get slippers on her feet to protect herself from the cold ground. It wasn’t until she got to the doorway that she realized nature was encroaching upon her home, and her eyes went wide with wonder as she gently touched the leaves. Marisol ignored me then,

and walked out to the commons to survey the house in its entirety.

I joined her by the center fountain, looking around, surprised that nobody else in the village seemed to notice. “She’s speaking to me,” Marisol said dreamily, as if she hadn’t quite woken yet. “The flower’s not just our dye, it’s her name. Azucena, the bitter lily. She’s reaching out to me.”

The tiny hairs on my neck prickled, and I knew it wasn’t because of the cold. Maybe Azucena was speaking. “The real reason I came,” I began carefully, though I couldn’t draw her gaze from the house. “I had to give you something. I found this, last night. And I believe it’s very important to you.”

I pulled the journal from my pocket, opened it to the last entry and held it out for her. Only then did she drag her eyes away from the house, and take the worn and smeared papers from me, her eyes quickly skimming the text.

When she looked up again, her look was hard. “I think you should go now.”

And I did. How could I argue with her?

The rest of the day was more normal than it had any right

to be. Nana greeted me at the door again when I returned, just like the previous day. Only this time she had a cup of steaming tea, that she urged me to drink quickly. My stomach flipped when she pulled a little leather book from a shelf and handed it to me, but when I opened it, the first pages were full of her own handwriting. Counts of the herd, on the first page, how many adult females and who was expecting crias. A description of their breeding habits, a description of the shearing process. What mix of food they needed, how much hay and what fresh plants would benefit their coats. A list of names and places, people to contact for buying and selling young animals, buying food, who would spin the wool into yarn.

“Today,” she said softly, “I want you to write everything we do on the remaining pages. That will be your reference for the ranch. Everything you need to know about the animals, it is in there.”

And so I learned. I worked harder that day than I think I ever have, clearing out the barn, hauling feed and water, even turning the turf on the unused part of the pasture so that fertilizer could be mixed in and it would recover from the damage the alpacas had wrought

Best In Show

by Phil Juliano



The Blotter

with their tiny feet. I learned that they had pads like a dog and long toenails, rather than hooves like I had thought, and so they took a lot longer to destroy a pasture than cattle. But eventually, everything needed to be refreshed, and this was the time of year to do it. When the soil had been properly mixed, we utilized the wind to seed with clover, which would both hold the soil in place during the spring rains and serve as the initial grazing crop when the pasture opened back up again.

I was glad, guiltily so, that I had enough work to occupy my mind. When we finally returned to the house the sun was beginning to set, and we shared a cold dinner before the fire, neither of us having the inclination to cook anything that day. Nana brought me lemongrass tea in a steaming bowl, and laid her palm on my cheek. I was startled to see the smile on her face crinkling the corners of her eyes. "You've always been such a good boy," she said. "You'll need that."

With that she banished me, with my tea, to the barn room. I didn't want to go in quite yet, and instead sat on the bucket outside the barn doors in the shadow from the moonlight, listening to the soft bleating from inside and looking at the mountains. Now that I had time to rest, I had time to think about my grandmother, and the things my grandfather had written about her. She was strong of body, and of will, but I had never considered she would have it in her to do what he claimed. Still, there were deaths to account for, and that was the only explanation I had heard. Could the sad, tired woman I knew, forcing herself through her daily work

though I could see the pain in the lines of her face, really have been so heartless? Or had she been, as the journal insinuated, driven by humiliation into blackmail?

I heard the door of the main house open and shut, but it was clear that in the shadows as I was, Nana couldn't see me. I watched her wrap herself in a heavy wrap, and begin the walk down to the village. I didn't think she really visited much of anyone. I set down my tea on the bucket, and followed.

The path was open enough that I could see her a ways off, but not once did she turn and see me. I'm not sure why, now, I never called out to her, or hurried to catch up. I just watched. But once the houses closed in around her, I lost which direction she went. It wasn't a large village by any means, but somehow she managed to disappear completely. I stood in the street and tried to imagine Nana with the kind of dark powers my grandfather had claimed. Could she have had a hand in my mother's death, too? I didn't know what to believe any more. After a few minutes of checking down alleyways, I gave up and went to see Marisol.

But she wasn't home either. No answer came to my knock, and no light betrayed a presence inside the house. I pushed on the door, experimentally, but this time it didn't give beneath my palm.

As I walked back out to the road one of the neighbor women emerged from her door to dump a bucket of scraps for her dogs. "You're looking for Marisol?" She said kindly, and waved down towards the center of the bowl. "Try the lake. She goes for walks, sometimes. I try to tell her not to go in

the dark, but she won't listen to anyone."

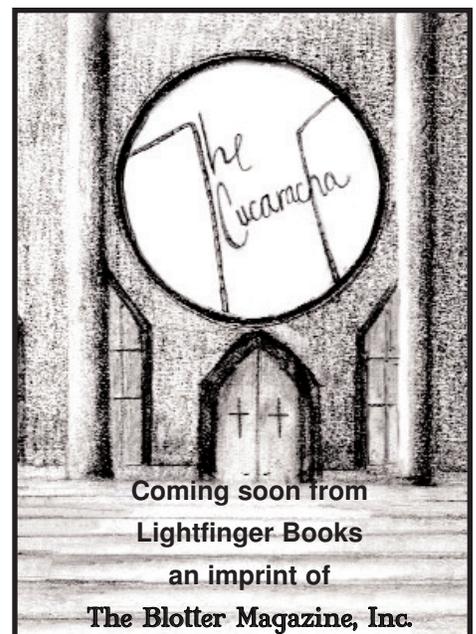
It might have been the coyotes howling that put me so on edge as I picked my way on the path to the lake. The frogs were a deafening crowd, and the light of the moon came and went with the clouds passing over her face. I never called out, and now I wonder what would have happened had I did. Would it have changed anything?

Because I found Marisol at the lake, bathed in moonlight, in up to her waist. She was holding something under the water, but when she heard my footsteps she straightened up and turned towards me, water streaming from her body. Her face was in shadow, but I knew she saw me.

"Don't come closer," she cautioned me, as I stepped into the shallows. The water entered my shoes and socks but her voice was colder than that by far.

"Why?" I asked her, suddenly afraid. "Why, what have you done? Marisol?"

She came out of the lake as I



splashed in, and we traded places. She stood and watched me on the shore, soaked to the bone, and I discovered my grandmother, still and lifeless, under the water. Her skin had already lost its color and her eyes were closed. She looked calm. I looked back at Marisol, who watched me impassively. She was so small, and Nana was so much larger than her. How could she have done this? Didn't she fight back?

And then I saw the vines coiling tightly around her limbs. They cut into the flesh, and blood streamed thinly from the edges. The vines with the naked blossoms, nothing more than stamen left, and the yellow petals that floated on the surface of the water.

"What are you going to do now," Marisol asked me in a mocking tone. "Take revenge for your

family? Your grandmother made your grandfather kill my mother. He's already gone, nothing I could do for that. But she was the start of all of it, she deserved it! What are you going to do? Continue the cycle? Can you? Are you even capable?" She spat at her feet.

I left Nana in the water and stood in front of Marisol. I imagined my hands encircling her throat, how easy it would be to squeeze harder and harder until the fight drained from her. I imagined holding her underwater, I imagined how a knife might slide in between her ribs, how she couldn't run if I cut her hamstrings, how her skull would blossom if I had a gun. I didn't know what to believe about my grandmother any more, but ultimately she was MY family, MINE to judge, and Marisol had taken that

opportunity away from me. I imagined I could see the pulse of her carotid artery, her ulnar and radial arteries in her arm, the ones that are easy to get to and most vulnerable, singing if they were to be sliced open. I imagined her at a cellular level, deep into the nuclei that carried the strands of her DNA twisted and folded around itself, and I wondered how much of that she shared with me, exactly. She watched me, defiantly, her jaw set forward and her lip curled so slightly upward. She taunted me with that look. She never looked more desirable.



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"I Hope This Morning"

by Jess Dunlap

I hope this morning you are surprised by the world you inhabit.

I hope the strange light opens your eyes

The strange light that filters through the lavender comforter, cotton quilt cloud land above, mingled with sun.

I hope the squirrels perform for you great acrobatic feats

Heretofore Unseen

Such Bravery

amongst the trees.

I hope the old oaks moan at you —

That in their wailing you are granted

A Glimpse

Never Witnessed

By Your Eyes

down the path

You walk so often.

I hope you chose the right coat

and your stride is strong —

that you walk the extra block

to revel in your land.

I hope your dog friend stops

to sniff

Everything.

That you are given enough pause.

I hope you are entranced.

Today I hope home

is not taken

for granted.

The Dream Journal

real dreams, real weird

Please send excerpts from your own dream journals. If nothing else, we'd love to read them. We won't publish your whole name.

mermaid@blotterra.com

Just before the alarm breaks in, there is a moment where I am upstairs in the police department building, in a detective's office, looking out the window at the roof of the building where the ski-jumpers must land or otherwise smash into the much taller bell-tower and steeple of a church. I am trying to explain how a ski-jumper can lean back on his skis and drag his backside and poles and everything like a sea-anchor in order to slow down to a stop rather than crashing off the roof or into the church. There is no snow on the landing-roof, in fact it is a pretty day outside, sunny, and the windows of the detective's office are open. Am I one of the perpetrators of some dastardly and complicated crime, involving a James Bondish ski-getaway? Or am I a brilliant Holmesian solver of how-the-heck-did-they-do-it scenarios?

HD - cyberspace

CONTRIBUTORS:

Ash Stern is a student of creative writing at North Hennepin Community College in Brooklyn Park, Minnesota. She writes at four in the morning between patients at the University of Minnesota Hospital, where she works in the laboratory. The patients think she's weird..

Jess Dunlap, also known as GneissMouse, has been drawing and writing since she first took pen in paw back in the days of Duran Duran and acid-wash jeans. Since then she got a bit taller, got a degree, got married, got a dog, and moved to Athens, Georgia. Her work these days focuses on place, native animals, elevating the every-day, and spiritualizing the seemingly meaningless. Backyard nature, long morning dog walks, and a love of home resonate deeply in her work. She likes the little things best and hopes creating art to celebrate them will help others find beauty in their own surroundings and life.

Phil Juliano has been cartooning for over twenty years. His comic strip, "Best In Show", is a visual interpretation of his daily life and struggle to find his place in society. He's a beer snob, baseball fan and avid outdoorsman, usually all at the same time. "Best In Show" is currently being featured in several newspapers and magazines and is syndicated by MCT Campus where it is distributed to college and university newspapers across the country. To see more of Phil's work go to www.bestinshowcomic.com

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