

CALL OF THE ATACAMA

In the north of Chile lies the most barren spot on Earth but, even here, descendants of ancient nomads live a simple, tranquil existence sustained by myth and tradition

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The Valle de la Luna (Valley of the Moon) is typical of the arid beauty of northern Chile's Atacama Desert

ATACAMA

A flock of James's flamingos feeds on tiny organisms in the Salar de Tara – part of a nature reserve they share with the related Andean flamingos and Chilean flamingos



'FOLKLORE STILL BLOWS THROUGH THESE OASES LIKE THE ATACAMA'S GENTLE PACIFIC BREEZE'

It's sunrise at Salar de Tara and the salt lake is aflutter with flamingos. There are thousands of them, long slender legs wading through metallic blue waters. They move in waves, flighty as though an electric current bites when they linger too long. The wind stirs from its slumber, whipping the water into a dance. Alongside the salt lake, hundreds of llamas pick their way through tufty yellow pastures. They look with long-lashed eyes down velvet noses, seemingly haughty, their ears pricking at the crunch of salt underfoot.

Bordered by barren Altiplanic mountains and bisected by the Tropic of Capricorn, this wetland sits within the Reserva Nacional Los Flamencos on the eastern fringe of the Atacama, in a nook between the borders of Bolivia and Argentina. It's a zone of permanent and seasonal lakes – but extending westwards and covering an area nearly the size of England is a region known as the driest on Earth. Nowhere, save for the icy anomaly of Antarctica, receives less rainfall. Indeed, in great swathes of this desert, rain has never been recorded. Its cracked, dusty landscape is

somewhere between lunar and Martian, unable to support plant or animal.

Yet throughout the desert, pockets of life do exist. The llamas around Salar de Tara are owned by shepherds who herd them as the seasons dictate. The shepherds are Atacameños, mainly descended from nomadic pre-Columbian Indians who first settled here more than 3,000 years ago. They live in ayllus – small indigenous communities – on hillsides and in gorges served by ephemeral streams, cultivating crops on terraces dug out by their forbears, and tending to goats, sheep and llamas. Folklore still blows through these oases like the Atacama's gentle Pacific breeze, a rich mythology that connects these people to their nomadic ancestors, and to the extraordinary landscape that they inhabit.

A VOLCANIC TEMPERAMENT

'Licancábur is a prince and Quimal is a princess,' says Atacameño guide Rosa Ramos Colque, speaking slowly and deliberately, and gesturing to each of the

mountains in turn. The peaks face off across the Salar de Atacama, on which she stands – a vast sea of salt encompassing more than 1,200 square miles, to the west of Salar de Tara. The peaks of Licancábur and Quimal are some 50 miles apart, but such is the clarity of the air, they appear closer. Alongside the perfectly pyramidal, snow-splashed volcano of Licancábur is another mountain, conspicuous for its flat top. It looks as though its peak has been removed, possibly severed; mythology asserts exactly that. 'Juriques, Prince Licancábur's companion, was once just as perfect, with a head too,' says Rosa. 'That was, until he seduced Princess Quimal.'

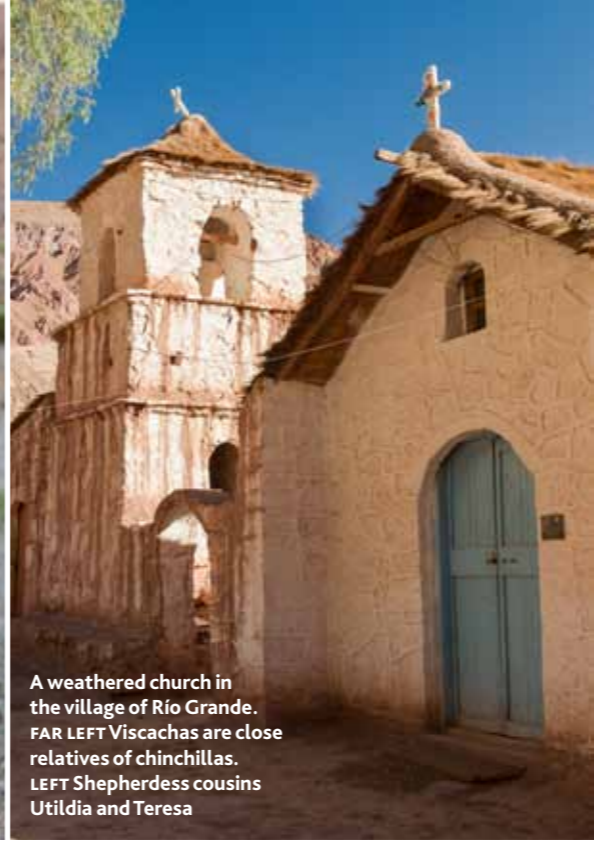
The volcano legends are known by all in these parts; versions vary, but any Atacameño will readily recount the steps that followed this betrayal. Quimal's father, Lascar – an amorphous mountain standing to the east, almost equidistant, beheaded Juriques and exiled Quimal across the salt flat. Such behaviour certainly fits the profile. Lascar is the most active volcano in the Central Andean section of the Pacific's Ring of Fire – in 1993, it dispatched a gritty

cloud of tephra as far as Buenos Aires, 900 miles to the southeast, and it has made its presence known several times already this century. Licancábur was heartbroken at Quimal's banishment, shedding tears that over the centuries accumulated into the lake cradled in its crater.

Such legends are indicative of an unwavering reverence; in the Atacama, volcanoes are both providers and destroyers. The ancient Atacameños built villages from volcanic stone in spots where water runs down their steep slopes, while over the centuries, dispersed volcanic ash has helped to fertilise parts of this otherwise barren landscape. Forty-five minutes southeast of the regional hub of San Pedro de Atacama, two villages sit below Lascar's smoking crater. They're both called Talabre. Rather than a lack of imagination, the duplication stems from another eruption of Lascar in the 1970s. The volcano contaminated the original Talabre's water, lacing the river with ash; ever at the mercy of the master above, the Talabrites peeled the grass-thatched roofs from their houses and relocated further →

Sheep and goats are herded through Guatín Gorge by the septuagenarian Audina. ABOVE Carlos Esquivel is also a shepherd – unusual in a region where this is seen as women's work

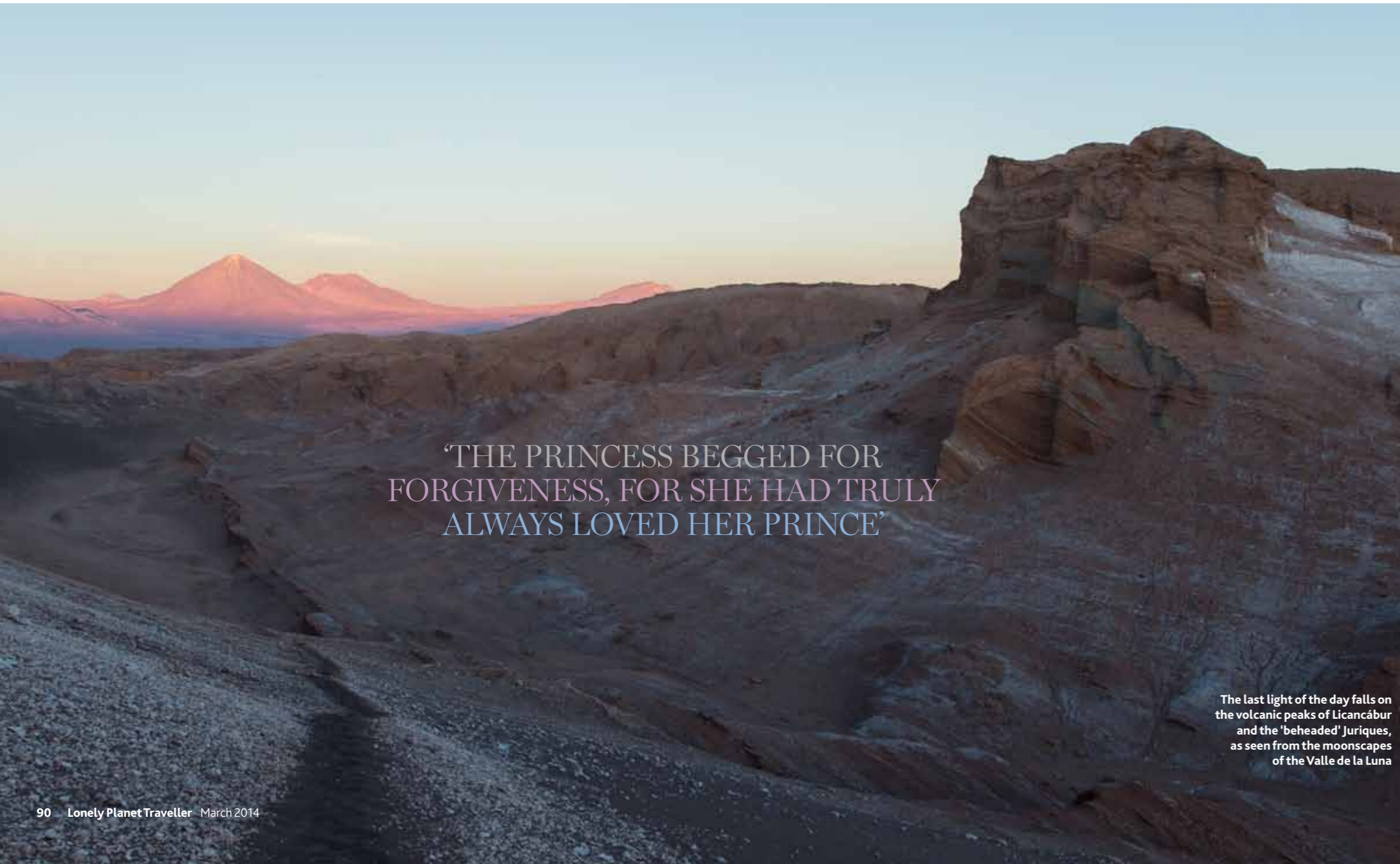




A weathered church in the village of Río Grande. FAR LEFT Viscachas are close relatives of chinchillas. LEFT Shepherdess cousins Utildia and Teresa



Tall cacti eke out an existence in Guatín Gorge. LEFT Coloured tassels show who a llama belongs to. RIGHT Local guide Rosa knows all the area's myths



‘THE PRINCESS BEGGED FOR FORGIVENESS, FOR SHE HAD TRULY ALWAYS LOVED HER PRINCE’

The last light of the day falls on the volcanic peaks of Licancábur and the ‘beheaded’ Juriques, as seen from the moonscapes of the Valle de la Luna

down the hillside in a place where fresh water could be channelled. And so, a second Talabre was born.

All that remains of the old village is a cemetery and scattering of ruins at the bottom of Quebrada Kezala, a steep-sided canyon once used as a resting point – and canvas – for llama caravans. Herders would spend starlit nights engraving the sheer red walls, carving flamingos and jaguars from the Bolivian jungle. ‘The Atacameños did not write,’ says Rosa, ‘so petroglyphs were one way they could express something special in their life.’ But they knew the llamas best and captured their different characters: some irritable with ears flat against their heads, others trotting forth willingly.

At the Salar de Atacama, the sun is beginning its downward arc through a cloudless sky and there’s just a whisper of wind. The legend of the volcanoes is about to reach a tender denouement. ‘The princess begged for forgiveness,’ says Rosa, her eyes trained on the ostracised mountain’s darkening outline. ‘For she had truly always loved her prince. And so, one day every April, the shadow of Licancábur reaches across the salt flat at sunrise and touches the foothills of Quimal.’

CACTUS SISTERS & RAIN GODS

It’s just before sunset and a wave of black, white and tawny particles sweeps down the curved road into the valley, leaving a trail of trodden soil and trimmed pasture in its wake. At its head is the shepherdess Audina Vilca, tall against the ochre hillside, a wide-brimmed straw hat pulled

down over her circular face. The herd of goats and sheep homes in on the circular corral as if pulled by gravity. ‘I learned everything I know from my mother, of course,’ says Audina, with a chuckle that reveals pink gums and two lone front teeth.

Each morning she rises at six, milks her goats, churns fresh cheese, prepares bread for the day and then heads into the hills, returning just before sunset to her home here in Guatín Gorge. Half an hour north of San Pedro, this spot where the thermal springs of Puritama merge with the Andean waters of the Purifica River was one of the first places settled by the early Atacameños. Long before people, giant cacti took root here. Today, their spiky heads peek out of a gully floor specked with small, shrub-like cacti known, mischievously, as ‘mother-in-law cushions’; the tallest of the giants measure 15 metres and have witnessed 1,000 years on Earth.

Guatín’s population consists of Audina and her fellow septuagenarian sister Paulina. Theirs is a close, if not always harmonious relationship, with a strict demarcation between their respective flocks. ‘My sister has her side and I have my side,’ says Audina, explaining why she seldom sees her younger sister despite living 100 metres apart. ‘We can’t mix the animals,’ she says.

And there’s a definite feeling she doesn’t want to. A businesswoman as well as a shepherdess, Audina sells her goat’s cheese to those returning to San Pedro from dawn visits to El Tatio – the hissing, bubbling geyser field an hour further north, 4,300m up in the Andean Altiplano.

Although shepherdesses following in the footsteps of tradition are mainly →

‘IT’S A LANDSCAPE THAT SEEMS TO RESONATE WITH MYSTERY – AND NOT JUST ON THE SURFACE’

longer in the tooth, they are not hard to come by. A few miles north of Guatín, cousins Utildia and Teresa live in a small stone house with two corgi-like dogs. Their ageless Altiplanic uniforms include dusty woollen cardigans, billowing skirts and greyless Andean manes braided and tucked under straw hats. Utildia is toothless, talkative and deaf; Teresa has a full set of teeth but rarely speaks. There’s a refreshing girliness to them with their blue ribbons and giggles. An understanding, although not gained by conventional forms of communication, runs between the pair. They seem to live in content companionship.

Atacameño tradition dictates that shepherding is woman’s work, along with cooking and looking after children, whilst the men go out hunting. Nowadays the men no longer need to hunt, but the customary order of household tasks is not to be questioned by mere mortals. The majority of mortals at least: Carlos Esquivel is an exception to the rule – in more ways than one. In a land of ubiquitous knitwear, this 50-something shepherd is

quite the peacock in his silk neckerchief and leather sombrero.

His small plot of land outside San Pedro is covered in old cars of various shapes, sizes and degrees of decrepitude. Tucked away at the far end he keeps his livestock: a mini menagerie of three pigs, one pony, two donkeys and several goats and llamas. There’s no pasture on his plot, so most days Carlos mounts his diminutive steed and takes to the mountain to find food for the herd. Today he is on home turf. Leaning on the bonnet of one of his wrecks, he opens a can of beer with a fizz, carefully pouring some on the dusty ground before taking a sip. ‘It’s tradition here,’ he says. ‘I’ve done it since I was young – it’s for respect. First some for Pachamama (Mother Earth), then some for me.’

When it comes to the mountains, the recipients of reverence are the Mallku – the word for the mountain gods in Kunza, the extinct Atacameño language. ‘When I go to the mountains I always make a payment – sometimes the blood of a white animal, sometimes llama fat mixed with white corn,’ says Carlos. ‘We pay the

mountains so that it rains, so that the animals remain healthy.’

WHAT LIES BENEATH

Five miles west San Pedro, the Atacama reaches a zenith of otherworldliness. Great drifts of sand mass around rock formations and saline outcrops carved into improbable shapes by eons of wind. The valley floor is littered with loose stones and mottled white with dried salt that resembles mould growing on a slab of cheese. Wisps of sand swirl above the desert flats, drifting like phantoms. The eye wanders, struggling to find either focal point or familiarity. Colours seem equally fluid, the landscape altering hue with the changing light; at times a lifeless brown, at others fiery red. This is the Valle de la Luna – the Valley of the Moon.

It’s somehow fitting that dinosaurs once roamed this terrain, albeit 70 million years ago. A stage this strange and colossal demands an appropriate cast. It’s a landscape that seems to resonate with mystery – and not just on the surface. ‘There are lots of tunnels and caves →

When night falls over Guatín Gorge, the Milky Way stands out clearly in the desert sky

Secundino and his wife Margarita carry on a tradition of people living in the midst of one of the world's most challenging environments



The Valley of the Moon is aptly named – according to NASA, parts of the Atacama are perhaps the only places on Earth where a Mars-type lander would fail to find any evidence of life in the soil

‘THAT GREAT WEALTH LIES UNDERGROUND IN THE ATACAMA HAS NEVER BEEN IN QUESTION’

around the Valle de la Luna,’ says Rosa, as she struggles up a dune, ripples running up to its sharp spine. ‘Some say mini people live underneath it – a foreigner once disappeared here and said he found a city.’ That great wealth lies underground in the Atacama has never been in question. The mineral-rich earth has long sustained Chile. It started with ‘white gold’ – sodium nitrate, of which the country had a world monopoly until the early 20th century. When a synthetic substitute was devised, attention switched to copper – and to gold.

A rumour ground from the local mill has it that Audina’s late husband owned a secret goldmine but concealed it from all, even his children. Whether Audina knows its whereabouts is unclear. Perhaps she herds her sheep to the mine – and maybe gold lies at the root of her rivalry with Paulina. Such stories contain fibres of truth. After Chile’s 1973 military coup, dictator Augusto Pinochet ordered a map to be made of all the mines in the Atacama. However, word goes that several coordinates were given incorrectly in order to conceal hidden pockets of wealth from the national purse.

Another legend of hidden treasure dates from the death throes of the Inca Empire,

which at its peak comprised much of northern and central Chile. While being pursued by the Spanish conquistador Francisco Pizarro in 1532, Atahualpa – the last sovereign emperor of the Incas – promised to deliver much gold in exchange for his freedom. From every corner of Tawantinsuyu, the Inca empire, gold started to be transferred to pay the ransom. However, when they heard that Atahualpa had been executed anyway after being adjudged too much of a liability by the invaders, the Atacameño people hid the gold at the bottom of the lake on Quimal mountain. It’s said that on certain days this treasure shines beneath the water, and those who seek the riches never return.

One hour north of San Pedro, the road winds down a canyon into the village of Río Grande. Pass through, and soon a lone house appears, its gardens abloom with flowers, the property shaded by leafy trees. A figure in a stripy shirt emerges from the foliage. Secundino is his name, a man with a ready smile that forces his eyes closed as it spreads across his face. As a male, he does not have the

authority to invite guests into the fold so, with a chuckle, he trots off ‘to ask the boss’.

Margarita Ansa is the mistress of the house. Chaperoned by a canine entourage, she emerges from the stone-and-mortar house she shares with Secundino, her pretty, elongated face exuding a sense of learnedness. The house once belonged to her grandmother, but now she serves as warden of the plot, tending to the gardens, taking care of the goats and harvesting quinoa and garlic. Secundino once worked in the copper mines further north, but the couple returned to the place where Margarita was born for peace and solitude.

They chat readily until the sun disappears behind the horizon in a haze of purples and pinks, and the air quickly cools. Soon the night sky will emerge, the stars enhanced by the near-total absence of ambient light, the Milky Way visible in their midst. From the tale of Licancábur and Juriques to the hidden treasures at the bottom of Mount Quimal, legends bear a moral about coveting what is not yours. As Margarita and Secundino retreat into their modest house, arm in arm and smiling, it seems clear there’s nothing on this Earth that they covet. Here, in this most forbidding of places, they’ve found life’s true riches. ☺

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