

Umbrella Factory Magazine

Issue 75

October 2025

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Lazarus

Passengers on an aircraft approaching the island could see the sandy beach, the white squiggles of waves, their crests opening like lips as they nibble at the shoreline before receding back into the infinite sea. Even from three thousand feet above, beachcombers could be spotted in their white hats, naked flesh recumbent on towels, tourists to the north, locals to the south, an empty, sandy expanse separating them like North and South Korea. Tiny wheels of red and blue dot the beach in haphazard clumps: these are umbrellas. Skinny palm trees jut out diagonally from the Yabucoa peninsula like deformed fingers with nothing to do.

A few more feet inland, rotting parked cars look shiny and new from far above. The scent of coconuts and suntan lotion float through the air. Passengers on an aircraft might imagine footsteps in the sand, trudging outward from the tide, the lingering evidence of Ponce de León and his crewmen arriving from an old world, their noses upward to relish the scents of the tropics, their eyes wide and in awe of a new land dense with life, their gaits slowed by anxiety, the unknown rolled out in front of them.

This place was called Dead Dog Beach. This sand had buried tens of thousands of dogs over the years. Legend had it that deceased dogs were deposited here by their owners for a proper seaside burial. That was decades ago. Now, the strays arrive of their own accord, looking for a pack to socialize with, waiting on the generous human patrons with food scraps, the restaurant managers who deposit mounds of leftovers at night. On occasion, a despondent owner consigned an unwanted dog here, hoping a beach was more humane than a final syringe.

Once or twice a year, groups of kind islanders retrieve the skulls and bones, their task observed carefully by the bulging eyes of skinny dogs who have yet to lose their lives, oblivious to the sound of their own fates: the clanking of bones inside a trash bag as it's dragged across the sand. For every dog sniffing or frolicking above ground, at least a hundred had gone to sleep in the sand beneath their paws. The arrival of disease often hastened the collective dying. The smell of nature, bacteria doing its work on remains, had pushed the human sunbathers to the far ends of the mile-long beach, but occasionally a concerned human soul would traverse the sandy boundary and watch the dogs, careful not to call them over, usually

turning away quickly in distress.

The inland backdrop for such a wretched sight was composed of mountains, each covered thick with jungle, a couple narrow roads leading upward toward Ciales and beyond where the jungle is so dense that it seems to be pushing back on de León, blocking the paths of his descendants today. Sometimes on Fridays, a silver van driven by a short, muscular woman named Jessica was visible on the mountainside as if dropping out of the sky, gravity pulling her vehicle downhill until the brakes left her gently at the beach's gate. Many of the dogs knew Jessica's face - or her scent - and might have greeted her happily had they more energy or four working legs. During her visits, Jessica would inspect the canine denizens for any extraordinary ailments or conditions that warranted urgent intervention, such as advanced pregnancy, which today she noticed in a tan girl with a white-speckled muzzle. This dog, which laid six feet from a fresh, fluffy carcass, didn't rise when Jessica approached, but slapped its tail repeatedly against the sand in anticipation. Jessica collared and leashed her and walked her overstuffed body to the van, where she lifted the mother-to-be and placed her on a dog bed in back. She stared back at the beach, blocking the sun with her hand, and longed to take them all. She could only save one or two (her shelter was still small) so tried to select only those who could benefit from her ex-husband's clinic and veterinary skills. He had become a ghost, as had she, over the past eighteen months, yet they had managed to preserve a cordial working relationship through which he would treat her rescues (pregnancy, broken bones, infections), but nothing more. Her drop-offs and pickups were merely transactions, lacking the warmth they once had felt toward each other. There was nothing warm about Dead Dog Beach.

On the drive home, a phone call diverted Jessica's route toward the village of Betania, where a stray had become violently tangled in a briar patch. It was struggling to extricate itself and at risk of bleeding to death. With gestating pups in tow, Jessica floored the accelerator to climb the suddenly steeper road that offered the only passage to Betania from her location, unpaved and narrow, vines and branches whacking at her windshield, rocks or potholes rattling the van's chassis every few yards. After a few miles, the road flattened and then began a decline. She heard a thunderous rush of water from just up the road where a couple dozen children were wading up to their knees, shouting and awkwardly kicking soccer balls, the girls

laughing in a circle, several on bikes. A waterfall had formed spontaneously just up the way, and the road was flooded. When the kids spotted Jessica's van, they moved aside and waved for her to proceed.

"Puedes!"

She inched forward steadily. A shirtless boy called to her from a hundred feet away, pointing and directing her to the road which continued uphill on the other side. The van ventured slowly into the water, and the depth soon leveled off, never rising above the top of the tires. Jessica smiled and thanked the boys before gunning the engine and ascending again. Through her rear-view mirror, she watched the children reunite in the water unthinkingly like a drawbridge. Had Lázaro lived, he would have been the boy calling to her, helping her to the other side, while Mo and Luis, his little friends and admirers who followed him everywhere, would look on. Laz was take-charge like that, especially for a ten-year-old, and especially outdoors.

In fact, he once had saved Luis from drowning in the river. And Mo made sure everyone at school was made aware of that fact, constantly reminding Luis in public that he owed his life to Laz, which made Laz laugh but made Luis blush. Luis had thanked Laz several times, once even in front of a teacher. Eventually, in an effort to relieve Luis of his indebtedness, Laz pretended he was choking and allowed Luis to save him. They both knew it was an act, but at least it put the subject to rest.

Laz had been serving as an altar boy for both Sunday masses. He'd rode his bike to the early mass, then Jessica would drive him and his bike home after the later mass, which she regularly attended. The morning of his disappearance was like any other Sunday except, she recalled, the sky was very gray and had stayed that color all day, which was unusual for the island. When she arrived for late mass, Father Feliciano pulled her aside and inquired about Laz, but knew immediately when Jessica turned white as a sheet. Mass was canceled, and the parish formed a search party, splitting up to cover every foot of the mountain-hugging route Laz had biked, every detour, every possible distraction. Nothing except the bike was ever found.

Another dozen miles later, Jessica pulled up to the bridge where she'd been instructed to meet the woman who had called. There she sat, in a wheelchair, glaring at Jessica as she stepped out of the van. Behind her stood a younger woman, maybe the daughter, one hand on the wheelchair and the other fixing her bright red halter top.

"You're too late," said the mother.

"Mama!" scolded the daughter, who then introduced herself as Maria. "It got untangled, but I don't think he'll last long. He went off that way."

Maria pointed to the road's southern bank, which declined steeply, leading to a small valley and then another hill coated by thick and twisting greenery.

"I'll do my best," said Jessica. Maria smiled warmly. Her mother scowled.

A few minutes later, like a big game hunter traversing her prey's mountain habitat, Jessica's stocky figure wielded a six-foot-long control pole with a loop at the end, which looked more like a weapon than a life-saving device. Her controlled steps were navigating up and down and around the stout banana plants with little thrusts. Sweat dripped from her brow. The animal was hiding in the brush but sang with an audible whimper whenever it moved to escape the pole's reach. The coqui chirped in unison from high up in the maga trees whose branches' blue and red flowers burst forth like tiny cups for the sun. Chickens clucked awkwardly in the distance, maybe mocking their canine predator and his weakened state.

Jessica spotted the dog emerging from behind palm leaves, confused and pausing in front of a natural hedge of bright orange: birds of paradise. Its fur was matted with blood, or, depending on the area, had been yanked out altogether. Its muzzle was missing little chunks of flesh. Its right legs, hind and front, were lame and shaking. One of its eyes bled. It panted uncontrollably. But there wasn't a thorn or briar to be seen. If the jungle had attacked the poor dog, it had left no trace.

The dog's frightened eyes made contact with Jessica, so she whispered reassurance as she slowly extended the pole. The dog would have none of it. It darted away, whimpering and scurrying behind a phalanx of bamboo trees. Jessica sighed. The scent of eucalyptus had arrived now. A bright red flamboyant tree at peak bloom exploded on the next ledge. She approached the bamboo grove, her pole straight out in front, and slowly curved her trajectory to approach from the side, but the incline was too steep and her footwear was too casual, so she stumbled onto her rear end just in time to watch the dog scamper down the mountain.

The dog was in pain, so Jessica knew it couldn't get too far. She followed its path down the mountainside and turned where she'd seen the dog turn. Here she entered a plateau of sorts, a modest clearing, the remnants of a gravel road cutting through it and leading to a pile of modest boulders which had been

stored there perhaps a generation ago. Fifty feet away was the carcass of a bulldozer, encased in rust and vines. Behind this vehicle was where she heard the whimper, so she advanced with her pole once again, this time the dog escaping before she came anywhere close. Past the bulldozer was another small clearing, this one encircled by maga trees and containing on the far side a small, abandoned structure made of metal and concrete set amid the flora, perhaps an old barracks for laborers, Jessica thought. She wondered, of course, if the dog had sought shelter in this structure. Halfway across the clearing, she made out that it was indeed a tiny house of sorts, or had been, but what she couldn't make out was the smell. The faint scent of eucalyptus had been displaced by a faint yet increasingly noxious scent of something unidentifiable but repellent. As she neared the little house, the smell intensified. She approached the front door, which was open and appeared as if it had been open for years. As she poked her head inside, she covered her nose and mouth with her hand. It was one square room, lit only by the sun entering with her. She could barely make out the contents, taking a step inside to spy a braided rug, a table with an abandoned tabletop refrigerator, a wooden chair and a human body on the floor.

Jessica went to raise the window shade, but the whole thing crumbled and dropped to the floor. Light filled the room now. She approached the body, which lay flat on its back, eyes closed, as if it had been placed there for sacred viewing. When she came within a few feet, she experienced another shock: the smell was gone.

A breeze swept in through the door at her back and nudged her toward the figure on the floor. Everything suddenly slowed down. Her feet stepped as if in slow motion. Something kept her from rushing, something beyond fear, like a faint recognition she didn't want to acknowledge. Her brain felt big and open and extrasensory, oxygenated by deep, panting breaths as she approached. It was most certainly a corpse, but something prevented her from looking directly at it, instead diverting her eyes toward the floor. A tremendous discomfort had emerged in her abdomen and was now crawling through her nerves, ossifying her limbs as she came closer to the body. The discomfort next entered her mind, where it was recognized not as shock or even surprise but as knowledge. Instinct gave way to certainty, especially once she made out the little curve of his shoulder, the indentation just above where his bicep would have someday formed. Her glance lingered there long enough to make out the color

maroon, the tee shirt with the Spider-Man decals on the front, which stretched across the shoulder awkwardly, rightly, leading toward his neck and the tail of his too-long brown hair, which was always overdue for a cut. It was unavoidable now. Jessica knew. It was happening right now, but was her life beginning or ending? There was no point in further delay. She was about to be overwhelmed by elation and pain, relief and horror, the end of life, the beginning of life. She stumbled to the body and fell to her knees.

It was Lázaro.

His upper body was turned to one side, half of his blank face flush against the dirty wooden floor. He had grown slightly and his body was intact; it was dirty and pale but otherwise the same little boy she'd lost eighteen months earlier. The same little boy now fifty miles away from home.

Jessica bent over and sobbed. She maneuvered her hands underneath his torso and pulled, bringing him vertical enough to hold. She rested her chin on the top of his head and sobbed some more. He was neither cold nor hot, just slightly stiff. Where had he gone? Had someone taken him? And where was he now? His hair smelled just the same, as if she had just shampooed it after a stinky day playing at the dam with Mo and Luis.

"Where have you been, mama?" asked a boy's voice. Lost in memory, Jessica hadn't noticed that his arms had become warm in her embrace. She pulled away so he could cock his head and look up at her astonished face. He smiled, and his teeth looked especially white against the background of dirty cheeks and nose. She kissed his thick eyebrows.

Jessica couldn't reply because she couldn't create a sound. She had been existing -- but not alive -- since that Sunday. She'd been forced to live with death. Most people weren't compelled to linger for years after their own death, but Jessica had been. She'd felt as weightless and aimless as a ghost, death having taken her son, her marriage, herself. She had felt alone on the island, all the other human forms unable to see her or touch her. She felt most present with non-human life, the flamboyant and bamboo, the coqui and the cuckoos, and, of course, the dogs.

"I bet Mo told everyone the chupacabra got me." He laughed. An island legend, the chupacabra -- or "goat sucker" -- was thought to be a scaly, vampiric monster that had attacked and half-devoured countless farm animals -- and dogs -- and maybe humans -- across the countryside. Most considered the legend silly and

obscene, but as a cipher for all of human anxiety, it was a powerful idea.

"Everyone will be so happy," said Jessica, unsure if the words were audible. She fell into Laz again and hugged him as tightly as she could. There was a scuffling sound behind her, maybe from outside. She immediately thought of Carlos, her former husband, Lázaro's father, and wanted him here. Could it be him? Will he join them any moment, his tears and his arms bonding the three of them together again?

"Gracias, mama," said the boy's voice, muffled, into her breast. She caressed his back and made a shushing sound to quiet him so they could cherish the moment, to preserve such transcendence for as long as possible before returning.

When she felt the cut flesh in his lower back, the chupacabra re-entered her mind. She smiled at the thought, but her fingers explored further and discovered the gouge was quite large. It was an open sore, fresh, unbandaged. Had this just happened? She froze and studied her surroundings, looking for intruders. Her fingertips felt liquid. There was a strain in his little body that had otherwise felt so calm a moment earlier. There was a pulling, a squirming.

When Jessica released him to inspect, he was whimpering. She did find more injuries. They were fresh and raw, and the blood had matted his fur. She turned away, and a new sob shot from her eyes. Then she wanted to choke, or to cough, or to something, anything, that would eject the emotional pain. Her heart had been resurrected, just for one minute, just for one embrace, but that was over now. The empty space returned where her heart had been.

"It was dead," said a female voice.

Jessica turned around to spy Maria -- the girl who'd called -- in the doorway holding a blanket. Her jaw had dropped, astonished.

"It came back to life ... just now in your arms," she said. "I brought this to carry its body back," she said, offering the blanket, which Jessica could barely make out through her streaming tears. There was a life that needed her. It was not Laz. The bleeding dog was in pain, but it was alive. She called over Maria and instructed her to unfold the blanket and lay it flat. Then she told her to bring the control pole, which had been left by the door, and place the collar around the dog's neck, that the dog would cry out in pain, but that was okay and she must not let go. When the animal was secured in the collar, Jessica glared silently at Maria, a warning to stay tough, and then slid the dog onto the edge of the

blanket. Despite its writhing and growling, she kept nudging until the blanket's edge peeked out from under its far side and yanked it. When she finally had the dog centered on the blanket, she wrapped it up. This is when it stopped resisting. She released the dog from the pole's collar and handed one end of the blanket to Maria.

Jessica wiped her eyes while the girl waited.

When she was ready, she lifted her end. Maria lifted the other, and they carried the dog outside, as if on a hammock, into the sun. Chances were small that she would reach the hospital in time.

"I know a short way," said Maria. She led them out of the clearing a different way, a flatter way. "See, it's not far at all."

Jessica was shocked that the journey back was so much easier. In just a few minutes, they were back on the road. They walked a few hundred feet more and found the van. Maria's mother was no longer anywhere to be found. A new mother, however, was resting inside the van. When Jessica opened the back door, she was greeted by five tiny puppies squirming in the dog bed, eyes closed and skin pink. A sixth was clearly dead. Jessica called over Maria, who gasped, then smiled and watched as they squirmed, one in particular as it reached out its paws, stabilized itself under the teat, and took its first nourishment in this new, dangerous world.