

FARMGIRL ANGST

THOU SHALT NOT COVET

BY MARILEE FOSTER

National Geographic has always come to our house. Before I could read, the magazine's full-color spreads were my first and vivid clues of what life is like elsewhere. I guessed at the mayhem I held in my lap; a war, famine, a lion attacking a zebra and the bloody lunch that follows. Less frequently, but just as intense as my curiosity, revulsion or fear; *National Geographic* inspired envy. It's not the same as other envies, so I call it farm envy. It was brought on by a photograph of a couple plowing their field in a former Soviet republic, I think it was Georgia. The land was beautiful and the dark earth they'd managed to turn already that morning, gorgeous. A hillside gently rose and fell on a vast, fertile plain. I envied their land, coveted the apparent remoteness of their unmechanized union. The man was pulling the plow and an equally old and rugged woman, presumably his wife, was pushing it. Envy is perhaps sinful because it keeps us from seeing the whole picture.

There is the envy the non-farmer has for the farmer's lifestyle, the non-farmer saying things like, "Oh how I envy you, it must be so peaceful to live in the country and work with nature..." and so on. There are those who envy the apparent worth of the land.

Then, there is envy between farmers, and that is apt to be more complex. It can be across generations, about being outbid, about greater or lesser success, the ebbing of resources and fairness within.

Less fractious than inherited feuds is the envy that comes each spring. Via retired messenger, on his rounds from potato farm to farm, word of others—technically your competition—and they've already started planting. He'll be back to tell who

is finished, who is digging, who is done storing. Early in spring, the first cotyledon of the growing season sets—the perennial fear of being behind, and envying those who seem ahead.

Also is the envy a farmer might have for another farmer's land. When I asked my neighbor if the term "farm envy" evoked anything, I hadn't finished the question when she began to laugh. "Oh, you mean like I envy you, for your family's farmland?"

Frankly, I had not considered this. They own a bit of land, but mostly they rent. My friend and her husband are first-generation farmers, unwittingly; I had my own reasons for envying them.

Another first generation couple I know had conquered or at least come to terms with their farm envy. When I asked them if looking at magazines (like this one for example), when they look at the photo spreads, does it sometimes inspire the dread of envy, the comparison of theirs to yours?

"No," she answered, "not so much. What I envy is infrastructure. I see a nice Morton Building, or a new walk-in refrigerator, and I wish I had it." Her husband continued, agreeing, "Yeah, if I see a nice irrigation system, I think of how a system like that would benefit our farm. I think the things that get my attention are the things I probably need, and really it helps me recognize what I can do to improve my own operation. So I am OK with it." He said it also helped to visit other farms. "We take those same pictures of our farm. But it just represents one area, not the whole farm." By visiting other, success-



Photograph: Brian Halweil

ful organic farms in the on-season, rather than the off-season, the couple saw that the showcased farms looked pretty much like their own: There were beautiful spots and rough patches; there was really nothing to be envious of. ©