

Noah started brewing on a Tuesday in late September. The clouds had just released Miami from a week of torrential rains, leaving an open sky overhead and a light breeze running through the city. It wasn't a huge relief: walking down the street still felt like going for a swim. The air was stickier than a glazed donut, without the donut's delight.

Noah started as a tropical depression over the mid-Atlantic, but by Wednesday it was a full-blown hurricane. The news reached Carlos, in Indiana, before it reached his husband in Miami. Carlos phoned Andy right away. "Did you hear about this new storm?"

Andy hadn't. He'd had a "sideways day," as he liked to say. Between deliveries, and his faltering attempts to find a buyer for the business, he hadn't had time to turn on the news.

Sideways days were the usual since 2008. After the Great Recession, Andy, left with no options, had started selling household technology. He'd bought the business, *Tech Toys*, from an investor who had gotten tired of his investment. After much thought, Andy renamed it *Budget Gadget Getter*. It needed a good name, to justify all the loans he and Carlos had taken on to buy it.

Here's how the customer saw the business: Andy- whose bleach-speckled jeans were made up for by a well-groomed mustache- would teeter in with a cardboard box, place it in the middle of their home (usually either a sprawling beachfront property, or a corner in some nursing home that smelled of stale popcorn), install the gadget that came inside, and teach them how to use it.

Here's how Andy saw the business: oceans of tech manuals to read at every free second, phone calls with suppliers and customers that each tested his patience more than the last, and the occasional reward of using a machine he'd become an expert on- as he shared his wisdom with its new owner.

His one employee, a part-timer, kept the inventory up to date. It was effectively a one-man job. Since Andy had taken the business off a tycoon's hands, it had come at a reasonable price, initially making the work seem worthwhile. It would have been, had it been making enough to sustain their Housing Bubble mortgage payments. But after three years at the job, a foreclosure seemed imminent.

Before the crash, things had been okay- at least financially. They had moved to Miami thirteen years earlier, and Andy had found a stable job in business analytics. He and Carlos had left Bogotá- Carlos's birthplace, where they'd met at a biology conference a decade earlier- after adopting Tali, an olive skinned baby with piercing green eyes. Really, Andy had adopted her as a single parent. An adoption together would have been immediately denied. But, because they couldn't officially get married either, there was no need to disclose that detail. The moment Tali was in their arms, they were on a plane to Miami. Risking losing her was out of the question.

Carlos had left his job as a bat researcher in Colombia, and couldn't find a flexible enough bat-related job in Miami. So, he stayed at home full-time. This was okay. Andy's income let them sustain a modest living in a nondescript suburban house, among similar houses with similar couples: unofficial gay partnerships. Though their marriage still wasn't recognized, they could at least hold hands outside their home without fearing flying stones.

And while they couldn't afford a weekly dinner out anymore (let alone a country club membership), Andy earned enough to lease a used sedan, and to keep the lawn in good shape. Sure, the job wasn't anywhere near his dreams, but the big company figured his computational biology degree meant he could use a computer, and they were right. It was the only job Andy had found in the States. It had made their new life possible. It had made Tali possible.

Then thirteen years brought about the financial crash, and, out of the blue, Andy was left in the red. Thirteen years outside of computational biology made him a fossil in his field, so *Tech Toys* it was.

The shift grew noticeable on each of their faces: Andy's burnt-orange hair had thinned out and his vision deteriorated enough to require thick glasses; Carlos's perfect tan had paled and his plump cheeks grown gaunt; and Tali's unstoppable blabbermouth had grown quiet. (And that was before their stress was compounded: Florida expressly prohibited their marriage less than six months later.)

By eighth grade— a year after her parents bought the business— Tali was able to look after herself. So, Carlos left his stay-at-home position to help make ends meet at *Budget Gadget Getter*. But one more year showed it wasn't enough—something had to give. Then, for one moment, the stars seemed to align. Indiana called: they needed a bat expert to join their group of bat experts. Carlos left in the family's car to save the Indiana Bat, while Andy was left to sell the business. Then, (“Within a few weeks!”), he'd move together with Tali (as much as she forcefully protested that she'd stay behind).

That had been a year ago last week.

Wednesday night, Tali and Andy huddled around their outdated, cubical television, watching the Weather Channel. It was the first time that only two of them watched a hurricane forecast together. This was the forecast: already a category 3, Noah would continue to intensify, and, by Monday, its eye would stroll down Tali and Andy's block.

Tali breathed easy, hoping her fourth week as a sophomore might be cancelled. She could tell her dad was tense, though, from the way his eyelids flickered faster than usual, stayed open a few seconds, then did it all over again. His eyes also looked like over-steeped tea bags—but that wasn't so unusual.

“No te preocupes, Papi. *Don't worry*. We've done this plenty of times.”

She rested a hand on Andy's shoulder. He reached under his glasses to rub his temples.

"But never without your dad," Andy said, wrapping an arm around her.

"But some of those storms were so much worse! And here we are, still in one piece." Tali paused a second, then rushed on, so as not to linger on this thought. "Just think of it as a nice break. A few days of us together, and nothing else." She smiled at Andy.

He gave her an unconvincing smile back, and a kiss on the forehead. They both turned back to the forecast.

Over the next few days, the Weather Channel's viewership would jump from 100,000 to over 1.5 million. All over the country, people would be tuning in to see reporters brave the deadly winds. Not many viewers would be from Miami, though. Power would be gone by Sunday afternoon, along with over half the population. All residents were strongly urged to evacuate. Most were mandated.

For better or worse, Tali and Andy were only urged. They couldn't evacuate, even if they'd wanted to. The standard practice of raising prices as dictated by The Law Of Supply And Demand ruled out any flights as options. As for driving: Carlos had the family's car in Indiana. The only possibility was lugging out in the company vehicle: a rickety, twenty-year-old, white cargo van. The sort you'd be worried to come across on a dark street. But its

regularly failing battery, small gasoline tank (compounded with a statewide gas shortage), and broken air conditioning were more immediate issues than its look.

Besides, there was Kazak- the family's puppy- to worry about. They still called him a puppy even though he'd grown up alongside Tali. He had started barking when Tali started talking. When Tali had left for pre-school, he'd left for dog training. Their latest milestone: as Tali had her growth spurt, so did Kazak's stomach. He was the largest member of the family, a bulky German shepherd that lived up to the wise-old-man stereotype. Kazak had always been aware of life's goings-on. He knew just when to climb into bed with his family; when to nuzzle their ears (although they yelled and shook their heads, he knew they appreciated it); when to howl for the world to hear good news. Nobody would ever consider leaving Kazak behind.

There had been some discussion of leaving Andy behind, though. Sending Tali to Indiana on an out-of-budget flight was an option for all of three seconds. "What the hell, dad? I don't even plan to go there when *you* move, and you think I'll leave you here alone now? Are you kidding me?" That was that.

So Tali and Andy took to preparations. They started Friday afternoon, when it seemed like the forecast really wouldn't be veering elsewhere. Andy went supply shopping after his last installation: he'd put a second wine cooler in a woman's home. It was one of those houses where your voice reverberates off the tiles for miles. He'd tried explaining that if the power

went out, neither cooler would stay on. She'd insisted she needed it for the hurricane anyway. "You aren't evacuating?" he'd asked. "Why would I do that?" she'd said, "They always exaggerate these things," and waved a gold-studded hand as if it could blow the storm back to sea. So he did his job, then took the freshly earned money to the market.

The store looked like Noah had already hit. It smelled of cardboard and emptiness. Andy walked up the canned food aisle, and found most shelves cleared out. A couple of cans rolled slowly across the floor. He grabbed the five cans he deemed edible, and felt thankful that Carlos had enforced his "spontaneous disaster" rule: always keep enough emergency supplies for four days. The same went for flashlights, batteries, water: few and far between, but some at home would fill the gap. Andy struggled to lift a bag of dog food that was big as his body into the cart, and thought that it must be meant for a giant's dog. He found the thought funny, and couldn't help but laugh to himself.

Then came the trek for gasoline. Andy drove through the streets in search of a pump. Cars were starting to thin out, giving him the feeling that he was in a Western ghost town from some childhood film—just more humid. The whirring metal fan attached to the dashboard wasn't nearly powerful enough to withstand the sweat that poured from his brow, so he opened the windows. He passed his regular pumps, which were sold out. He found a line of cars at a station nearly ten miles past their house, and joined the procession. He turned off the ignition and opened the glove compartment. *Shit*, he'd forgotten to bring his stack of manuals to read. Nothing to do now, so he flipped on the radio. He briefly listened to

the forecast- nothing new- then flipped through a couple music stations. Every few minutes, he'd turn the car back on and inch forward a few feet, then return to the radio.

John Coltrane, after giving Andy the brief bliss of connection to Carlos, gave way to commercials. Andy flipped stations again. The 7 o'clock news offered a description of the escalating violence in Syria, a product of their recently ignited civil war. The anchor told the stories of the first two families that had left their homes for the US's safety. She speculated there would be more to come, wondered how many would be let in. Andy knew they all would: these people just needed a place to live. His mind wandered to his own family's scramble to the US. They had come out of fear, but had it been for *safety*? It couldn't be the same: he and Carlos had made the choice to leave Colombia, not been forced out. Andy wished they had chosen to stay. Then he, Carlos, and Tali would be in Bogotá, all three of them, together. He shut off the radio, telling himself he should save the van's battery.

Andy watched the sun drop slowly across the sky. He'd recently listened to a podcast on mindfulness, and now tried to focus on the moment, like its narrator had stressed. The day was still clear and blue, save for a few wisps of clouds in the west. The sun prickled his skin, felt like Carlos's hand running up his arm. Andy imagined Carlos in the passenger's seat—he heard Carlos's gentle breathing. Andy realized he was daydreaming, tried telling himself to leave the thoughts behind—focus on the moment. But it inevitably became Carlos's voice

encouraging him—“enfócate en el momento.” He decided it was no use, and let his mind wander.

An hour passed, and the sun’s rays became sharp fuchsia streaks.

Andy tried to concentrate on brainstorming ways to sell the business. Was there anything he hadn’t tried? He thought through the details of when he’d bought *Tech Toys*, looking for inspiration there. No luck. His fingers tapped the steering wheel. He remembered the lady who he’d almost sold *Budget Gadget Getter* to, wondered what he could have done differently. He knew the answer: he could have stayed where he was comfortable, in Colombia. Nothing would have happened to Tali. They’d be in their living room there right now: he, helping Carlos revise his latest article on bat migration; Tali asking for help with her biology homework instead of her broken lamp. Andy’s fragmented thoughts continued as the van crept forward.

After two hours, there were stars in the eastern sky.

After two and a half, the station attendant brought out a red-lettered sign: “NO GAS.”

Andy blinked a few times fast, then held his eyes open, then did it again. Maybe clearing his vision could make gasoline reappear. He dropped his head against the steering wheel. No gas, and still no good ideas of what to do with his business. For months he’d brainstormed possibilities. For months, it had come to nothing. He lifted his shoulders and

scratched the bald spot on his head. He readjusted his glasses and looked at the gas meter. Still half full—he could look again tomorrow.

With that he went back home to Tali, down the southbound highway. On the opposite side, a river of headlights went on and on. But the river was like the Everglades: so slowly moving, it looked more like a swamp. Andy imagined a stream of nearly-touching cars stretching from the Keys to Georgia: each of them trying to get as far away as possible, but blocking each others' paths, taking each others' gas. Maybe it wasn't so bad that they'd be staying. His stomach fluttered, reminded him it wasn't so great either.

Tali and Andy had a feast that night. They looted their fridge, knowing a loss of power was imminent. With a pixelated Carlos looking across the dinner table, they stuffed themselves full of cheeses and olives and leftovers and popsicles and frozen waffles. They gave Kazak a bowl of roasted carrots and potatoes.

“He wants another bowl!” Tali said.

“Cuidado, *careful*, or he'll be farting through the night.” Carlos warned.

“He's sleeping with you tonight, Tali. It's your call.” Andy joked.

“Okay, fine. Sorry Kazak.” Tali said, scratching Kazak's neck with one hand and stuffing a mushroom in her mouth with the other.

They ate until they could hardly swallow, and there were still enough perishables left for another banquet or two. The table glowed yellow from the light and their laughter.

Andy's alarm rang with the rising sun. Tali rose with him. She loved prepping the house for a storm. There was something eerily beautiful about the enclosure. Once the shutters cover the windows, you're back in the womb: embraced tightly by the walls, hardly aware of what's happening outside, save for the pitter-patter of rain against aluminum, or the occasional ping of a projectile pebble.

This, on the other hand, gave Andy the creeps. Everything seems so familiar; it tricks you into feeling powerful. The news comes on: there's a storm with a nice name. You get your things together and wait it out. Forewarning becomes dangerous: you tell yourself it'll be like last time, when the models all failed and the storm fizzled out. So you leave a window un-shuttered, you buy an extra wine cooler, and you wait to be proved right. Until the storm shreds your roof while you cower in the bathtub. So went the next-door neighbors' favorite story, and you can bet those guys were well past the Georgia border by now. Andy wasn't taking any chances. The best he could do was get to work.

The sun was barely above the horizon, hidden behind clouds. The clouds were of the cotton candy sort. The locked-and-loaded clouds would start filtering in later that day. It was the typical Miami sunrise, all greyness and silence. The only unusual feature: as the sky grew brighter, the silence remained. Usually a buzz would begin to emanate from the highway, but not today. Andy figured there was still a stagnant river of cars there, maybe even with sleeping drivers. In truth, the highway was perfectly desolate, as if its existence were a secret.

With the sun clinging to their backs, Andy and Tali dragged inside anything that could be thrown by the wind. First from the backyard (a grassy square, the size of a three-car garage), they took Kazak's faded-blue doghouse, any sizable rocks and sticks lying around, and the variety of potted plants that slumbered in the sun. Taking care of the plants had been a hobby of Carlos, so they had grown into a densely tangled web. Neither Tali nor Andy visited the backyard often, so they both felt the weight of Carlos's absence as they struggled to drag the plants inside. They left the plants around their piano, right by the sliding glass door. Their living room became a forest. Kazak brought in the balls and toys he'd littered in the grass through the years. Then he threw himself on the couch for a break.

The backyard was left a serene patch of grass, almost as pure as when they had moved into the house. Its only blemish was the towering tree that they'd planted in the front left corner. The tree was their closest attachment to Colombia, grown from a seed given by their tree there. The seed had become a sturdy trunk that exploded into a mass of leaves above the house's roof. Its greens were studded with soft yellow fruit—pomarrosas. Later, when all was set for the storm's onset, Tali would monkey up the branches and gather a bowl of the tender, rosy pouches, to be enjoyed while sheltering inside.

But before they could relax, the front yard had to be taken care of. They again sifted through everything on the ground. There wasn't much space to cover—it was a similar size to the backyard, with grass on the left and driveway on the right, almost too tight for the

van. There was a smaller, fruitless pomarrosa tree in the grass, which they'd planted two years ago for cross-pollination.

They then walked down their street to take responsibility for any flotsam, bringing Kazak along for the walk. Every house on the block was nearly identical to theirs: a cookie-cutter drab design, except most had shutters up and people gone. One had a second story. They filled a box with a baseball, three glass bottles, and a cinder block. They collected a few fallen palm leaves, too. Everything went in their waste collection bin, which they then brought inside.

Before going out to find gasoline, they had to put up all the shutters. For three hours, they dragged aluminum sheets, one at a time, to each window. Tali held each sheet while Andy notched it in place, eight or ten per window. The midmorning sun, peering from behind a cloud, made the outdoors feel like a steam room. They both glanced enviously at their next-door neighbors' hurricane-proof windows. They missed Carlos, with whom the prep would have taken half the time. For Tali, this meant that simply delegating the real labor, as she usually had, wasn't an option. She was growing antsy before even half the windows were shuttered.

“Can't we take a break, Papi?” Seeing her hands were covered in grease, she wiped her forehead with her forearm.

“There’s more to do, chiquita. Remember what you said: when everything’s done, we’ll have all the time in the world.” Andy responded.

“We have plenty of time now, can’t we take a few minutes?” She huffed in desperation.

“Less time than you think,” he said, “Look at the clouds—who knows when the rain will start? And if you want to stay in Miami longer, we need the house in one piece. Listen: I really appreciate your help. I couldn’t imagine doing this without your dad, let alone without you either. How about we finish this up, go find some gas, and then grab lunch at Carmela’s?”

Carmela was the chef and owner of a Colombian restaurant down the road. Eating out was almost unheard of to Tali, but whenever it was an option, Carmela’s was her go-to. And though most places would be closed by then, Andy knew Carmela would be around until the last possible moment, unable to lose any more business than strictly necessary. He knew this rare offer would do the trick: Tali relented, and got back to work.

When all was set, they rode out to find gas. Carlos was on speakerphone.

“Everything’s set?”

“Yup,” they replied together.

“Did you remember the trash bin?”

“Mhm,” they replied together.

“I’ll keep the news on tomorrow and Monday. If you lose power, you can call me for updates.”

“Sure,” said Andy, “But we’ll have to save battery. And it’s not like we’ll be going anywhere anyway.”

They talked about their preparations, their plans for the next couple days (none), the latest update on the Indiana Bat (still endangered), and so on. They managed to fill the tank at a station almost fifteen miles west of their house, then stopped by Carmela’s before returning home.

They parked the van across the street, away from trees and basketball hoops. The house was flooded by darkness, except for the wisps of day that filtered in through the ends of the shutters. They turned on a few lights, took showers, put on a movie, and savored the air conditioning that would soon be gone.

By Sunday morning, the skies were angry. By evening, the power was out. Andy sat at the piano under the tangles of their indoor forest. They had owned the piano a couple of decades, since Carlos’s mom, a professional jazz pianist, had died. Andy had decided to learn to play a few years ago, but hadn’t practiced since buying *Budget Gadget Getter*. He couldn’t remember much, partly because he’d never learned much. He now spent some time running his hands up and down the smooth keys, pretending he could play. After finishing a stunning avant-garde improvisation, he invited Tali to a game of chess. They sat close to a battery-powered lamp, at the edge of its glow. They then spent a precious hour of

phone battery with Carlos. Andy read a few manuals (the espresso machine, model VU822, was a particularly invigorating read), then told himself: no more work until after the storm. Tali read *Calvin and Hobbes* out loud for Kazak, as he drifted in and out of dreams. She eventually joined him, on her bed. They all went to bed early—having spent a day shuttered in, their internal clocks were already shifting. There was only a gentle rain tapping outside.

They awoke to a thin whistle. The dizzying sound of wind cut through the neighborhood, with occasional rumbles of thunder or rattles of shaking leaves. Noah was toward the cusp of category 4, the strongest it would get. Tali and Andy wouldn't learn this, though. Cellular service was knocked out when they woke up. Andy was up first, Tali an hour or so later. With her came Kazak, pressed against her leg, shivering as if it were an earthquake they were going through. They sat quietly in the dining room, under the artificial glow of a lantern. They drank the last sips of milk, and left the empty fridge open to defrost.

A hurricane is a pregnant pause—

Everything stands still. You drift from the couch to the bed to the floor without noticing it. Even your thoughts become lethargic, each idea undone before fully forming. You try to think about the past, and end up thinking about the future. You wonder what the rest of the world is doing, but never answer your own question. The people you miss most feel further than usual, barely real. Everything is reduced to yourself and your body, which is suddenly in touch with nature. Suddenly at the whim of the wind.

Noah's eye crossed the city. The rain let down slightly, but the wind persisted into the evening. Tali and Andy were eating pomarrosas, pitting some and passing them to Kazak, when they heard a creaking like a rusty swing set, followed by a bellowing crumble. Andy's heart leapt. A single ray of grey light filtered down the hallway, then a wave of brightness flooded in. With it came plaster dust and roofing, and a swirling cloud of leaves. A puddle trickled toward the table.

Andy blinked fast, then stared. Then blinked fast, then stared. "Tali..." he said. "Tali..." he said again. Tali fixed her gaze on the puddle, watched it reach her bare foot, flicked her toes in it, making sure the water felt wet. She walked slowly to the kitchen, where Kazak had ran to. He lay shaking on the ground, whining like a wind chime. She got on the floor, wrapped her arms around him, and they shook together.

Andy had started walking toward the suddenly bright hallway when the living room's leftmost wall started to give way. A smooth, glistening tree-bark sat where the roof had just been. A pomarrosa occasionally fell through and burst against the floor. He went the other way, to the kitchen. "Tali..." Andy said, "Get a backpack."

It took her a moment to process what he'd said, but Tali eventually got up and got a bag, as did he. They each rushed through their drawers, stuffing random clothes in their bags. Each motion was a mindless spasm, done as quickly as possible. Yet, everything moved unnervingly slow, a lifetime passing between opening a drawer and moving on to the next.

They didn't feel as though they were doing anything, just watching their limbs move instinctively. Andy's feet took him to the kitchen, where his hands grabbed cans of food, bottles of water, and a small bag of dog food. Then the van's keys. "Let's go, Tali!" his mouth said.

She put her nightstand picture in her bag, zipped it, and ran to the door. She kept her eyes away from the living room, so as not to see the hairline fracture that crept further and further down the wall. Andy dragged Kazak by the collar as they crossed the street and clambered into the van.

With Kazak bundled in the cargo-hold, they drove away. Andy squinted through the rain, unsure of where he was going. The wind rocked the van this way and that. Tali felt nauseated, then abruptly awake: "My sketch book!" she yelled. Andy flinched and sent the van into the wrong lane, then straightened it out. It was a good thing they were the only people on the roads. "I'm sorry, Tali," Andy said, unable to think of anything better. "No! We have to go back! I remembered my picture but not my sketch book!" She reached into her bag and pulled out the picture, looked at the much smaller Tali on Carlos's shoulders. At Andy, looking up at her through a wide smile. Kazak in front, his tongue resting outside his mouth. She understood: that was it. She wept quietly, then a bit more loudly.

Andy didn't say anything, didn't know what to say. Tali had just reminded him of his photo albums, which his mind hadn't remembered when it should have. He considered

turning back—it's not like he was driving anywhere anyway. But he didn't. He imagined the water seep into the pictures of his parents, his first biology conference, his husband before he was his husband, his daughter the day she became his. He imagined the water soak into the paper, draw out the ink, create a black puddle of his memories. He wept quietly, too. He now squinted through the rain and his tears, unsure of where he was going.



They awoke the next day in luscious bedding. A dazzling sun sliced through the window, and pulled Andy and Tali out of their dreams at the same time. Neither could remember where they were for a moment, then they remembered: this was the first hotel they had driven past last night. No—the second one. The first one had had a no-pets policy.

There had been no power when they arrived, probably none yet either. But Andy reached for his nearly dead phone, and saw that service was back. He walked to the bathroom, the screen flashing “CARLOS,” he hesitating to press the green button. He pressed it as he looked in the mirror, examined each of his freckles individually. “We might be in Indiana sooner than expected,” Andy said.

Tali, meanwhile, called Kazak over. He stayed in the room's corner, recuperating from the night's stresses, she imagined. She stretched her back, then went over and sat down beside him. She gently rubbed his back, but he stayed motionless. “Kazak?” she said. Then “Pa... Pa... Papi,” each time a little louder than the last. Andy peered from the bathroom, saw the

river streaming down her face (this one not at all like the Everglades; more like the rapids of the Amazon), and interrupted Carlos to say he'd call back.

In Indiana, Carlos sat frozen, the phone still at his ear, unsure of what was happening. Was he supposed to feel devastated, or relieved? It seemed his isolation would soon be over! But Andy's pain kept resonating between his ears. He couldn't imagine Tali.

In Room 605, Andy held Tali tightly, knowing there was nothing to be said, but saying things anyway: "He made it much longer than most... He had peace last night, here with us... He'll always be around." Tali wasn't listening anyway. She clasped Andy's shirt and soaked it with her tears. Andy's tears were mixed in. When they were able to call Carlos to give him the news, his tears seeped through the telephone, fell on Andy's shirt, too.



Noah's passage signaled the return of responsibilities. The most urgent was meeting with the insurance inspector, who had asked Andy to be at his house after lunch the next day. Calling it a house seemed like a joke, seeing that its insides were torn into like a scavenged body. The tree that did the scavenging lay against the floor, which was covered by a pool of water. Black and white piano keys were tangled in the tree's leaves, which sat where the instrument had once been. When Andy saw this, he tried to imagine the last gasp the piano must have given as the tree crushed it. It must have been beautiful, he concluded, and felt a shiver.

Andy didn't listen to very much the inspector said. His mind was trying to take it all in: his flooded neighborhood, his nonexistent belongings, the smell of ancient dust that filled his "house." He occasionally caught bits of actual news, which boiled down to this: the neighborhood was in such bad shape that the bank wouldn't require them to rebuild, so Andy and Carlos would get the insurance payment. Whatever the bank didn't take, that is. But since they had paid almost half of their 30-year mortgage before starting to miss payments, they'd eventually get almost \$30,000. They were lucky: most neighbors, whose houses were filled with water, but in one piece, would get no payments—hurricane insurance doesn't cover simple flooding.

When the inspector left, Andy found Tali sitting on her bed, which was still whole. She held a box of found debris: Andy's dad's watch, which hadn't ticked in years; the two CDs that remained on their bookshelf, the rest of which was swimming somewhere in the neighborhood; her metal figurine of a ballerina; a handful of pomarrosas. They looked around together one last time, then took Tali's box to the van. They got another box from it. Standing over the small pomarrosa tree in the front yard, which stood gallantly above the flooding and destruction, they scattered Kazak's ashes in silence.



They only stayed in Miami another day. There was no reason to linger. Andy had called his one employee, and asked him to arrange a liquidation of all inventory. It would be yet

another loss, but what else was there to do? With that, their material attachments were gone. It should have been easier to let go of Miami, Andy figured, now that it was nothing but dust to them. But as they boarded the plane to Indiana, their stomachs contorted with the sense that they were leaving everything behind. Maybe because all they had with them were two half-filled backpacks.

Tali didn't feel the rush she usually got from airplanes. She didn't imagine the cities below as ant colonies—she shut the window the entire time. There were no more snarky comments about staying in Miami, which relieved Andy. Tali thought about her friends, who had evacuated and hadn't returned in time to say goodbye to. She thought, too, about past visits to her dad in Indiana. Her clearest memory was of thinking she was being pointed at in a shopping mall, wanting to forget Spanish and cover her olive skin. Even though she'd realized the people had only been pointing at a billboard behind her, this didn't change the facts: she didn't feel comfortable in Indiana like she did in Miami, where her neighbors were so unlike each other, they were like each other. In Indiana, Tali felt like only she would stand out.

Andy thought about the neighbors, too. Would they find such a place in Indiana, where the families on both sides of their house would also have two dads? Where the families that didn't would still accept invitations to dinner, even bring a bottle of wine? Carlos made it seem so, but Andy still worried. This state had just adopted a constitutional amendment

like the one he had dealt with three years back, after all. Again, his hopes of marriage were outlawed.

To calm himself, Andy tried reading *Trout Fishing in America*. He'd bought the novel at the airport (having asked for "something humorous but not too uplifting"), but as he tried to read it, its lines became instructions for a stereo sound system. He closed the book, and spent the rest of the flight trying to think of a job he could get in Indiana. No good ideas came—they all involved machines and more machines, the last thing he wanted. He tried to feel excitement about seeing Carlos for the first time in five months, but mostly felt emptiness. He imagined his next-door neighbors returning from Georgia, peering through their hurricane-proof windows, realizing the wave that would come with opening their door. Here he was—the neighborhood's broke and broken salesman, its least deserving person—with \$30,000 and a new life at his fingertips, leaving everyone else at the brunt of the storm. Nothing made sense. So how could anything fill his emptiness?

But when they met Carlos by baggage claim, for a fleeting moment, everything made sense. The three of them embraced each other, melted into a unit, felt their tears combine and stain their shirts. All of history was briefly reduced to that instant.



After spending a few weeks cramped into Carlos's studio apartment, the insurance check came in. They were able to put the \$30,000 down payment on a new mortgage. As he

signed the paperwork, Andy felt unlike himself—as though he'd ditched an entire neighborhood, an entire city, an entire life. For those first weeks, it was only in the brief moments before falling asleep, with Carlos's hand in his, that he felt complete. These usually came after a flash of worry, "I'm forgetting something," and a relief, "No. No more microwave manuals before bed."

He somehow missed the manuals, the clear-cut sense of meaning they had given him for three years. Now, he felt like a feather in the middle of a hurricane. Having nothing to do (and no ideas) left him constantly thinking of the past. Everything was a reminder of Miami. First the tight apartment, which was like Miami's overbearing, sweltering heat. Then the empty house, which was like Miami's outstretched openness. Andy sat in both places, floating from corner to corner, thinking of how he'd organize his belongings— if he still had them. For some reason, he missed the piano more than anything. The final sound he'd imagined for it—a blistering crash of strangely beautiful dissonance—had haunted him.

A week after arriving, Andy told Carlos that he heard their life in that sound: a tragic explosion, a result of their overreach. Had they needed to plant that tree? Had they needed to leave Colombia? To buy the business? To come here, forcing Tali out of a happy place? Andy regretted saying this immediately— Carlos had to miss his own mother's piano more than him.

Carlos half-heartedly accepted the apology, but it wasn't the piano bit that dug into him. It was the sense that all control was gone. Since he'd left for Indiana, over a year ago, he'd envisioned his family's reunion as a scene out of a holiday movie. Instead, he'd gotten a dreary wallop. He could never convince Andy to leave the apartment, even to look for houses. Neither would Tali go to the nature trails with him, which had been her favorite activity when she'd visited. Carlos felt alone.

It seemed like, to come back to life, his family just needed to build a connection, to find a community like they'd had in Miami, to plant a seed. So Carlos would leave work every day and look for houses, try to find that neighborhood. After a week of looking, he found it. The community was near his lab, the people as gay as Miami's (and seemingly as friendly), and the local high school a grade A. Then he saw the price tag. He didn't tell Andy about that house.

But Carlos managed to drag Andy house-shopping a couple weeks later, pointing out that the apartment's rental period was ending in a month. They eventually found a place. It didn't have the same community, but the people seemed okay, if slightly monochromatic (compared to Miami, at least). The houses were further from each other, anyway, and more rural, which was a nice change. Carlos pointed out where he'd plant this and that around the house.

Once they moved in, Carlos felt some promise. They had their own space again. Tali returned to school, which saved Carlos the stress of seeing her sulk about with Andy. This also seemed to help Andy's spirits— though his quiet pensiveness persisted, and he was still unable to find a job, he had told Carlos that Tali's shattered face had been the hardest brunt to bear.

Since leaving Miami, Tali had felt like an uprooted tree. She missed her friends more than anything, but felt unable to call them, terrified of the blame they would put on her for leaving. There were moments of forgetting, when a friend happened to call, asking how she was. Until they asked when she'd be returning. She had at first held onto hopes of returning, but they slowly began to dim. Her first weeks in the new house, in school again, she was as silent as a Miami sunrise. But as she accepted her situation, and learned that most classmates had no problem with her accent, or her two dads, she began to open up again. She even agreed to buy a sketchbook. But it sat empty on her desk, which was too new and shiny.

All their furniture had this strange lacquered look and pungent scent, unlike Miami's inherited house-things. This made Andy stare at his empty bookcase for an oddly long time the day it was put in. He then found Carlos and told him: "I'll find a job at a bookstore." There, he'd be able to rant about his favorite works all day. Well, he'd first have to discover his favorite works, which turned out to be harder than expected: he got the job, and

realized reading still evoked tech manual after tech manual. But it felt good to hear Carlos's reassurances that their bookcase would soon be full and lively, along with them.

The Friday after Andy's first workweek, Carlos took the first step in trying to make it a home. When everyone was back, he called Tali and Andy to the front door. He showed them a pomarrosa seed with a sliver of green running from its core. It had been Tali's idea to bring the seed. Its fruit was one of the bits of debris she had rescued.

The three of them went to the front yard together. None of them was used to the dry air or orange sunsets yet, not even Carlos. They dug a small patch of earth, and gently placed the sprouting pomarrosa seed there. They stood quietly around it. Though none spoke the thought, they each commemorated Kazak: the deepest hole in their hearts, what they missed beyond all else.

Carlos broke the silence: "I've been thinking... We could go by the Humane Society today... Just to take a look. Maybe there'll be a little guy for us." He smiled at his husband and daughter hopefully, but saw Tali's cheeks drop painfully. She shook her head, and looked at the ground as she walked back inside.

Andy put a hand on Carlos's cheek. "We've forced enough upon her," he said. Carlos shook his head, "I wanted this tree to be a new beginning," he hiccupped through withheld tears. "We have no more beginnings, only continuations," said Andy, pulling his husband

to his chest. Carlos gripped Andy hard, as though worried that Andy would disintegrate between his fingers otherwise.

“Come- we should be with Tali now,” said Andy, leading Carlos inside by the hand. They found Tali sitting on the limestone floor of their still couch-less living room. They joined her in silence.