Hurricanes that hit Puerto Rico have Americano names like Alice and even when they name one Hugo the weathermen don’t pronounce it correctly. Hurricanes never have the names of your children or relatives. Names like Milagros or Rafael.

When they find out that another hurricane is coming your way, your relatives on the mainland—in New Haven, Hartford, Philadelphia, Newark, and New York—always call and ask if you are ready. If you need anything. They want to send you and the children things to help you cope.

But you know the truth.

They want to send you and the children things to ease the guilt that they feel as they sit in their safe condos and co-ops with central air and all the other amenities, as they put their feet up to watch the news for the weather report, smug that they are safe and warm while you are . . . not.

What will you need? they ask.
Clean water.
Hot water.
Ice.
Electricity.
None of which they can provide.

They want to send blankets, powdered milk, deodorant, Pampers. This is not St. Croix, you say. Besides, your children are too old for Pampers. Your relatives have watched one too many news reports.

The winds of the last hurricane that hit your town knocked out all the power lines for days and you had no light, no heat, no phone. It really wasn’t that bad because you live in Carolina, near enough to San Juan and the turistas so that the problem was fixed pronto. But you heard that the people who lived farther out where the turistas hardly ever went had it real bad—no power for almost three weeks.

Imagine if you lived there.

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The last hurricane knocked over the two coconut trees in front of your house and wiped out the crab and chicken pens in the backyard. You heard the chickens squawk as the winds carried them away as you sat in the dark with the wind hawking at your ears and your hijo Rafael crying because it was his job to bring the chickens in and he forgot. You tried to shush him by reminding him that he was your jibarito, but Milagros was louder than you as she called him tonto and slapped at whatever parts of him she could find in the dark.

During the time of a hurricane, it is not good to be alone. Which is why you are glad you still have the hijos. Although it is dark and you cannot see their two faces, you cross from one end of the room to the other after you have sent them to bed, sitting by their sides and placing your palms on their foreheads. Your hijos smell sweet in the darkness; the scent of the tembleque they had for dessert lingers in their partly opened mouths. On a night like this, you don’t bother them about brushing their teeth before bed.

Está bien, you say.
Calmase.
Estoy aquí.
You trace their worried cheeks. You pinch their noses for fun, to cheer them up, glad that you cannot see their eyes in the dark. You will sleep lightly tonight because your children cry in their sleep whenever the winds pick up and the rains fall heavily, fearing the coming of a hurricane or tropical storm. They have every right to be fretful. The last hurricane’s winds reached a new high, hitting so hard that its name was retired. The hijos were too young to truly experience the last hurricane. All that your children remember is that it raged outside with their father in it. They remember that it took him away for good.

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Tropical storms become hurricanes when the winds pick up. But the power of the storm, the strength of it, is represented by a central pressure reading instead of wind speed even though it is the winds that are terrible, deadly. The winds picked up and uprooted the banana tree that crushed your husband’s limbs beneath its trunk and buried his face under its wet soggy leaves.

Hurricanes know who they want.
You could not get the last one to take you. You stood outside for hours, getting drenched. Raindrops fell with a forcefulness you could not describe. The storm within you was more frightening. It raged, picking up speed and swirling uncontrollably, pressing hard against your ribs, plummeting down to your stomach only to rise again and again. The beads of water slapped and pelted you, but the winds would not pick up around you and the stubborn trees clung to their muddy roots, uncooperative. When you finally dragged yourself back into the house, back to your hijos, you felt as if you had been in a fight and lost. So you decided to wait for the next hurricane. They come every five or six years, so by then the children would be old enough to take care of themselves.

The last hurricane knocked the power out of all the generators. With the children, you waited on line for over three hours for a block of ice. You carried your ice around the corner where the boys raised their guns to your head and took your block of ice away, the same as they had done to the people who had been in front of you, the same as they planned to do to the people coming after you. Nothing personal. Later—if you have the money—you can buy it back.

So when your relatives on the mainland—in New Haven, Hartford, Philadelphia, Newark, and New York—call to tell you that they have been watching the latest reports and say that the tropical storm is growing and it looks like it will be a big one and ask you how you are doing, you say, “Estoy bien.”

This is the answer you give because they really don’t care and they don’t know anything about being a Puerto Rican in Puerto Rico anymore. When it is too cold on the mainland, they take paid vacations to fly over. They spend their money in the mall in Isla Verdes, buying clothing that is too tight for them, buying makeup that is now too dark for their wintry pale Americano faces. They ask you to go to the cine with them and you sit there in the theater in San Juan, watching movies in English with Spanish subtitles, wondering if the very irony of the situation escapes them, sure that it does. You and your hijos give up your beds to your relatives who sleep blissfully, full of the pasteles, empanadas, and morcilla they have begged you to prepare. They eat your mangoes and papayas as though they are going out of style, excusing themselves by reminding you that mangoes are so cheap here, that they often have to pay almost two dollars for one back at home (home is what they now call the mainland) that is half as sweet. The hurricanes and
tropical storms can wipe the mangoes out for seasons at a time so that they become as rare as the coquí and there aren’t any to be had by anyone except by the turistas and you sometimes have to pay much more than two dollars for one.

That is not what your relatives want to hear.

You have become a postcard to them. Beaches and good food, exotic fruit and salsa clubs; they are no better than the turistas. But you can’t tell them so because they are familia.

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When it is time for them to leave, you take them to the airport, proud that it is really in Carolina even though it is listed as being in San Juan. They don’t allow family members inside or anyone who is not getting on the flight. You cannot walk your relatives to their gate. You drop them off at the curb. As you drive away, you catch your hijos’ eyes in the rearview mirror. You hold their gazes and drop your voice to a whisper. You point at your relatives’ retreating backs and warn your hijos not to ever become like them. You tell them that if they do, a hurricane will come and sweep them away and they will end up like their father.