

When Hugo
Lucitante
was a boy,
his tribe
sent him
away to learn
about the
outside
world so that,
one day, he
might return
and save
their village.
Can he live up to their hopes?

BY BROOKE JARVIS
PHOTOGRAPHS
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Homeward



It's Christmas Eve, and the night is hot and thick and very loud. The invisible jungle speaks with the whoops of frogs and the throb of insects, with honks, snorts, and sudden splashes. Hugo Lucitante is paddling a canoe as silently as he can down a thin black river, following the beam of a flashlight trained on a pair of shining, unblinking eyes.

In the bow, a small boy perches on the gunwale, flashlight in one hand and a child-size spear in the other. The shaft is a thin piece of cedar, the point a nail hammered flat. Sometimes the boy uses it to spear fish, but tonight, for Christmas and for this prized trip with Hugo, his godfather, he wants a caiman.

The hunt has taken them down the Aguarico — the wide, muddy river that runs past their village in the Ecuadorian jungle and eventually into the Napo River and then the Amazon — to this small tributary, the Sabalo. Where the rivers meet it looks like strong tea flowing into chocolate milk. There's been no shortage of caimans — South American cousins to alligators — but most have been too small to bother with and the rest slipped beneath the opaque water just as the canoe came close. This one, too, flops into the river and disappears before the boy can thrust his spear. But it seems nothing can dampen his excitement. "The big ones are smarter," he says to Hugo in Cofán, the language of their tribe, then breathlessly tells him the story of the time a baby caiman bit his hand and refused to let go, no matter how much he shook it. For a 9-year-old boy, this hunt is bliss.

Tonight, caimans or no, Hugo is happy, too. He likes what it feels like to breathe this soft air and listen to these sounds, the strange mixture of drowsiness and acute alertness, the focusing on one small sliver of vision in the wide darkness. For right now, everything is simple. He watches his godson and thinks of his own childhood,

before everything changed, when he and a group of older boys would paddle much farther up the Sabalo, staying out all night, drinking banana pulp, building fires to cook any fish they caught, killing caimans and tapirs with a .22 rifle. It was hard to sit perfectly still for hours in the narrow, wobbly canoe. Sometimes he would lie down on one of the logs in the river and sleep.

The change came when he was only a year older than his godson is now. To Hugo it seemed sudden, but it was something that his father, Bolívar Lucitante, and other leaders of the small Cofán community of Zábalo had been thinking about for some time. For decades, they had witnessed the intrusions of oil companies and colonists. They had watched their hunting grounds shrink and their people get sick. They had tried fighting back, sometimes with spears, and fleeing deeper into the jungle, but when there was nowhere left to go, they decided that they needed a new plan. Opportunity presented itself in the form of an idealistic 22-year-old American college student named Miranda Detore, who spent three months with the Lucitantes while studying tourism in the region. Before she left, Detore agreed to an unlikely plan proposed by Bolívar. Hugo, who at 10 years old spoke only Cofán and had never been more than a few miles away from the Aguarico, would leave his village deep in the Amazon and return with Detore to her home in Seattle. His job, at first, would be to learn English, but with time expectations grew: He would get a Western education, he understood, so that he could return to Zábalo to help guide his people through a changed and confusing world. He would start with the fourth grade.

To Hugo, it was all at first a bewildering blur. He found himself focusing on the strangeness of the elevators in Quito when he went with his family and Detore to ask for a visa; on the terrible cold there; on the lights that for some reason burned all night.

To the village leaders, it was the first move in what became a deliberate, long-term strategy, the hope of a tiny nation on the edge of extinction. To save the Cofán way of life, they decided, their children would have to leave it. They would have to become something not quite Cofán. Something new.

IN HIS THIRD-STORY Seattle apartment, Hugo whispers as he packs his bag for class. He's worried about waking Asha, his 15-month-old daughter, who's had a fever all day but has finally fallen asleep on the couch, her dark hair splayed across the pillow. On a bookshelf next to her sits the curled skin of an anaconda and a couple of feathered headbands. In the kitchen, Hugo's American wife, Sadie, home from her job as a preschool teacher, is ribbing red chard for dinner. Outside the apartment window it is already dark, and a cold rain is falling.

Class tonight — at the Seattle community college Hugo's been attending for two years, fitting a few classes at a time between jobs to pay for them — is public speaking. Last year Hugo spoke at Brown University, to a freshman

PREVIOUS PAGE
**Hugo Lucitante,
in Ecuador in
December**

OPPOSITE PAGE
**Hugo in Seattle
one week later**



class that had watched a documentary about his people's struggles with oil development; now a professor there is trying to help him become a Brown student himself, but first he needs to work on his humanities grades. Writing in English has always been his biggest academic struggle, so public speaking seemed a good option. Earlier this week, for an assignment, he gave a speech pretending to present one of the elders and founders of Zábalo with an award for defending Cofán territory. When the professor assigns a show-and-tell speech for a later class, Hugo raises his hand. "Could I bring a spear?" he asks.

Until last month, Hugo was working as a valet at fancy restaurants and events, parking BMWs and Mercedes and Ferraris. One time last summer he parked Bill Gates's car, another time Sir Mix-a-Lot's. But in a move that terrified him, he took out his first U.S. loan to buy a Prius and go into business as a Lyft driver. Last weekend, as Seattle celebrated an NFC championship win that would take the Seahawks to the Super Bowl, Hugo stayed out until 3 a.m., making good money driving revelers home.

He takes pleasure in being able to navigate the city, a hard-earned skill. Hugo's first trip here, when he was 10, was mystifying. He and Detore — who would become his legal guardian a year later — flew from Quito to another city, which Hugo assumed was the one he'd been told about, but instead they got on another plane and flew to another city, and then another and another and another. He didn't know how to ask where they were or what all these stops meant. By the time he was in a car, surrounded by an unbelievable number of other cars, he might have been on a different planet.

Hugo badly wanted to swim, to clean himself off, but there was no river he could see. Finally Detore showed him how to turn on the shower. He climbed in, as he usually did in the river, with his clothes on. Later she took him to a thrift store to buy new clothes, and he picked out a pair of pink girls' shorts. He was fascinated and confused by things like the fake grass at a soccer field, the plastic flowers on restaurant tables, cars carrying only one person, the perpetual availability of food. "He was questioning constantly," remembers David Crabtree, a friend of Detore's who became a mentor to Hugo. "Stoplights. Stop signs. Certain codes: You go first — no, you go first. Lots of these things, they were so foreign."

At Hugo's West Seattle elementary school, the ESL teacher, Maxine Loo, was told that the silent new kid in her class spoke Spanish; it was only a month after he enrolled, at an open house, that she met Detore and heard of Cofán. One day, a class bully broke the beaded necklace his family gave him before he left. Detore explained its significance to Loo, who sat the other kids down: How would you like to be far away from your family, she asked, all alone in

The town of Zábalo is a day's journey, via gravel road and motorized canoe, from the Ecuadorian oil town of Lago Agrio.







ABOVE
Randy Borman leads a church service in Zábalo on Christmas Day.

RIGHT
Oil drilling in the jungle near Zábalo

a strange place? Hugo gravitated toward kids in similar positions. He and his first friends there, from Turkey and the Philippines, had little common language, but they were always together. As Hugo slowly learned English, the American students peppered him with questions, mostly about the animals in his home. Were there really monkeys and piranhas? They invited him over to watch *Indiana Jones* and *The Jungle Book*. Loo tutored him after school, but when it came time for standardized tests, she says, “he would fall flat on his face.” He was a hard worker and hated failing. I know which plants are poison and how to treat a snakebite, Loo remembers him saying; why do they always ask things I don’t know?

For most of that entire first school year, Hugo had no way to contact his parents. He only had the promise they’d made when he left that someday he’d come back. In Zábalo, his family, especially his mother, Norma, talked of him often — What might Hugo be doing? Eating? Is he sick or

well? In the village, a woman becomes known by the name of her oldest son. For ten years, Norma had been called Omama, the *O* short for Ovi, Hugo’s village nickname. And now he was gone. When summer came and Hugo and Detore, together with two of his classmates and a few chaperones, returned for a visit, it was a joyous relief. His Cofán was slow and awkward, but here he was, safe. Hugo exhausted himself trying to serve as translator, to answer everybody’s questions about one another.

In Seattle, Hugo lived in Detore’s house. She was a full-time student and worked, sometimes two jobs, to support him. “I didn’t sleep much those first couple of years,” she says. “I was so young at the time; I didn’t even realize what I was getting into.” When Bolivar had first broached his question, she’d been shocked. The Hugo she knew “was, like, this jungle kid. He could do all these amazing things in the forest, but he didn’t wear shoes, didn’t have any kind of awareness of the world I had come from.” Still, she was



honored by Bolivar's trust and felt she should at least find out if what he asked was possible. At the American embassy in Quito, she was told she could bring Hugo home with her if someone could fax the necessary documents by that afternoon. Detore called her father, who was hearing of the plan for the first time, and by the next day Hugo had a visa; before long, she was home in Seattle, plus one kid.

Detore paid most of Hugo's costs herself, though one private school offered a yearlong scholarship and others offered discounts. Detore enlisted her friends and family to sell handicrafts she'd brought back from Ecuador, and she and Hugo handed out fliers asking for donations to help the Cofán. Crabtree remembers telling people that their contributions would go toward saving the rain forest.

When Hugo was 12, Loo got a call from a friend at the U.N. planning a session on indigenous people. She recommended Hugo without mentioning his age. His school raised money to send him, and Hugo found himself in New

"He wanted to fit in just like everybody else, but people were looking at him as this story, not as a person."

York, planting trees on Earth Day alongside Kofi Annan. Detore paid for his parents to join them; they toured the Empire State Building and played carnival games and walked the streets with their faces tilted upward at the soaring glass buildings. When Loo knocked on Norma and Bolivar's hotel-room door, she found they had moved the bed's mattress to the floor for fear of falling off it.

About once a year Hugo would return to Zábalo to visit, at one point staying for a year at a missionary school in Quito, where he learned Spanish. Each time he left, he'd break down at the look on his mother's face: "I'd start crying, she'd start crying, and then I'd turn and walk away." He often longed to go home for good, to stay where it felt simpler to be himself. But he felt a duty to stay in Seattle. "I don't think I would have finished high school if I had a choice," he said. "But I told myself that I had to." Crabtree watched Hugo struggle with the expectations

bearing down on him, including his own. “He wanted to fit in just like everybody else, but at the same time, it was this tremendous thing: People were looking at him as this story, not, like, as a person.”

As Hugo grew older, normal teenage tensions — the struggles for identity, for independence — were amplified by his circumstances. He and Detore began to butt heads. Later, when Hugo was about 21, they would stop speaking; both are reluctant to talk about it, though they say they wish the best for each other. “Hugo is just a human being like the rest of us, doing the best he can,” says Detore.

The worst was the oil: the wastewater that poured into streams every day, the pipeline ruptures that turned the river black. Mendua remembers children drinking from the river and later dying.

“It’s a huge burden and it’s a huge responsibility, and just because he was asked

to go learn English as a little kid doesn’t mean he has to rise to this huge responsibility now, as an adult.”

Hugo often speaks of feeling frustration — with what’s happening to his people, with making ends meet in Seattle, with the gulf between what he’d like to accomplish and what he’s been able to — but he seldom shows it. He stays cheerful, and you can see him carefully picking the right words. Sitting in his car after class, during which the professor focused on the importance of tailoring a message to an audience, Hugo, now 27, says he’s sometimes uncomfortably aware of his role as a symbol — “like a dolphin for Save the Ocean.” But the dolphin doesn’t have to figure out how to live on land. “I’m sure I’ll never feel like I’m doing enough,” he says.

THE CHRISTMAS visit is Hugo’s shortest trip back to Zábalo yet. Too short, really, barely more than two weeks, but it’s all he and Sadie can manage in between school and work. When they’ve visited Zábalo before, it’s been for months or even a year at a time, long enough to fully get away from the things that bother Hugo about Seattle: the gray, the rain, the loneliness, the endless cycle of bills, the jobs he’s able to get in the States — at a Chipotle, at a used-CD store, under the table (before he got a green card) at the antique shop where he and Sadie first got to know each other. “I hate having to pay to live,” he says. “In the community, you build your little house, you hunt, and you’re fine.” Sadie calls it cabin fever, the way he gets when he’s been away from Zábalo for too long.

They pack their bags with supplies for the people in the village: toothbrushes, an inverter for solar panels, a boat propeller, fishing hooks. For themselves and Asha, they bring a small duffel. On the heels of a December windstorm, they leave their apartment in north Seattle’s Bitter Lake neighborhood and land a day later in the still, damp heat of another bitter lake, the upstart Ecuadorian oil town of Lago Agrio. Lago is a grubby city of honking motorbikes, crowded food stalls, and jumbled concrete apartments. Just outside of town, gas flares shimmer and peeling murals — a black-haired woman with a macaw on her head, a muscular man standing by a verdant waterfall — decorate a long cement wall that surrounds large

tanks labeled CRUDE. Men in tall rubber boots are still shoveling mud mixed with oil next to a pipeline that burst over the summer, sending a stinking black wave down the Aguarico all the way to Zábalo and forcing the villagers to ferry clean water from the Sabalo River in 55-gallon drums.

The Aguarico has another name, Cofa Na’e, which means “main or most important river”; it denoted the role that the river played in the lives of the people who lived along it, and later became the term that outsiders applied to them. Though there were once likely tens of thousands of Cofán, the population crashed after the arrival of European diseases, leaving a small number of people scattered across a rich and expansive tropical territory. Those who remained had no need for complex government — if there was a problem, they could easily move somewhere else — or formalized land ownership. All it made sense to own was something you had built or caught yourself.

Then, in the 1960s, Texaco discovered oil under the jungle. It led a consortium of companies that established well pads and a new town — nicknamed Lago Agrio for the company’s Sour Lake, Texas, home — in what was formerly the Cofán village of Amisacho. At first, the Cofán retreated from the newcomers, putting up basically no resistance. One elder compared their reaction to a deer hiding in the underbrush and hoping the hunters would give up and go away. But they didn’t. The Ecuadorian government, in an effort to develop its vast eastern jungle, announced that anyone could own land that they cleared and worked, and *cucuma* — the Cofán word for outsiders — began to arrive in waves, leveling the forest as they came. Oil production would soon rise to more than 200,000 barrels a day, with billions of gallons of crude oil and contaminated production water spilling into the streams and soil, an ongoing disaster that would later spawn an infamous, decades-long lawsuit in which the Cofán were plaintiffs.

From Lago the village is still a day away via paved and then gravel roads lined with pipelines and freshly cleared cow fields, and then a four-hour boat ride down the Aguarico, passing families fishing from wooden canoes and oil trucks riding upriver on painted barges. The village itself — a long cluster of stilted wooden houses, a school, a church, and a soccer field, all surrounded by a tall canopy of trees hosting toucans and woolly monkeys — is set back from the shifting banks, invisible from the river but for a line of canoes.

It can be hard for Hugo to talk about his Ecuadorian home in his American one. “Where do I start?” he asks. “How do I explain?” But he tries, usually saying that there are only about 2,000 Cofán left, scattered in jungle villages along the Ecuadorian–Colombian border, and that all they want is to keep living the way they always have. Sadie, for her part, once went a year at a new job without mentioning Zábalo to her co-workers. She doesn’t like the way people get hung up on the idea of bathing and drinking and washing laundry in the river, of eating from the bush, of worrying about poisonous snakes and yellow fever. They

Randy Borman is an indigenous spokesperson who understands how power works outside the jungle.



talk like it's not a real place, like living there is either a lark or foolhardiness. Either way, says Sadie, frustrated, "it's not a choice. It's not for fun. It's because this is where family is." Like any home, it's both a refuge and a responsibility.

For Christmas Eve dinner, Hugo's parents prepare a giant river turtle and a whole clutch of eggs. Usually the Cofán protect the turtles — digging up eggs and moving them to pools they've made so the hatchlings' shells can harden away from predators — but once a year they're a treat. Asha, who's had mild diarrhea for a few days now, is being fussy, so before heading out in the canoe with his godson, Hugo lets Mauricio Mendua, Zábalo's shaman, try to extract the bad spirit Mendua believes has entered her.

Mendua lights a cigarette and blows smoke onto Asha's hands, then pulls along her arms, then her legs, her belly, her head, using his hands to slowly coax the spirit out. Usually he would use fresh tobacco from his garden, but today he has manufactured cigarettes, and he goes through the whole pack. "We don't believe in that stuff in the States," Sadie says later. She, Hugo, and Mendua are sitting in the hut used for ceremonies involving ayahuasca, a hallucinogenic brew, after spending the afternoon working on a photographic guide to medicinal jungle plants. "But it's strange out here. It's like anything is possible." When she and Hugo visited Zábalo after Asha was born, Hugo, like all new fathers in the village, stayed away from lakes and swamps for fear that an *añano*, a water spirit that eats children, would smell the baby on him and follow him home.

The next day, Christmas, means gifts: bags of candy given by the national oil company, toys and household goods bought in Lago by the village president using proceeds from the Socio Bosque, a small fund set up for the community by the national government as compensation for protecting its forest. More than a hundred people gather to play games and win the gifts as prizes. Men throw spears at a rock, laughing at each other when they miss, while women race each other to spoon water into empty bottles or to light a series of matches as quickly as possible. Kids compete in footraces and shoot at a soccer goal. Winners choose their prizes: colanders, bags of marbles, tubes of toothpaste, toy cars, a couple of blond plastic dolls. Later on, each family will receive more practical gifts: machetes, cooking pots, stacks of towels and sheets. Hugo and Sadie, who add kids' clothes from Seattle thrift stores to the collection of prizes, organize a tug-of-war.

At the edge of the soccer field, a gray-eyed, white-skinned man in a traditional navy-blue tunic talks to a small, distraught boy who's already snapped the blades off his new plastic helicopter. This morning, the man led a Christmas service in the village's open-air church, and in a few minutes he'll stand up to introduce the dishes in a long line of silver pots that women have brought for the community meal, making jokes in Cofán: that the rice is really maggots, that this chicken is in fact a vulture, that this fish is clear evidence of a poor hunter. The people will laugh and then crowd in to fill their plates with paca, paiche, and peccary.

Hugo imagines that others in the village think of him as wildly rich and successful, that they expect a college education to function as a kind of magic wand.

The man is a respected leader among the Cofán, but his name — Randy Borman — and light coloring mark him as other. Borman's parents were American missionaries; he was born and raised in Dureno, a Cofán village far up the Aguarico, learning from Cofán elders alongside Cofán children. Though he left to study in Quito and the U.S. and still keeps a home in Quito, he returned to the jungle and married a Cofán woman. As both a respected Cofán hunter and an educated, English-speaking white man, Borman is unique: an indigenous spokesperson who understands how power works outside the jungle, and whom *cucuma* can't comfortably ignore. It is largely because of him that, instead of disappearing, Cofán territory now includes a million acres of legally protected forest, far more than neighboring tribes'. It was because of him that Hugo's parents migrated down the Aguarico to Zábalo, a settlement they helped carve out of the jungle when Hugo was a baby, and largely because of Borman's example that they later sent Hugo away.

Borman scans the children running in happy chaos before him. "I need replacements," he says, "and I need them before I get to be old and decrepit."

WHEN THE OIL companies moved in, Borman, along with Hugo's parents and grandparents and many current residents of Zábalo, was living in Dureno, in the heart of what was quickly becoming oil territory. While in high school in Quito, he'd read about indigenous losses of land rights around the world. Though others in the village didn't yet see the point, he began a campaign to clear boundary trails to formally define a section of Cofán territory, some 20,000 acres around Dureno. Today this is the only land that the Ecuadorian government recognizes as belonging to the Cofán of Dureno. On maps of deforestation in Ecuador, it stands out as a green circle amid cleared land.

As the forest beyond this territory shrank, game became scarce; adults who should have been hunting large animals were reduced to going after the small ones on which children usually practiced. Theft and alcohol became problems for the first time. But the worst was the oil: the wastewater that poured into Dureno streams every day, the frequent pipeline ruptures that turned the river black. Mendua remembers one particularly bad spill in the 1980s. "The smell was terrible," he says. "Everything at the level of the river died — armadillos, birds. It killed a lot of things." He remembers children drinking from the river and later dying. Hugo's paternal grandparents' water tank, Borman says, was full of black sludge. Both would eventually die of what he believed to be stomach cancer.

It was Borman who suggested a move downriver. He'd been working as a boat driver on the Aguarico and wanted to start a tourism business with some of his Cofán friends, including Hugo's father. They began exploring down the river and came across a stretch with wide sandbars, good for fishing, an eight-to-twelve-hour ride from Dureno by



motorized canoe. “It was far,” Mendua remembers, “but there was no oil.” They planted yucca, then began to clear fields and build houses. By the late ’80s, Cofán families, including Hugo’s, were relocating there from Dureno. This was a chance to start over, to, in Borman’s words, “get kids into an environment where they could hunt and fish and learn to be Cofán.”

Hugo learned. He followed Mendua into the forest, fascinated by the medicinal plants he used. At the age of 7, he took ayahuasca for the first time. He learned to make a blowgun and poison darts, to sharpen their tips using piranha teeth. In addition to caimans, he hunted for paca and capybara and speared fish at the time of day when the sun cut through the milky water and revealed them. He learned to keep his distance from sable trees, where jaguars and bad spirits lived.

One day, when Hugo was 6, his parents loaded him into a canoe and headed, along with about three dozen other people, downriver to the Sabalo. They turned into it, then motored upriver for a full day. The children and the women stayed with the canoes, fishing, while the men, with painted

faces and spears, began a two-day walk to a region of jungle where an oil company had begun to drill exploratory wells inside a federally recognized natural reserve. It was territory the Cofán of Zábalo had claimed, and that they now manage alongside the Ministry of the Environment. Borman saw the pageantry as at least partially symbolic. “Our only weapon is our color,” he explains later. “A fully dressed Cofán is an impressive man or woman.” Mendua saw things differently. “We were prepared and ready to go to war,” he says. “If something were to happen to one of us, we were going to kill them, too.”

The oil workers radioed the military, and a helicopter full of armed soldiers arrived. At first the colonel in charge refused to speak to Borman, saying he wasn’t a real Cofán, but Bolivar insisted that Borman had the right to speak for the tribe. Borman explained that the land was protected, and in the end, the oil workers retreated and the military helicoptered the Cofán back to their canoes.

But in just a few years, Borman, Mendua, and a group of Cofán warriors would again be dressing for battle and confronting oil workers, this time in a weeks-long standoff

Hugo and Sadie Lucitante in their Seattle apartment with their daughter, Asha

over a well drilled inside Dureno territory. It was clear they needed a new, more assertive strategy, and with it new leaders — ones who, like Borman, were both Cofán and not. Borman had already begun to talk about the need to “create an indigenous leader from scratch,” and Bolivar agreed. He himself had never been to high school, but he had seen the way outsiders listened to Borman. He wanted his sons, starting with the eldest, to benefit from the education “of outside.”

Though Hugo left first and went farthest, Borman raised money through a foundation he started, and soon other Cofán kids were leaving Zábalo to study in Quito. At one point in the late '90s, before the money began to dry up, there were more than 20 Cofán students in Quito. Some would miss home, struggle, and quit, while others would fall for modern life in the city and find it hard to imagine moving back to the sand flies and seclusion. Randy's two teenage nieces, home in Zábalo for Christmas, say they are forgetting Cofán (“take away the forest and you've lost half of what you can talk about,” their uncle says), that they can't remember their life here before they left for school the first time, at around 6. People here call them the Quito gringas.

“It's a tremendously difficult job for these kids,” Borman acknowledges. When Jhon, the second of Hugo's four younger brothers, left home for school in Quito, he cried and told his father he didn't want to go. “This isn't for me,” he remembers Bolivar telling him. “It's for you, your community, your children. Everything depends on you and the sacrifice that you make.”

ON THE DAY after Christmas, everyone gathers on the soccer field for the community's annual meeting. To ensure that their traditional tunics and dresses don't fall out of use, the community self-imposed a rule years ago that everyone must wear them, if only on this day, or pay an outrageous fine of \$50. Even Asha has a tiny skirt.

Hugo and Sadie sit near the center of the crowd, in a line of chairs with the rest of the Lucitantes. Last night, the community's current president asked Hugo to come to his house to talk through some of the issues that would come up at the meeting. Today Hugo is fairly quiet; he's conscious of not being too pushy or vocal. When he speaks, it's to encourage respect for an elder whom people are upset with, or to bring up a rule about how new members are accepted. Two men from other Cofán communities are petitioning to join. “There's this feeling that the oil company is going to show up here in Zábalo — possibly sooner than later,” Hugo explains; people are beginning to think about how benefits would get split.

On everyone's mind is Dureno, which recently allowed oil production to start within its borders: 500 barrels a day from the same well Borman and Mendua helped shut down with spears 20 years ago. Dureno's president, who is said to have begged the companies to start drilling, is driving a fancy new truck and has forbidden outsiders from visiting; there are allegations that he's only sharing

the oil proceeds with his supporters, and one of Hugo's cousins says he was paid for his vote.

Mendua calls this unrest “the Dureno disease” and worries aloud that it's starting to seep into Zábalo. There are those here, especially young people eager for jobs, who've made it clear that they would welcome oil. Hugo believes they've forgotten what their parents went through to keep it out, but he also knows that Zábalo might lose them anyway if they don't see a way to earn an income there.

Though Hugo dreams of returning, the right time seems to hover just out of reach. He has a hard time picturing himself living without Internet, raising his daughter without modern medicine. And there's much more he hopes to study: anthropology, indigenous rights. He talks of one day taking a boat trip, following the Aguarico down to the Napo, seeing how other Amazonian tribes have dealt with the world changing around them. He'd love to make better maps of Cofán territory, and to buy a drone to patrol for illegal mining, logging, and hunting. He wants to help provide cement posts so people's houses don't rot so quickly, to improve village schools so kids don't have to leave so young. How is always the harder question. He imagines that others in the village think of him as wildly rich and successful, that they expect a college education to function as a kind of magic wand. He still remembers the moment, in high school, when he realized, “If they want to continue to live this way, then I'm going to have to do something about it.”

When Hugo first returned to Zábalo with Sadie five months after they married, they stayed for nearly a year and built their own house on the edge of the village. They planted fruit trees and sweet potatoes and kept a pair of green parrots as pets. To the rough-hewn house, they added American touches: a tall countertop-table in the kitchen, a closet off their bedroom. “This is Sadie's dream walk-in closet,” Hugo jokes, though they came back to Zábalo to find that, while they'd been gone, the closet had been taken over by bats and a termite mound nearly 3 feet high. Even when empty, the house is a signal, a demonstration that they're committed to building a life here. “In a way, I always have to remind myself, or the Cofán, too, who I really am,” Hugo says later.

On the night before he and Sadie are to leave Zábalo, there's an incredible rainstorm, a thundering roar on tin roofs. Like everything else, the water eventually comes down the Aguarico. In the morning, the Lucitantes gather on the riverbank to see them off, only to find that overnight the river has risen by perhaps 10 feet and the boat they were supposed to take upriver is no longer here. Hugo, Sadie, Asha, and one of Hugo's brothers squeeze into a smaller boat; it rides so low that the water laps over the gunwales. As Hugo's parents, brothers, and sister watch in the driving rain, the boat turns away against the powerful current, bumping into logs and branches and other unseen hazards the storm has hidden below the water's surface. You can never quite plan for what the river will bring. §

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