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Exodus

by Laurie MacDiarmid



“You know,” their mother rolled her window down, took a deep breath, and rolled it up again, “ — we’re going to love this. Mark my words.” She’d been chanting it ever since they’d left Pittsburgh four days ago, about once every other hour.

Maura wrote *mark my words* in her mind. She put a check mark against the sentence and then underlined it. *Yes*, she thought, *we are*.

“It’ll be an adventure,” their mother went on, talking to no one. “A real live adventure. Right now, your father’s busy finding us a big, new house in a nice neighborhood, and you’ll all have your own bedrooms. No sharing. Won’t that be nice? I know Maura will love it. Won’t you, darling? And, what’s even better is that in the fall you’ll be going to one of the best private schools in this hemisphere.”

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Actually, “one of the best private schools in this hemisphere” was their father’s phrase. It sounded funny — high and quavering — coming from their mother’s small mouth and voice. Their father, thousands of miles away, might have been practicing ventriloquism on his wife.

“Adios.” Maura’s little sister Vicky giggled. She had one of their new Spanish-English books splayed open over her knees. Maura could see a cartoon cockroach dancing, a guitar and a blanket thrown over its shoulders, on top of a pitcher of lemonade. *The cockroach can’t walk anymore*, Maura read, sideways, *Because it doesn’t have any lemonade to drink*. Musical notes spilled over the Spanish words into the margins.

“That’s right,” their mother said. “Say it. Adios Pittsburgh. Adios Ohio. Adios Kentucky. Hola Mexico City.” She pronounced it Me-hee-co. Maura cringed.

Maura knew better than to say anything. In her overnight bag, she had the tiny Spanish-English dictionary that Frank, one of their father’s grad students, had given her. She also had a special notebook for recording important phrases; she’d started to copy entire sentences and their pronunciation. In one column, she wrote the sen-

tences in English: My name is Maura. How do you do? The weather is hot. I feel ill. Where is the bathroom, please? In the next, she'd copied the sentences in Spanish, and how to sound them out, syllable by syllable: Me llamo Maura (may YAHmoe Maura), Como está usted? (COEmoe esTAH ooSTEAD), Hace calor (AHsay cawLORE), Me siento mal (may seeENtoe mawl), Donde está el baño? (DONday esTAH el BAHNyō). Maura practiced these phrases under her breath until the syllables blended into a weepy little song that repeated itself in her head whenever she bothered to pay attention.

"Pretty soon," their mother said, voice rising, "you'll all be able to speak Spanish like natives. I can just picture it. You'll be chattering away with each other, with everyone else." She paused for a sigh. "And then maybe, just maybe — " She caught her breath with a little hiccup.

Their mother had taken three years of Spanish in college. She swore she remembered nothing, even though she was always trying to say things in this pathetic, overeager fashion, screwing them up, laughing and then apologizing — mostly to their father. He certainly didn't think it was too funny. In fact, he got pretty impatient with her attempts to say anything, cutting her off in mid-sentence with a question about dinner, or about car maintenance, or just chopping his hand down in the air like a guillotine blade.

Sometimes, if their mother tried to say something in Spanish at the dinner table, their father would draw them all — Maura, Vicky and Billy — into her punishment. He'd hunch his shoulders together, digging his fork into his meat or scraping it across the china to collect a pile of rice. They all knew what was coming next. "I'm trying," he'd say, enunciating each syllable, "to listen to Cronkite. At least he has something interesting to say about the world." Or he'd look at them each, one by one, from underneath his eyebrows, twiddling his knife. Then he'd clear his throat, while their mother looked at her plate, fascinated by the broccoli in its congealing butter, or while she shredded her napkin in her lap, and after they'd all held their breath for a good few seconds, he'd announce that "their mother" was "incapable of communicating in any language other than English." Even then, he'd add, she had problems.

After a little speech like that, their father would sit back in his chair and smirk to himself, turning his mouth into a glistening rosebud. It reminded Maura of her grandmother's — his mother's —

powdery, lipsticked pout. His own Spanish was, of course, excellent: he'd lived for a few years in Colombia with a bunch of coffee plantation peasants, researching their social structures. He'd filmed them working in the trees, speaking to each other and to the camera. The peasants spoke several Indian dialects in addition to Spanish, their father told them, which continually stumped the graduate students he assigned to their study. He still liked to watch the films he'd made, sitting in the living-room with his favorite grad students. They'd laugh and repeat the gibberish Indian words together, their father laughing and talking the loudest of them all.

All that Colombia stuff was before Ray, Maura's "biological" father (that was how their father, Joe — Maura's *step*father, to be precise — liked to refer to him), died from cancer. The way Joe told it, he met Ray when he came back from the field. They were working at the same university in New Orleans, and the two of them would hang out at the gym and then at bars, talking about intellectual ideas until "the crack of dawn." Or so Joe said. Maura's mother didn't talk about it.

"Who wants to sing a little song for us?" asked Maura's mother. She leaned back in her seat and drove with her arms straight out in front of her. It looked as if she was trying to stretch herself.

Billy, always silent, slept in the front seat, a tendril of drool dotting the shoulder of his tee shirt. Vicky stared at her book. Maura simply sat.

Maura's mother peeked into the rearview mirror. She expected a show of hands. She was like that, forever the first grade teacher. Their father made fun of her precise way of talking. "Jesus," he'd say, "you've been teaching those idiots for so long that you're becoming one yourself."

He liked to say this kind of thing when they had company. Most of his friends were graduate students with wives — the wives never said anything. Only their mother had the nerve to say anything during those "intellectual" conversations, and then their father would make fun of the way she was talking. "She's just a schoolteacher," he'd say. "You have to forgive her." There would be a little pause as everyone looked first at their father, and then at their mother. Then one of the grad students would say something about jogging, or about someone else in their department, and the talking would go on around their mother's red face and their father's tiny sneer.

Their mother was still worried about the song. "Vicky, what can

you sing for us?" she said, wheedling.

"I know," Vicky said, and started in on the song about the cockroach. Their father had taught her to repeat the Spanish syllables. "La cucaracha, la cucaracha!" As she sang, Vicky bounced around in her seat, knocking the open book onto the floor. Several of its pages crunched. Maura stared out the window.

A colorless accumulation of trees, houses, and asphalt swept past the car. They'd driven, relentlessly, through three states already. And as far as Maura knew, twice that many states or more waited for them, unmoving, while Pittsburgh fled behind them as surely as the blackbirds, ripped away like huge exclamation points from sagging telephone lines. They rode with the windows shut even though the early August heat, frantic with cicadas and flying beetles, seemed to push them back the way they'd come with an equal and opposite force — so that the yellowish soot, stirred up from empty fields, wouldn't blow in over them and the luggage and boxes piled high in the rear; so the dust wouldn't collect on the bags stuffed under their feet, or dirty the damp pillows crammed between them. Even so, a fine silt wormed through the open vents. The air itched and burned in Maura's nostrils.

In another hour or so, their mother promised, they'd pull into a hotel and settle in for the night, unpack the overnight cases and the bathing suits getting moldy in their plastic bags, and haul out the cooler for a supper of hard-boiled eggs and bruised plums. Then they'd swim, letting their mother doze in a chair by the pool, a fat book spread over her face, and when the sun slipped into the ground they'd drip in, at last, to divide the two double beds between them.

Maura, just turned fifteen, was not fond of moving, much less of the idea of moving lock, stock and barrel to a foreign country, nor did she relish long, cramped car trips with the family. Or, for that matter, of picnicking on the same food for three days, of sharing a hotel bed with a sister who kicked in her sleep and a brother who still wet his sheets. After a first night spent sleeping on the very edge of the mattress, under only a corner of the blanket and sheet, and then another spent in the same place, the acidic odor of urine every second pinching her back from sleep, Maura begged their mother to put Billy and Vicky in the same bed. "They'll pull each other's hair out, dear," her mother said, already exasperated at 7 a.m., her wispy bangs matted to her forehead.

"So let them," was Maura's answer. "What do I care?"

Their mother looked disappointed, rather than angry. She just shook her head and put something else in the suitcase.

But that night, the third night out, Maura's mother — after ten hours of driving on flat, melting road — just watched as Maura made Billy and Victoria get into the same bed. And she kept watching, from the other bed, as Maura packed a row of pillows between them. When Maura came over, her mother leaned back without saying anything and lifted the blanket for her to slide in.

Maura's father, Ray, died when she was two. A year later, her mother married Joe, and they went to Mexico for their honeymoon in her mother's Volkswagen bug. Maura stayed with her new grandparents in New Orleans. A hurricane knocked out the lights and blew down oak trees all along the block. In the morning, the air smelled thick and meaty, full of honeysuckle and stale puddles.

Now Maura allowed herself to look at her watch. They'd been driving for almost seven hours. To keep herself from counting, she tried to read her book — *Hitchcock's Best* — but the road snatched the words away from her eyes before she could get a good grip on them, and the sentences oozed into her stomach. They crouched there, heavy. She swallowed and looked out the window — not at the trees and grass but ahead at the unfolding road — her mother all the while shaking her head and saying “Maura, I told you not to read in the car, didn't I? If you get sick, this car will reek to high heaven.”

Maura had always been the one to get sick in the middle of the night. She'd wake up and the bed would be reeling, her stomach closing on itself like a big fist. She remembered stumbling out of bed, once, when Vicky was so little that she still slept in their parents' room. She couldn't make it to the bathroom before she puked all over a hooked cat rug that Grandma Natch, Ray's mother, had made her. Her mother appeared in the doorway, rubbing her eyes and wrinkling her nose. “Oh God,” she sighed. “I hate this. I hate this so much.”

Maura's mother had never been sick until she was pregnant with Vicky. Now the smells and tastes of things that she'd loved when she was with Ray made her violently ill. She was allergic to oysters, for instance, and hard alcohol didn't sit well in her stomach. But when Maura got sick, her mother acted as if it were something that Maura did on purpose. As if Maura did it to punish her — to make her get out of bed in the middle of the night, or to piss Joe off.

Maura did not want to get sick now, so she forced herself to forget the book and trained her eyes out the window, straight ahead, where the road boiled up and evaporated into a sky the color of ruined jeans. May YAHmo Maura, she thought. AHSay cawLORE. It makes hot, hot, hot, Maura thought.

All of Maura's friends in Pittsburgh, amazed by the fact that she was to travel over a thousand miles by car, maybe three thousand, had stood speechless as she showed them the snapshots Joe had taken of the American School, of the neighborhoods where they might be living soon, of the shops and cars and people on the streets, all of which looked like — almost — the shops and cars and streets in Pittsburgh. Only in Spanish. Shuffling the pictures like a deck of cards, passing them around, surrounded by her jealous friends, Maura had convinced herself, at last, that soon everything would be better — that they would go to Mexico and somehow find some balance, some peace.

"We're definitely going to love this," Maura's mother said. "Aren't we?" She reached across the seat and grabbed Billy's knee. He kept his eyes closed.

Those days with the pictures, at her old school, might have been a dream. Listening to her mother talk, Maura could only remember how, each time they moved, more and more disappointments accumulated. No one dared point them out, though. The year they'd spent in New Orleans, Joe had parked them, every weekend, at his mother's house. While he and their mother took sailing lessons, swimming in pools with all of their clothes and shoes on, Joe's mother made them get down on their knees and say their prayers before going to bed at eight, and then made them get up early for three hours of church and Sunday school. They couldn't complain. "If I had to suffer that for eighteen years," Joe said, "so should you."

"Every day will be an adventure in learning," Maura's mother went on now. Mexico would be fabulous for them, yes indeed. Maura pictured the tight, lipless smile her mother used to punctuate such chipper monologues. That kind of talk, all careful around the edges, had always been used to plaster over unpleasant situations. Years back, after another shouting match with their mother in the kitchen, Joe had pulled Maura aside, his hand tight around the uncontrollable tremble in her arm. "Mommy and Daddy are still learning things about each other," he'd said. "Sometimes they have

minor disagreements, but that's all normal in any relationship." Once, Maura had crept down to the third stair to see their mother throw a chair across the kitchen. Her stepfather grabbed her upper arms — the same way he'd held hers to stop the trembling, only much harder — until their mother cried out and fell to the floor, arms up as if praying.

And the next day, at the breakfast table, their father, voice flat as paper, had declared that he and their mother had worked out their "differences." When he said it, Maura's mother turned her face away.

Maura could not believe that this situation was much different. She knew, for instance, that when Joe announced this transfer, her mother had simply smiled — her eyes a terrible brightness — and later that night Maura had heard the familiar rumble of their voices from the bedroom.

"Don't you think so, Maura?" her mother said now.

"What?" Maura leaned forward and wrapped her arms around her mother's headrest.

"The way the road looks. Vicky says it looks like water the way it shines. Isn't that a beautiful way of looking at things?" Maura's mother thought everything Vicky did and said was precious.

"Maybe," Maura said.

"Like a swimming pool," Vicky pronounced. She stuck her legs under the front seat and kicked. Billy dozed on.

"It's the heat, Vicky," Maura's mother said. "The road bakes and distorts the air right above it. That creates the illusion of water, the waves we see in the distance. Doesn't it look refreshing? I could jump right in. Why don't you get the map out, Maura, and we'll see how far the hotel is from here."

Maura groaned. Her mother was always insisting that she look at the map — no matter how hard she looked at it, it persisted in its mess of lines and squiggles. "Where is it?" she said.

"Billy, wake up and hand your sister the map." Maura's mother shook him by the arm. "Hand your sister the map, dear."

Mumbling, he tossed the map behind him. It fell underneath the pillows so that Maura had to dig for it. "God," she muttered. If their father had been in the car, Billy would have been disciplined. But their mother was notoriously lax about enforcing the rules.

"That wasn't very nice," their mother said, taking her eyes from the road and glaring at Billy. "Why did you do that? Do you want me to tell your father?"

Billy shrugged. His hair fell into his eyes.

"Answer me," their mother said.

"No," Billy told her.

Maura wasn't all that concerned about the map falling. She wished it had blown out the window.

But Maura's mother said, "We're all tired and want to get to the hotel soon and you're just holding us up with these senseless antics. Don't do it again. Next time, I will note it down — I will make a list — and give it to your father when we meet him in Brownsville. Do you hear?" She turned in her seat to stare at him, for emphasis, driving without looking, her mouth a straight line.

Billy leaned against the window and crossed his arms.

Maura kept her eyes on the dotted white line. In her mind she willed the car to remain in the lane, but it began to creep out. "Mom, you're veering," she said, "you're veering out of the lines."

Maura's mother swerved back and punched the accelerator. "See what you make me do?" she said.

They sped past a house, then a blue car. The road emptied and Maura leaned forward to check the speedometer: 65. She sat back.

"Do you have that map open?" her mother asked.

"Not yet."

"How many times do I have to ask a thing, Maura? What's wrong with you, anyway?"

"Here it is," Maura said, "I have it," and unfolded the map, spreading it out over her lap and the pillows.

Vicky batted at the map. "Get it out of here," she said.

"Vicky — " Maura's mother peered into the rear view mirror. Her eyebrows creased again, dragging her forehead down to the top of her nose.

"Tell her not to put it here, Mom," Vicky said.

Maura stared at Vicky. She had her grandmother's eyes, everyone said. And her father's mouth. She was sneering.

"Your sister is trying to read the map, dear. Please just bear with it for just a minute longer, will you?"

Vicky punched the edge of the map.

"If I have to inform your father of this when we see him," Maura's mother warned, "I will. I'll tell him all about your selfish behavior and we'll see what he has to say. And I won't be responsible for the consequences."

"Mom!" Vicky wailed.

"That's enough," their mother said. She pressed her foot on the accelerator again: 68. "How many miles, dear?"

Maura stared at the map. "Where are we?"

"Lincoln's birthplace should be somewhere nearby," her mother said. "Look for that."

Nothing looked in the remotest like the place where Lincoln had been born. Unless, Maura thought, he'd been dumped in the middle of a tangle of squiggles and numbers. "I can't find it," she said.

"Oh shit, Maura," her mother said. "Do I have to do it? Can't you see that you're the only one who can do it right now? Can you manage to do this small task for me or do I have to pull over?"

Maura felt the blood rush to the ends of her fingers and all the sounds well up like water in her ears.

"Hand it over," her mother said, sticking one hand over the back of the seat and steering with the other. The speedometer read: 70.

"Wait." Maura searched the map frantically for anything beginning with L or B — as in Lincoln, Birthplace. Nothing.

"Give it here," her mother said, wiggling her fingers over the back of her seat. "Come on."

"Wait," Maura said. "I'm looking." The lines blurred and separated, then blurred again — optical illusions. Like the road itself, ahead, and the sun, messy egg yolk, dropping down into it.

"Give me the map, dammit." Her mother snatched at the air. Maura lifted the open map over the seat and her mother grabbed it, shoved it into the space between her arms and the wheel. "Why is it we can't do anything right?" she muttered.

Maura's mother drove for a few minutes looking up and down between the map and the road. Then she stabbed the paper. "We're here," she said. "We have to get here." She moved her finger up the map, glancing at the road and back again. The car wavered between the shoulder and the dotted line. Maura willed the car straight. Up ahead, metal roofs and tiny swimming pools like lozenges glimmered with distance. All this appeared clear to Maura. And unmoving. Perhaps, she thought, they had become suspended in that one horrible moment, the moment of looking.

Maura's mother pushed the map away, over her head. "Can you at least fold it?" she said. "I'm begging you."

Maura retrieved the crumpled map. Even the refolding of it seemed an impossible task. The creases eluded her. Vicky stared at Maura from across the pillows, scratching at her rash.

“Stop that,” their mother said, into the rear view mirror. “You’re going to draw blood if you don’t quit.”

“Asshole,” Maura whispered, tangling the map together. “Asshole.”

Vicky gave Maura the finger. Her fingernail, ringed with dirt, was bitten down to the cuticle.

“You girls settle down,” their mother said. She tightened her grip on the steering wheel, knuckles whitening. “I do not want to have to give your father an accounting. And I don’t want to have to make threats every five minutes, either.”

Maura leaned back. *May see EN toe mawl*, she thought. *I feel sick.*

And then their mother was screaming: “Son of a bitch,” she screamed, swerved hard to the right — a muffled thud at the side of the car — and then the car careened onto the shoulder, crackling gravel as they shuddered to a stop.

The car and luggage rocked slightly. Everything disappeared into a dust tornado. Their mother hunched over the steering wheel, head down.

“What was it, Mom, what was it?” Maura hadn’t seen anything but the impossible map. “Did we crash? Is there a flat tire?”

“A dog,” she gasped. “We hit a dog.”

“On my side of the car?” Maura’s stomach lurched; her head seemed to float off its shoulders. “No way,” she whispered.

Their mother sat back and, in the rear view mirror, Maura saw that her eyes were glazed, slicked.

“You hit a dog?” Maura said.

Vicky opened her mouth to cry. No sound came out.

Maura said: “Did you kill it?” Maura had always loved dogs — they had all wanted one forever but their father would not allow it. They didn’t have any room for a dog, he said. Dogs were smelly, loud and expensive. They would not feed a dog, he said, or clean up after it; they would kill a dog as surely as they had killed their parakeet, and their hamster, and the fish. But Maura had always assumed that, if they’d gotten a dog, she would have taken care of it and it would have loved her. Even now, when she was fifteen and past hoping, she couldn’t help wishing for a dog. And now they’d killed one.

Maura’s mother unbuckled her belt and opened her door as if something heavy were pushing it closed on her all the while. “Stay in the car,” she told them. She walked around the side of the car, shaking her head and pursing her lips. She paused, hands on hips, by the

back wheel. She put the back of one hand to her cheek, as if checking herself for a fever. Then she turned her back to them.

All three of them got up in their seats and looked out the back, peering over the tiers of luggage, to see their mother walk down the empty two-lane, head sagging. After several hundred feet, she began to blur. They watched her bend over the grass and put her hands on her knees.

Billy had his hand on the door handle.

“Don’t move,” Maura said. “Move and you’re going to get it.” She opened her door.

Vicky whimpered but didn’t try to get out.

Maura stepped onto the loose gravel and felt the land rushing up her legs, the sky pushing her down. Her head still felt loose and empty. She faced the car. She looked at the side, where the plastic molding traveled cleanly, almost to the rear wheel well, before it jumped out from the car like a question mark, or a yelp of pain and surprise. There was a bit of blood smeared on the tip of the molding, and on the rim of the well — also bent — and blood splattered in delicate drops over the hubcap. Maura’s knees turned to water. She bent down, put her head between her knees, and threw up.

“Are you sick?” Vicky stood looking over her.

“No,” Maura said, wiping her mouth.

“Mom killed it,” Vicky said.

“She didn’t kill anything.” Maura kicked gravel over the vomit so their mother wouldn’t see it. “Get in before she comes back.”

All the while their mother had been out by the grass, looking and shaking her head. Now she rose up and crossed the road to a house, where she stood on the porch for another five minutes, talking with someone behind the door. Finally, she started back, head down.

“I can’t figure out who it belongs to,” she said, getting in. “No one’s seen it around here.”

“You killed it,” Vicky said.

“I didn’t kill it, dear, it was an accident. It’s just hurt — it has a little blood on its head and it’s acting funny — but there’s nothing we can do about it now, not knowing who the owner is or where that person could be at this moment.” Their mother talked without pausing for breath, as if there were no end to what she had to say. “I spoke to a woman across the road who thinks the dog is a stray. She said it’s in heat, and maybe it was running from another dog when it barreled out into the road like that without looking.” She turned her

head a bit to see Vicky. "It ran right into us, dear, I couldn't avoid it even though I turned out of the way. The whole car is dented."

She turned back and said, "Your father will have a fit. Shit." She pounded on the steering wheel with both fists.

"We should take him to a doctor and save his life." Billy's voice was flat. "We should get him and take him to the hospital. Go back, Mom."

"We can't, dear," their mother said. "It's just not possible. First of all, there's no room in the car, and second, the dog is hurt and very scared. It was snapping and growling and wouldn't let me come near it. For all we know, it has rabies. Do you want me to get infected with rabies?"

"Go back," Billy said.

"Do you think it'll die?" Maura had to know.

Their mother sighed and dropped her shoulders. "I don't know. It looks bad."

"Put it in the car with me," Vicky ordered. "I'll hold it on my lap."

"Go back, Mom," Billy said. "Mom, go back."

Their mother shook her head. "I'm sorry, honey," she said.

Billy slouched in his seat for a second and then, without warning, slammed his feet into the glove compartment. Their mother reached out and put a hand on his knee, gently, but he pulled back and smashed the dash again.

The same nothing filled the car that had filled it before. It was hung like a great curtain between them and whatever might happen once they got going. But it seemed impossible to get going — they might never move again from that spot, Maura thought; this evil land would always be around them with its yellow stillness, and the dog would always be behind them, growling to itself, bleeding. None of them would ever be able to speak again.

Their mother said: "I'm sorry, kids, I really am. But that's the way it is." She started the engine and put the car in gear, then let it roll slowly from the shoulder to the highway. They were definitely moving. Something like a bird yelled out, as if in answer.

"There's nothing we can do," their mother said, still coasting. Perhaps she'd been crying, Maura thought, at the side of the road, when she had her hands on her knees — but now she was dead serious, dry, her shoulders held straight ahead. Maura imagined that she was a statue in the front seat, her lips and cheeks blending into grey stone.

At the bottom of the short hill, the sun gathered and spread out into the fields in a red lake. Maura's mother went on in the same even voice: "If it dies, it dies, and we can't worry about it. We just have to get where we're going, that's all — just get where we're going."

And then it was as if they were truly diving toward water. Bloody waves reared up before them as they came, great red wings of water that parted with the road and vanished on either side, into the motionless trees. ❖