Arts & Humanities

Next Exit: A Short Story

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Anna and Elena Balbusso

The children needed school uniforms, Marian said. They would have to go downtown.

This was the third year that she and her family had lived in Ohio. They had a small house near the college where her husband Daniel taught.

She looked at her father. “We could take the bus into the city.” It sounded more like a question than a suggestion.

Francis had arrived a month before, his first trip to the States. “The train is costly?”

“Four of us . . . ” Marian said. “Or I suppose we could drive.”

Her father’s visit had catapulted her back into an uneasy space, between having daughters and being one. She could not clap her hands and say, hurry up, let’s go. She could not buckle the girls into the car with any certitude. Her father — she could not prevent herself from feeling — must be consulted, his authority guarded, his preferences laid bare. But what did he know of buses? What did he know of the six-lane expressway, its confusing loops of exits, the trucks that made her nervous? How could he predict the way her daughters would behave if the outing lasted too long and they were overtired? Six and eight years old, too big to carry, pulling at her arms as they waited for a bus. There would be shopping bags, she considered.

“You do want to come along, right, Dad? We can get you a few shirts.”

Was he enjoying himself? He would go back to India in another fortnight, his suitcase filled — everything that was easier to get in the States, cheaper or better-made, tinned foods that weren’t available in Bombay, gifts for her mother. Essie had stayed behind because she had come three times already, and the house could not be left unoccupied, even for six weeks. But she was constantly evoked, conjured between them in what Marian bought and her father would carry home.

“Should we go now, you think? Are you ready?” Her father had finished his tea, she saw. “We can drive, okay? That way the girls can sleep in the car on the way back if they’re tired. Or we can stop somewhere if there’s anything you want to see.”

But she would have to tell him what he might like to see.

“Yes, yes. Good,” he said. “Driving is better.”

“We won’t get tired,” announced Marian’s elder daughter, to whom the idea of rest had become an insult. Nicole was usually in motion. When she stood completely still, as she did now in the doorway, she seemed to her mother as solid and unmovable as a goat. Tara was quiet, generally willing to wait and see what understanding her mother and sister would hammer out. “Mom! We won’t get tired.”

“I’m glad,” said Marian. She wished her daughters had not picked up this *mom*, this slow, lolling American way of referring to her. She wished, in front of her father, that they still called her *mum*, as they had before they went to school. “These American accents!” she said to her father, laughing so that he would laugh too. Then she sent

both girls, quick, quick, to wash their hands and faces and climb in the car.

She was, Francis thought, a competent but slightly distracted driver. She accelerated in quick bursts and did not always leave enough time for smooth braking. She memorized routes without quite knowing the logic of where she was going. But the roads were good, the traffic laws respected far better than in Bombay, where driving was a matter of nerve and horn blasts. He had grown accustomed to her way of drawing to an intersection. He sat in the front seat and twisted around occasionally to revel in the sight of his granddaughters. They sat with books open on their laps, looking out their windows and alerting one another when they saw dogs, cats, the sort of car they called a bug, the rare good luck of a horse. Tara sang to herself.

They had reached the highway when he noticed a light flashing red on the dashboard.

“What’s that? We need fuel?”

Marian eyed the gauge. “Oh, shoot, we’ve passed the gas station. Should we turn back? We’d have to get off at the next exit and turn around, I’m not sure where. Or there’s one where we get off for Sears …”

She changed lanes with a worried glance in the rearview mirror. Large green signs hung over the highway and Francis read one aloud. “Is that the one you want? You know the route from there?”

“No, but I can ask.” The red light, which flickered once as they crested a hill, was again solid. Marian laughed, a nervous sound, and spoke with false cheer. “What do you think, girls? Will we make it?”

Had she been nervous as a child? He didn’t think so. Obedient. Cautious, perhaps. Francis wished he could remember better. When he thought of her he saw a tall, thin schoolgirl, long legs, dusty socks and shoes, a watchful expression on her soft, young face. He had wondered sometimes what she was thinking but without any notion of asking; their conversation did not follow such courses. Even now, overhearing the lively talk of his grandchildren, it did not occur to him to feel regret. It had been enough, in those days, to see her with her brothers or sitting at the table reading. She had worked hard at her studies. Sometimes, when Essie had gone out of the room, he used to put a hand on Marian’s shoulder and tell her: *Enough. Go*

and rest your eyes. In such moments, roused suddenly from her books, she looked up at him with no sign of guardedness, none of her usual reserve, and he was shocked to see how beautiful his girl had become. *Go and run in the garden.*

“What do you think, Dad?”

He peered at the fuel gauge. “Better to be safe.”

The girls slid closer together. They seemed both smaller and older, staring. Tara had stopped singing and her round face was grave — an echo of her mother’s face at that age, Francis realized.

“How long has it been on?” Marian asked.

He could not tell her.

They had nearly reached the exit ramp, but another car had drawn up alongside them on the passenger side.

“Should I go?”

“This fellow is blocking you,” Francis said. “There, go!”

But she hesitated and missed her chance.

“Never mind, Dad, we’ll make it to the next one. There’s always a little extra. Cross your fingers, girls!”

Nicole bounced up and down on the seat. “We’ll make it!”

First came the noise like a knocking inside a pipe; then came a hill. Tara imagined riding her bicycle up such a painful grade, training wheels jutting to either side behind her, legs aching as she pedaled. The car felt quiet beneath them, suddenly powerless. Nicole threw her body forward, as though to help the car reach the crest. Tara looked at her grandfather, who was shaking his head so slightly that she could not tell what he meant by it. Her mother’s face was strained, her voice thin. “Oh, God. I’ve got to get over.”

They trailed to a stop in the breakdown lane just below a road that crossed overhead. A stretch of dun-colored concrete sloped sharply up to where the overpass began. There were pairs of thick, round pilings at the top and bottom, and

the slope itself was smooth and shaded.

Her mother tried to start the car once, then again.

“It won’t go. We’ve run out,” her grandfather said.

“One more try …”

Her mother turned the key in the ignition again. Instead of rumblings came a flat-sounding click, like something final locking into place.

“It’s empty,” her grandfather said. Her mother said nothing. She withdrew the key and let her hand rest heavily in her lap.

“What will happen?” Nicole asked.

For a moment her mother didn’t answer. Cars careened past, rocking their own in tremors and making a windy noise that reminded Tara of planes. The road looked different now that they were still, foreign and menacing. On the pavement she could see bits of black and white and dark, oily spots on the roughened surface instead of a smooth, unbroken stream of gray. The white lines that swam together in motion had split into discrete lengths. The whole world seemed flattened, elongated, full of new distances, and Tara herself felt taut and hollow, like the cat’s-cradle tricks that Nicole had shown her, string looped around fingers, hooked and crossed and woven into figures; all lines stretched tight with nothing in between. Where was her father in his office at school? she wanted to know with sudden urgency. How far away?

But she didn’t ask. She took her sister’s hand. “What will we do?” Nicole spoke up again.

Even her grandfather appeared to be waiting for her mother to speak.

“Well, we’re stuck!” her mother said at last. She turned around and smiled at them.

Tara was not convinced by this performance. But Nicole said “Stuck!” in a satisfied tone.

“I’ll have to walk to the next exit,” her mother said. “Right? Dad, you’ll stay with them?”

Her grandfather was frowning. “Why not all go?”

“Dad, they’ll be exhausted. They’ll only slow me down.” She paused. “What else can I do?”

The sound of her mother not being sure was like a note struck off-key. Tara began to hum beneath her breath, a familiar song, the song her father sang to her when she could not sleep. A fox ran away into town and took a goose and a hen, *All for his little ones, eight, nine, ten.*

“It’s safe to walk on this road? A woman alone is safe?”

“Totally safe.” Her mother spoke firmly for the first time since they began watching the fuel gauge. She had set herself in motion again, reaching for her handbag. “I’ll call Daniel and he’ll come and get me. We can pick up a gallon of gas for the car. I’ll leave you the keys, Dad, and there are snacks here in case the girls get hungry.” She gave him baggies of carrot sticks and graham crackers, a roll of fruit gums. “Girls, be good for Grandpa. Do exactly as he says, no talking back.”

Tara felt a slippery fear; her mother was leaving.

“How long will it take?” asked Nicole.

“An hour at least,” Grandpa said to her mother. “Two miles up the road, in this heat, and then waiting for Daniel to come.”

“It might be faster,” her mother said, but then her voice trembled a little. “I’m sorry, Dad.”

There were plenty of miles to go that night, before he reached the town-o. Tara felt the hour stretching like the lines in the road, breaking apart into so many long minutes that she could not see the end of them.

They watched her go. Marian had told them they could get out of the hot car and sit in the shade. She had pointed to a line in the pavement, about a third of the way up the slope. “Not past there, you understand me,” she told the girls. “Stay above that line unless Grandpa takes you and you’re holding his hands.”

Yes, yes. They were frightened, solemn.

“I’ll be as quick as I can, Dad.”

They stood clutching his hand as she walked. Twice she turned back and waved. She was wearing thin leather slippers from home, Francis noticed, and a plain cotton white kameez with churidar. Her shadow kept a crouching pace beside her. She grew smaller and smaller and disappeared over the crest of the hill.



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The girls were quiet. “Come,” said Francis. They had brought their books out of the car; Nicole held them against her chest. “Come. Who will read me a story?”

They sat on the slope. The book was open in Francis’s lap and Nicole read in a loud, singsong voice. She put her legs out, but Tara leaned against Francis, curled into something nearly as small as the way he thought of her still, or the way he sometimes liked to think of her mother.

Marian had only walked a short distance, five minutes or so, when a car pulled up gently in front of her. She hesitated, but the man had rolled down his window. He was in his forties, she guessed, a black man in a short-sleeve button-down shirt. “That your family back there?”

She nodded, reluctant to speak, then felt this was inadequate. “Yes, under the bridge.”

“Thought so,” he said. “You look like you belong to them. Where you all from?”

“We live here. My husband’s at the university. But I’m from India.”

“India!” He looked at her appraisingly. “How do you like it here?”

This was a question she’d encountered hundreds of times before, at faculty gatherings, dinner parties, lunches with other women. She belonged to a book club, an international group, an art-museum league, a parents’ advisory board. She had cooked large batches of samosas and dressed up in a sari and given talks about India in the girls’ school. She was, by nature, a cheerful person, not given to flights of nostalgia, innately well-mannered. She was very happy here, she was accustomed to answering.

But the man looked at her, a stranger to whom she owed nothing. His elbow was out the window, his face broad with a strong chin and — was it her imagination? — kind eyes.

“I miss home,” she told him.

He nodded slowly. The sun beat down on the pavement and the top of her head. When he smiled it was not with pity.

“My name is Willy. Let me give you a lift.”

She did not think of what her father would say, or her husband. She got in the car, buckled her seat belt, and thanked him.

When Nicole had read both books, she ran to look at the pilings. Tara did not follow. She got up and watched the cars flicking past on the highway. Francis, whose hip had begun to ache, got up also.

“What’s wrong, darling? Not feeling well?”

She stood before him, already as tall as his belt, and spoke with both formality and forgiveness; she knew he could not help her. “I want my father,” she said.

He looked past her, to the highway. For a moment he imagined it was Marian speaking, or his sons — one at sea and one he didn’t know where — or the daughter he had lost before she was a week old. Sometimes he looked at Nicole, who did not resemble her mother or father, and wondered if she might have his own lost

daughter’s eyes or nose or chin. He would not recognize any of her features.

“Grandpa?”

“What is it?”

“How far is two miles?”

He looked at her — this child of his daughter’s, a child he could not have imagined the day Marian left home. He and Essie had waited with Marian in the airport lounge, her eyes large and terrified, and he could think of nothing to say to ease her fright. “You have some cash in your purse? Check and see. You have your coat?” Essie was holding their daughter’s hand in two of her own, and suddenly Marian had reached out to touch his arm.

“You’ll write, Dad?”

He had meant to, of course, but he had never been good with his pen.

“We can get you a ticket to come home for Christmas,” he told her. Essie frowned at him, but if Marian knew he was lying, she didn’t let on. Her eyes filled with tears, and she held his hand. “You’ll let us know if you need anything?”

“I will.”

But she had managed on her own; she met Daniel and married and had these children. This was the first time, it occurred to Francis, that they had been left entirely in his care.

“I’m king of the world!” called Nicole, who was at the top of the slope.

Tara pointed to the place where her mother had disappeared. “Is that almost two miles?”

“Two miles, you want to know?” He spread his finger and thumb. “In the whole wide world, two miles is this much only. Nothing at all, see? Any minute, Mummy will come.”

“How many miles away is Daddy?”

He spread his fingers a little farther. “A small bit more.”

She stepped closer. “Where is Grandma? Where is Uncle Jude?”

Francis stretched his hands as far as they would go; he felt the pull in his chest and arms. For a moment he stood like that, and then he let his arms drop to his sides. Cars were passing; what would they think of an old fool with his arms out like a scarecrow’s?

“A long way off,” he said. “Many, many miles.”

Tara nodded, yes. When was the next time he would see this child, he wondered. How old would she be? How would her face have changed?

“But we can go on the plane.” She smiled, a funny little triangle of a smile. Then Nicole called her, and she spun away to join her sister.

Willy turned to Marian. “I have a boy myself.”

“Oh, yes?”

“He lives with his mother. I see him weekends.” He looked at her. “You’re worried about those kids of yours, I know. But we’re just about there.” They were already slowing to turn off the highway and almost at once a gas station announced itself, the sign towering above the road on tall posts. What would her father think of this episode, Marian wondered. How would he remember his visit? It might be his last. The journey was difficult for him.

“Here we go,” Willy said. “I got a can in the back. We’ll have you back with your family in a jiffy.”

Marian rolled down the window. The wind was warm and stirred the hair from her shoulders and suddenly she felt a new lightness. The crisis had passed. The girls were safe; already she was on her way back to them. Her father would be surprised to see her again so soon.

“What’s your son’s name?” she asked.

Nicole had devised a game. They raced across the top of the slope, from one piling to the other, crossing paths. Tara began to sing to herself again. *So the fox and his wife, without any strife, they cut up the goose with a fork and a knife.* She was beginning to feel hungry. Soon she would ask Grandpa for carrots.

Marian could see them up ahead. The girls were running, two shadowy forms joining together, amoebic, indiscernible, until they pulled apart again. Her father was sitting midway up the slope, and Marian was pained to see how tiny he seemed, washed up on this great bleached highway like a bone or pebble, a bit of driftwood. All her worry about what he must think of her drained away and left simply this: her father who needed her, who would soon be leaving.

“There,” she said urgently to Willy, who was already gliding toward them.

Cars blasted past, each its own punch of sound. Trucks bore down on them and roared away with a loud and terrible din. When Francis closed his eyes, the noise seemed to become a wall of water, boiling and churning, hurtling forward with a force so great that even out of its path, he could be knocked off his feet. He called the children, but they were like children at the beach, intent on their play and unafraid in a way that made him call their names again. *Come closer. Closer.* The cars and trucks sped on, grim-faced and steely, a current too fast and powerful for him to see properly. Was Marian in one? Another? He could not pick out faces, could not do anything but hold to the sound of his grandchildren laughing, laughing as though nothing could ever harm them, while he closed his eyes against the blur of speed. It rushed past like the torrent of years that had carried away his children and left him waiting by the side of the road for one to circle back and find him.

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