

## Checkpoint

When I met Ieva's parents, they were already so settled in the world that you would never have known they were from somewhere else. They had a little blue house and a yard that Mr. Smith watered every day. Every year they went overboard on the holiday décor and Mrs. Smith would sometimes appear in our kitchen to beg for a cup of grain. They took on a pair of pets, the first when I was young and the second a few years later; and then there was Ieva, who had perfect grades even after taking the lead in the school play. Judged from afar, they were a trio of exiles who had been thoroughly assimilated. But it was different if you knew them.

Ieva was the first girl I had ever seen. We knew that humans were bigendered, of course, but I didn't believe it. An urban myth, I decided, like the one about them needing to eat brains to survive. Then they appeared at the neighborhood meeting. Mr. and Mrs. Smith had gone out of their way to look as androgynous as everyone else but Ieva had entered a rebellious phase and arrived wearing fitted clothes. I was fascinated right away. She was so lumpy! Everything about her was exotic, especially the fact that *she* was a *she*. I began carrying the government pamphlets in my pocket, the ones that taught us all the new watchwords. *She. Her. Girl*. Nobody has ever been more fascinated by a pronoun than I was in those days; if I'm a writer today, it's because Ieva forced me to confront the great intricacies of my parent tongue.

I was eager to learn how the Smiths had come to be living here, but my guardians discouraged me from asking too many questions. "As far as we're concerned," said Prina, "They're just people who bought a little blue house."

Joel Fishbane

“Dirty things,” remarked Praina, peering out the window. “Which one’s the male?”

“The taller one.”

“But why did they come here at all?” I asked.

“They’re exiles,” came the reply. “Criminals in their own world. They chose us over jail.”

“But what did they do?” I asked.

Prina shrugged. “Remember the watchcry: it’s impolite to pry.”

Fortunately, Ieva didn’t think it was impolite to pry. I was fascinated by humans and she was happy to answer my questions. I had already started learning human tongues – mostly so I could watch their films – but it was Ieva who made me fluent. Most of our conversations happened over text. Ieva was ashamed of her voice, which sounded so different from ours. We had been born in the same city – she was what the Homeland Council called an Immigrant-Born – and the world her parents had left was as mysterious to her as it was to me. Ieva’s parents were terrified of being ostracized. Desperate to fit into our way of life, they almost completely denied their own. This only sparked Ieva’s curiosity. Prohibition made the heart fonder and by the time Ieva and I fell in love, she had become an expert on all things human. Believing Earth to be some lush paradise, she could not understand why her parents said they wouldn’t return even if they could. I couldn’t answer this either but I told Ieva I’d go anywhere she wanted. That’s when we began planning our escape.

We always texted when making plans - this made it impossible for anyone to overhear our plans. Secrecy was essential. Humans were not full-fledged citizens. They could not vote or own property. Romance was also forbidden, less it lead to children. Physiologically, such offspring were possible. But it was said they would only lead to a polluted genetic tree; to allow it, said, was nothing short of race suicide.

*My mother has a brother on Earth, Ieva wrote one day.*

I wrote back: *You think this brother is someone we can rely on?*

*Humans take family very seriously.*

*And we don't?*

*Well, YOUR'S don't.*

She was right. My guardians had never wanted offspring and treated me as a burden. They were not-so-secretly counting the days until I left.

Ieva wrote, *He'll take us in. I'm his NEPHEW. Wait. NIECE. I'm his NEICE.* (Not having grown up among them, Ieva could be as confused by these words as the rest of us.)

The brother's name was Uncle Cas and he was responsible for bringing Ieva's parents together. They came from two separate countries and met at the checkpoint along the border. Ieva's mother had come to deliver sandwiches to Uncle Cas while her father was there to find work. He had heard they needed someone to do repairs.

Ieva told me her father had lived near the checkpoint all his life. Yet until the day he went there, he had never seen it. He had always imagined that the border between the two countries would be like the one between houses: clearly distinct, defined only by a change in color or condition. In fact, when he reached the checkpoint, he found the

Joel Fishbane

demarcation line to be so ill-defined that it was difficult to tell one side from the other. Ieva said that this particular checkpoint divided a roadway connecting two bordertowns. On either side was desert, inhospitable and patrolled at all times. The men posted there were often in danger, a fact which had led Ieva to believe that her Uncle Cas was a man of worth.

The checkpoint was one of the furthest outposts, Ieva told me. That alone must mean Uncle Cas was someone responsible because he was someone they knew they could trust.

*That he was someone WHO could trust?*

*The government, I guess.*

*All right. We'll go to Uncle Cas.*

*First we have to find him, wrote Ieva. My mother won't tell me where he is.*

Not all the humans who lived with us were exiles, of course. Many had come to us on their own. They treated the exiles with disdain, which is why Ieva didn't have many human friends.

Mrs. Smith had been a translator and now worked at the aero-port in security. She was useful: more exiles were arriving every month. A lot of Earth's convicts were choosing our world over imprisonment. Ieva told me that humans used to do things like this all the time. When they had discovered new lands, they'd give convicts the choice of going there. Like now, the condition was they were never allowed to return. Nobody seemed to mind, she told me. It was like getting a second chance.

Mr. Smith had been given a job in construction, a typical job for human males who were strong and had spectacular endurance. Stern and humorless, he always seemed like a stormcloud ready to break. But during the holidays, all this changed. He loved to drink, a habit Ieva and I always encouraged because it meant he would tell us things he might have otherwise kept to himself. One day he told us how Ieva was created.

“You may be Immigrant-Born,” he said, “but you were made on Earth, when we were in prison. We were allowed a private cell once a month.”

For a long time, I never asked why they had been convicted. I didn’t dare. But during First Summer’s Festival – our *last* First Summer’s Festival, as it turned out – I became more daring with my questions. Ieva and I had become anxious. Invitations from academies were coming in and we were worried about being separated.

“I heard that if you ever go back, they’ll put you to death,” I remarked.

“That’s right,” said Mr. Smith. “There was once a price on my head. I was worth a small fortune.”

It was just the two of us; Ieva was lost somewhere inside the house. Mr. Smith poured another drink and began telling me how he and Mrs. Smith had almost escaped. There had been a jailbreak and the two of them had fled across the checkpoint, the same one where they had met.

“We had stolen papers,” Mr. Smith said. “My fake name was Sheridan Hart.”

“Didn’t the border guards recognize you?”

“We were in *disguise*,” grinned Mr. Smith. “We hid aboard a cargo ship. But they found us. We had these bracelets around our ankles and they had sensors in them. We tried to mask the signal, but it didn’t work. You can’t beat those sensors.”

Mrs. Smith appeared suddenly, wearing a blue smock and the traditional crown of summer leaves laced into her short hair. “I hope you’re not boring him,” she said.

“Our young neighbor is not a *him*,” slurred Mr. Smith.

She shook her head. “Go tell Ieva that we’re leaving.”

“She can stay if she wants,” I offered.

“Yes, let her stay,” said Mr. Smith. “She should have *fun!*”

Mrs. Smith didn’t have the strength to argue. “I don’t want her coming home past dark.”

“You could have sold me for the price of a small house!” Mr. Smith whispered. Then he released one of those bizarre human belches and Ieva’s mother dragged him away.

I found Ieva standing by the food table. All the guests had brought food, but she was dutifully eating her mother’s vegetable pudding. It was a local recipe that had not been done well: it was gelatinous and sour.

“Your father’s drunk again,” I said.

Ieva shook her head. She was in a green dress and was tottering on a pair of shoes that had been imported across the universe from a place called *Italy*. I decided to ask her to dance. A live band was playing a waltz – the style was human, though the composer wasn’t – and we danced at a respectable distance. I tried to meet her eyes, but she was looking at her feet. She was trying to count.

“He told me about the jailbreak,” I said. “Apparently they had fake passports. Your father was called Sheridan Hart.”

“And my mother was Ieva. That’s where they got the name.” I liked dancing with Ieva because it meant she was forced to speak out loud. Her voice was abrasive. Sharp, like clanging metal. “Do you think Uncle Cas gave them the passports?”

“I don’t know. Your mother showed up before I could ask.”

Ieva scowled. “This is impossible.”

“We don’t really need Uncle Cas, do we?”

“Where would we go? It’s not just a foreign land. It’s a different world.”

A week later, Ieva broke into her father’s computer and stole several pictures we had never seen. In those images, I saw Earth for the first time. I also saw the checkpoint, which stood lopsided in the sand, almost at the same angle that the soldiers wore their caps. Behind the building, the sky was dark: it looked like the picture had been taken just before a storm.

*Apparently, on Earth, the sky ALWAYS looks like that,* wrote Ieva.

Another image was of Mr. Smith on the day he met his future wife. He looked young and thin with an oversized head. The image was taken by the soldiers at the checkpoint as a precaution in case he tried to run into the mountains: they had taken his picture and forced him to hand over his money and identity cards. After his picture was taken, Mr. Smith was given a bucket and told to scrub the windows and the floors and the giant signs that told people all the things that were forbidden. Sometimes later, the future Mrs. Smith arrived with sandwiches for Uncle Cas. The sandwiches were wrapped in paper, just as they would be years later when she made lunch for her daughter. They were also tied with a string which Uncle Cas, like Ieva, would always return so it could be used

Joel Fishbane

again (the paper, it was agreed, was a lost cause). Ieva only ever got one sandwich but twenty years earlier Mrs. Smith had made enough for every soldier at the checkpoint.

Uncle Cas told her that too, Ieva wrote. It was an act of charity. There wasn't enough food. Everyone was living on rations.

*Because there was a famine, I remembered. But it's over, right?*

Ieva assured me there was enough food for everyone. I had heard the same thing. The latest information from the traders was that the peace had held. But Mr. Smith was always telling us not to believe anything we heard. "Nothing but propaganda!" he always said. "They're worried about disrupting trade!" Ieva believed this was bias. They were exiles, forbidden to ever return. It was more comforting to think the punishment was a blessing in disguise.

You'll see, Ieva wrote now. *Uncle Cas probably lives in one of the big cities and he'll help us find our own apartment and I'll get a job and you'll be a big author. They probably don't have any writers like you. You'll be famous.*

*If we can even get there, I replied.*

I wasn't optimistic. Getting Ieva off the planet would not be easy. My people could come and go but the only humans who left were traders and politicians. But it was in these people that Ieva had placed her hopes.

*Those traders and politicians are always bringing their families, Ieva explained. When we get to the aero-port, we'll say I'm someone's daughter. And since the law doesn't let exiled humans travel alone, we'll tell them you're my chaperone.*

I had a terrible thought. *That's not all I am to you, is it? Someone to be your chaperone?*

Ieva saw I was in earnest. She put away her handset and spoke to me out loud, her clanging voice like a birdsong in my ears. “Don’t ever think that.” Her manicured hand fell into my gnarled one. “This is my birth-home, too. You think it’s easy for me to just leave it behind?”

I squeezed her hand.

“Over there it will be like heaven,” she continued. “Over there, they believe in freedom.”

During Third Summer’s Festival, Mr. Smith drank too much again and I encouraged him to tell me more about Uncle Cas. I asked him more about the day he met his wife.

“I smiled at her,” Mr. Smith told me. “But that only scared her.”

“Why would a smile scare her?”

“I suppose because it was friendly!” Mrs. Smith was always on her guard. At the checkpoint, she was the only girl among men who were used to taking what they liked.

“Like what?” I asked.

Mr. Smith suddenly looked like someone who knew he had said too much.

“Human men sometimes coerce women into...things,” he replied vaguely.

“Oh. You mean like marriage?”

“Yes, certainly. Like marriage.” He drained his cup right to the end.

I poured him another. “So what happened after you smiled at her?”

“I might as well have pulled a weapon. She threw a sandwich at me. Not that I was any better. I must have looked at that sandwich like it was a trap.”

“Did you eat it?”

“Of course! I was starved. My whole life, I will never forget that sandwich. It had cheese and pork and tomato. She made the bread herself.”

That sandwich started their courtship. Mr. Smith was hired as a janitor and each time, Mrs. Smith returned, she brought an extra sandwich. Eventually they devised a way to meet in secret and over a period of many weeks, they fell in love.

“But we didn’t dare speak of it,” he said. “The family had promised her to someone else, some important politician. There was a great war, a global one, and since then everyone had taken sides. We were like Romeo and Juliet.”

“Who?”

“Never mind.”

One afternoon, Mrs. Smith arrived at the checkpoint and, as always, delivered a special lunch to Mr. Smith. He was in a spirited mood and in-between bites of pork and tomato, he grabbed her by the waist and kissed her neck. She laughed and did not resist. But her laughter brought Uncle Cas, who emerged suddenly from around the corner. Mr. Smith told me he was a squat fellow who was letting the hair on his face grow long. Then he told me about his waistline, packed tight with the tools of the trade: a club, a radio, a pistol with a scratched handle. It was a makeshift utility belt, with loops and holsters that Mrs. Smith, as a young girl, had stitched and re-stitched several times.

“He came right at us,” said Mr. Smith. “I had never been so scared. I remember thinking: well at least I’ve eaten. I’ve eaten and if I have to fight, I’ll have the strength.”

“But you didn’t have to fight Uncle Cas, did you?”

Joel Fishbane

“I never got the chance,” he said. “Mrs. Smith came to my rescue. She told Cas that it wasn’t what it seemed. But apparently Cas had been following us for weeks. He already knew all about it.”

Now I was scared. Uncle Cas wasn’t sounding anything like who Ieva had described. “What happened then?” I asked.

“What do you think? He came at me and struck me in the face. I fell over. Mrs. Smith, she tried to stop him. But Cas only turned on her too.”

“Uncle Cas wouldn’t do something like that,” I said. “You’re just making it up .”

“What do you know?” he snapped, suddenly furious. “You don’t know him. He broke her *rib*.”

I didn’t want to hear anymore. “You should go home.”

But Mr. Smith had grabbed my arm. His face had darkened and he looked cruel. “Listen to me. He was beating us. The others came and watched. They *laughed*. That’s the way it can be down there. You tell Ieva that. You tell her it’s no place for a girl to live.”

“Why would I tell her that?”

“Your kind are all terrible liars. I know what the two of you are up to. Just remember, my wife works at the border. Ieva will never get off this rock. If I have to be stuck here, so does she. You tell her *that* too.”

Then Mr. Smith walked away. He didn’t stagger and I knew then that he hadn’t been drunk. He hadn’t said too much at all--he had intended to tell me every word he had said.

Joel Fishbane

Ieva refused to believe anything her father had said. *He's just trying to scare us,* she wrote. *You heard him. He's an exile. He wants us to be exiles too.*

It was a few days before the Last Summer's Festival and she had decided it would be easier to look for Cas once we were on Earth. There was a trading vessel leaving at the end of the week.

*Best of all, it leaves in the middle of the night. My mother won't be working.*

*Won't someone recognize you?*

Ieva doubted it. She had never met anyone her mother worked with.

A few days later, Ieva obtained false visas through some dubious person she refused to reveal. They were good forgeries. I had been given a fake name, which would make me harder to track. Like her parents before us, we would cross our own checkpoint as a pair of fictions. I was called Perius; she was an ambassador's daughter named Jane.

To cross the border in those days, you had to take a ferry out to the Spindle Isle. This was the base for the Lewis Spindle, an elevator that rode a giant tether up to the aero-port more than a hundred kilometres above the ground. I'm using the human measurement because that's what Ieva used when she told me the history of the Lewis Spindle, which she relayed on the ferry ride, writing long sentences into her handset before hitting SEND. This gave me plenty of time to stare over the guardrails at my disappearing city. It was only now that I was truly struck by the magnitude of my decision. My friends, my relations, even my unhappy guardians--I had given them all only a cursory farewell. And all for this Ieva, this human, this *girl*.

When we arrived at the aero-port, we found it was nearly deserted. This worried me, because it meant Ieva really stood out – she might have been one of the only humans

there. Our false visas survived the first gauntlet: the ticket sentry studied Ieva, but it was more out of curiosity than concern. As we checked our luggage, though, I was struck with a premonition that something would keep me from ever seeing my clothing again. Ieva did not seem to have any such fears: she breezily handed over her bag and stuffed the claim ticket away with a careless air. At the security gate, we emptied our pockets and then stripped to our underclothes. This was a new policy which we treated blithely as a nuisance of travel; in fact, we were each fully aware of how exposed we were, not just to the sentries but also to each other. We could have asked for a private examination, but that would have entailed separation. So instead we handed over our clothes which were whisked away for sterilization.

Barefoot and almost nude, we passed through the scanning gate. Ieva's underwear was a dark blue and there was a tear-shaped hole below her waistband. For some reason I focused on this small spot of flesh throughout the ordeal, perhaps because it kept my mind off myself – my flabby legs, my white belly, the exposed scales that ran along my spine.

We were getting dressed when we were approached by a pair of sentries. "You'll have to come with me," said the first. Tall and thick, like my Praina.

"Is there a problem?" I asked.

"Standard security check."

"Our things...."

"They'll be returned."

Then the sentries led us through an ominous black door. Here we were separated in a quick and skillful way; Ieva was driven down the hall while the first sentry ushered

me into another room. I was left alone for nearly the entire afternoon. I could do nothing but sit and bite my claws. I imagined some terrible farce in which our visas bore the names of terrorists or murderers wanted by the law. Poor Ieva! Without her handset, she would have to speak out loud. Then she would do what she always did in those moments: mumble and whisper. All her lovely ferocity would be gone.

My panic was finally interrupted by the sound of footsteps. I expected some gruff sentry but to my surprise, it was Mrs. Smith who came inside. She was in her uniform and her hair was in a bun as tight as her face. She had a terrible menace: even the emblem of her security badge radiated danger.

With a curt nod she dismissed the other sentry.

“I thought you didn’t work tonight,” I said.

She didn’t reply to this. Instead she said, “You’ll be happy to know you aren’t here for the reasons you think you are. This really was just a standard security check. We’ve been implementing them for months.”

“I don’t understand.”

Mrs. Smith reached into her pocket and took out a pair of handsets. I knew at once that they were ours. Ieva’s protective blue cover was all too distinct.

“For security, we’ve started going through people’s communication devices. Reading sent mail, rifling through inboxes, that sort of thing. Most people have started deleting everything before they get to the aero-port. You didn’t.”

“It’s how Ieva likes to talk,” I mumbled.

“I know. The two of you also like to write in human tongues. That’s why they stopped you and dragged me down here: they needed a translator. You’re lucky. If you two wrote like everyone else, you’d both be in jail.”

I suddenly realized what it was Mrs. Smith had read. Both Ieva and I were in the habit of keeping every text we had ever sent. Our handsets were, in effect, witnesses to our relationship. Now Mrs. Smith was, too.

I looked down at the table, certain I could hear my heart and blood. “How much did you read?”

“All of it. Why do you think you’ve been waiting so long? You’re in a lot of trouble, you know. False papers. A relationship with a human. Not to mention the fact you’re helping an exile escape.”

I looked up. “Ieva’s not an exile.”

“I’m afraid she is,” said Mrs. Smith.

“She was born here. She’s not a criminal.”

“Earth’s justice system is a little different from yours,” said Mrs. Smith. “Our exile includes any children we might have. We’ve never told her, of course. I don’t like talking about it. The truth is, I don’t like talking about what I did.”

I didn’t have to ask what this was-- she told me on her own. She wanted me to know that finding Uncle Cas would not be an option.

“It was an accident, of course,” she said. “He was beating us. It was self-defense. But he was a soldier and that made it a capital crime.”

I thought of Ieva sequestered in a room much like this one. Ieva alone. Ieva sweating, Ieva scared, Ieva biting the tips of her manicured hands,

“Fortunately,” Mrs. Smith said at last. “You decided to travel under assumed names. Nobody’s figured out that she’s my daughter and since I’m not going to interview her, I’m not planning to figure it out either.”

She slid our handsets across the table.

“I took the liberty of deleting all your messages,” she continued. “Sentries might go through them again when you get to Earth, so be careful what you write on the trip.”

I looked at her in wonder. “But our papers....”

“Your papers appear to be in order,” she said. Then she gave me the same curt nod she had given the other sentry. I rose in disbelief, stuffing the two handsets into my pocket.

Only when I got to the door did Mrs. Smith speak to me again.

“It was Mr. Smith who wanted to come here,” she said. “My sentence wasn’t terrible. It was just ten years. But Mr. Smith didn’t think he could raise Ieva on his own. That’s why he tried to break me out. It was when they caught us that we were offered us the chance to come here.”

Then she thought of something else and stood up so that she could look me in the eye.

“No one can ever learn who she is. We have family there, but if she finds them, they will turn her in. I dishonored the family. She is a symbol of that dishonor. They won’t risk exile just to help her. She has nobody there. You think about that before you do this. You are going to be all she has.”

I nodded. I thought back to the ferry, to the sight of my city disappearing behind the fog.

“It may not be what you want,” she warned.

“Ieva thinks Earth will be Heaven.”

“I’m not talking about Earth. Believe me when I say romance is a blinding thing.”

I replied as bravely as I could. “We love each other.”

Mrs. Smith smiled with sadness. “And what parent can argue with that?”

I was taken back to the lounge where Ieva was already waiting: she had been told that our detention had all been a mistake. Our flight had been delayed – whether by chance or Mrs. Smith, we never knew – and a few hours later we finally heard the first roar of the engines as the great ship broke its moors and shot itself into space. To maintain the illusion of chaperone and ward, we had taken a cabin with a double bunk, but on our first night of privacy we huddled together on the lower berth. Then I told Ieva the last part of her mother’s story and I felt the weight of her increase, as if my words were adding something to those strange curves that had fascinated me for so long.