

Loophole By Niki Hatzidis

Beeta had to pull over. She was on a narrow stretch of road, around her a sea of evergreen and pine. The air was so much lighter and crisper here than in New York, but Beeta barely noticed. She was lost and flustered. Her maps app had gone off signal about ten miles ago and there had been no sign of life anywhere. That morning she aimed to leave her apartment in the city early to beat the traffic but still she was trapped on the Tappan Zee Bridge for nearly an hour. Getting her rental car was a whole other ordeal all together. Now she was somewhere in the depths of a Vermont wood with not even an inkling of which way was north. She hoped she would make it to the boarder in time. She waited for her signal to come back or for someone to finally drive by.

In a parking lot about two hundred miles away, Marianne was switching over the radio in her car. The news always seemed to be depressingly horrifying lately and if she had to hear that hateful man spew anymore garbage out of his orange head she was going to have an aneurysm. She still had a few moments before she had to start work and she would rather listen to an endless infomercial about windshields. She settled herself back in here seat, mug in hand and watched the comings and goings of her little corner of the world.

This time was always peaceful in the town of Stanstead, Quebec. Seeing people go on about their morning was rather calming to her. From her vantage point there were mainly family

homes. The road carried people to and from their Thursday morning destinations; work, their children's schools, and appointments. As spring was beginning to take hold of this quaint residential street, the trees were gaining their buds, birds busied themselves around the branches and the flower pots leading up to entrance of the library were beginning to bloom.

Those seemingly benign flower pots outlined a very important line; the US border. That was the line that Marianne would have to cross in order to go to work in a moment. And recently there appeared another fixture on the outside of the library, a boarder patrol car with two stern looking agents in it at all times. There had recently been a travel ban issued from the US and things have been a little bit tense here in Quebec of all places.

The boarder of Stanstead and Derby Line Vermont has always been a very unique place.

People used to be able to cross over from Vermont to see a hockey game and Canadians would walk over for pizza at lunchtime with just a wave to the boarder patrol booth. It was like an extended community that went beyond government bureaucracy. But then the world had changed, September 11th happened and, things had tightened up. Now the travel ban has brought along even more changes, mainly focused on the brick structure that housed the local library.

The Haskell Free Library is built directly on the Canadian and United States boarder. There is quite literally a faded thick line dividing up the floor plan. If you wanted to visit the library,

regardless of which of the two countries you were coming from, you had to enter through the United States but most, if not nearly all, the books are on the Canadian side. Above is the Opera House and if you sat in the audience you would be in the US but the actors on stage would be in Canada. Other than that it's just your average, run of the mill, victorian building.

Marianne, coffee still in hand, reluctantly steps out of her car. It's still a bit chilly despite the sunny day, it is Canada after all. She makes her way to the flower pots with the feeling of being carefully watched. It's probably her imagination, but put a government issued official in her path she always feel like she was doing something wrong. Even when she is on her way back from a holiday and is at boarder control entering her own country her palms sweat as if her passport is fake. In reality those officers probably haven't looked up from their own morning coffee. She's as much as a fixture her as they have become in only a few months.

She makes it to the door, unlocks it with a yawn and steps through, the cheery ring of the bell on the door bidding her good morning. The little room feels like a silent sanctuary at this time of day as rays of light filter in through the large bay windows. She can't help but sigh with relief from her journey across the boarder, if only just for ten feet. It looks like any other library Marianne thinks, with its own children's section, computer tables and reading spaces. The only obvious difference is the floor. Slightly faded in places, a thick line is the only link to the arbitrary rules of the outside world. That and the newly made signs around the room informing

that there are to be no family meetings on the premises, next to the old one that states there is to be no food in the building.

Marianne made her way to her domaine, the check out desk, and flipped on the dated desktop as the bell over the door announced a visitor. She hardly had to look up to know who it was and chirped a bright hello to Walter. She and Walter had a little routine. He would be the first one to come in every morning loaded up with his black backpack and green laptop bag hanging across his belly. He would walk by her desk and place a Tim Horten's paper bag on it muttering, "I got you a donut, Marianne," as he made his way to his usual seat at the computer tables; far right, back against the window, facing the front door. The pastry might be different but the sequence of events was always the same. "Very thoughtful of you, Walter," Marianne would say as she peeked in the bag. It was a blueberry muffin today.

She stopped wondering a long time ago what Walter would do on his laptop everyday. He was often there until just before the library closed, but only if he brought a lunch. Otherwise he would leave about one and come back at two, grumbling if someone had the audacity to take his space. Other than the fact that he would bring her breakfast, she didn't know much else about him. Sometimes he would ask about her weekend plans or to restart the internet router and she would ask about his lunch and how much less snow they had gotten that year. And honestly, that was the way they both seemed to like it.

Traffic to the library was usually quiet, especially in the mornings. If it was raining or too cold to go to the playground mom's would bring their toddlers in to go through the picture books in the children's corner. It wasn't raining or snowing so Marianne predicted there would be only a few visitors in. Senior citizens would come in to exchange one history anthology for another. Every week Betty would come in for a new romance novel. Then in the afternoon there would be an influx of school children and their parents coming in to kill an hour before heading to an after school dance or karate class. On Fridays they perused the dvd section.

All in all the job could be very predictable. Sometimes Marianne would have to fix the printer or track down a book located in a neighboring municipality but otherwise she would scroll through Yahoo News articles on her computer or read a book she plucked from the latest donation haul. Other than that one time a man tried to smuggle weapons into the US through the library, interesting events would mostly be non-existing. That was until the Muslim Ban was issued.

It wasn't a notable shift of patronage at first. Libraries are not often assigned as meeting places but we have groups that come and congregate every once in a while. There was the mommy story time that happened every Thursday, the alcoholics anonymous that would congregate in the back room every Tuesday evenings when the library was opened late, up until they found a more central location three months ago, and of course there was the time Susan and Betty

tried to start a bookclub but a rather boisterous argument over allowing more romantic books to the docket caused the group to splinter off. Then there were those that came through simply because of its peculiar location and to marvel at a building that defied the laws of physics.

So, no, the first meeting didn't seem like anything out of the ordinary. A young man came in and sat at one of the chairs set out for the curious readers. Marianne remembered that his leg shook constantly as he slumped forward and periodically looked at his watch. After about thirty minutes a different young man walked in, which caused the original man to jump to his feet. They exchanged a long and emotional hug. Marianne guessed that they were brothers as they had the same cheekbones and ears. Marianne had read a book about genealogy once and ever since, she had noticed those sort of things. They sat together for over an hour talking in low voices in another language, they laughed at times, showed each other pictures on their phones. When it was time to leave they embraced tightly again, walked out and went their separate ways.

The only reason this made an impression on Marianne was because the ritual was repeated the following week, except with a different variation of people. A husband and wife walked in timidly and slowly one afternoon looking around. Marianne went up to help them, she assumed they might be tourists as they smiled at her seeming to not understand English. The woman had on a hijab and it looked like she had been crying. Just then a man, seemingly no older than

nineteen burst through the door. The family seemed to collapse into each other for several moments. They spent the whole day at a table in the back until Marianne had to gingerly tell them that the library was closing. At their goodbyes the women dropped to her knees in front of her son and would not stop sobbing. It took her son, husband and Marianne to coax her to her feet and out into the fresh air before she might faint.

Word must have gotten around because pretty soon there were these types of meetings and reunions multiply times a day. The Library hadn't been busier since there was a book signing by a famous Canadian author and that was just because of the novelty of the whole affair.

Family members would from Pakistan and Iraq would fly to Canada just to see their children studying in the US, unsure when they'd be able to see them again. Muslim residence in the US would meet friends, relatives even partners at the library. The reunions became so frequent that both countries took notice and ordered the reunions to stop. In essence these reunions weren't breaking any laws, no one was crossing illegally into a country they couldn't enter and after their visit was over everyone would leave and go back to either Canada or the US or travel back to their home country.

Marianne didn't see anything wrong with it. The visitors were respectful of the space and didn't bother Walter or the other regular patrons, she never felt threatened or as if she would need to call the authorities. In fact she was told by her superior that she needed to report these

meetings to the boarder control and kick those out that were only at the library for a meeting.

But other than putting up those signs Marianne didn't really lift another finger. Those boarder

petrol agents saw people coming and going, their presence there definitely being for the

purpose of intimidation but not many people were deterred, not that Marianne could tell

anyway. Perhaps everyone could just turn a blind eye until the world righted itself again?

Reunions still happened at the library at least once a week and Marianne just kept at her desk

making herself available for those that needed assistance just as her job description detailed.

And though she couldn't help herself she secretly enjoyed watching these rendezvous. They

were often tender, moving, even amusing, and at times harrowing. Marianne remembered two

grandparents reading to their grandson as he tugged on his grandad's beard and babbled

happily at his grandad's exaggerated reaction. She remembered a woman coming to the library

to meet her sister's new husband and watched them beam at the wedding album. She

remembered having to keep it together as a man held his mother's hand as she sat frail in a

wheelchair wondering as he might have if this would be the last time he every saw her again.

Days like that stuck with Marianne. She didn't know these people, she only say this little

snippet of their lives, made different because of the way they worship. She would challenge

any politician to sit in the library for just a day and see if they felt that these people deserved all

of this after. Marianne was raised catholic in the most loosest of terms. Her family would got to

mass every Ester and Christmas and the occasional Sunday her mother felt they needed to top up their “religious’ card. Once Marianne moved out she participated even less but she thought about what it would be like if the fact that of her having a Catholic background was used as an excuse to exclude her from doing things. And what if others reveled in the fact she was excluded? It was all enough to make Marianne furious, and the last thing anyone wants is a furious librarian.

But what could she do? She was just one person. She got emails constantly from the higher-ups asking if the meetings have stopped. What could she tell them? Pretty soon she might not have a choice but to ask these people to leave. Perhaps she could retire early? She took a bite of the muffin Walter had brought her, breaking yet another rule. She smiled to herself, one little rebellion at a time maybe?

The day passed without much excitement. Walter went out for lunch and returned with two cups of coffee, one of the computers caught a virus that she had to set back to original settings and a man came in asking for directions. Marianne was about to start her closing sweep when a young woman rushed through the door with a clang of the bell. She looked to be about 25 with black hair that covered her shoulders like a woolen blanket. She was panting and looked around worriedly but there was only Marianne left at there now.

“Can I help you with something? I’m afraid we’re about to close.” The woman’s brow furrowed

further in concern if that was at all possible.

“Could I use your phone please?” Marianne noted the lilted way she spoke.

“Yes, of course, were you waiting for someone?”

“Yes, and my phone isn’t working in Canada.”

Marianne showed the woman where the phone was on her desk and left her to it. She spoke softly in Arabic, at times it sounded like she was pleading. Suddenly she was trying to get Marianne’s attention. “Excuse me please, but when do you close?”

“We’re supposed to close at 6.” The woman looks at the clock above the desk and is a little crestfallen. She mumbles something into the phone, asks a question and doesn’t get the answer she wants. More talk continues that sounds like regret as if new plans are forming.

“Can stay open a little longer...?” Marianne offers.

“Really?” The woman’s face split in two.

“Sure, I got nowhere to be.”

“Thank you,” she says excitedly and then relays the information into the phone, but Marianne could sense it wasn’t going to go the woman’s way. She tried not to stare at her deflating and finally hang-up but then became aware that she must have been for a long time because the woman was staring at her. “I’m sorry,” Marianne blurted out but the woman shrugged.

“Thank you for offering to stay open longer,” she mumbled as she made her wait to leave.

“What happened?” Marianne called after her.

“My mother isn’t feeling well and they have to catch a flight early in the morning.”

“Oh, I’m sorry to hear that.” Marianne stood in the entry way of the library in silence for a few minutes. She could sense that the woman didn’t want to leave. That the leaving itself would signify a big loss. “Maybe another time,” was all the Marianne could offer as a consolation.

“Maybe.”

“Have you come a long way?”

“New York, I’m studying there.”

“Has it been a long time since you saw your mother?” Marianne asked but thought she better let the woman go on her way.

“I came to the US in August. We thought we would be able to visit each other through out the year. During my breaks. But then...” The women both nodded.

“What’s your name? I’m Marianne.”

“Beeta.”

“Where are you from originally?” The woman sighed and looked at Marianne a little skeptically. Marianne gave her most assuring smile. Then little by little Beeta began to tell her why she had come all the way to the Haskill Free Library. When she had accept her place in Columbia for her PhD Beeta knew it would be hard to leave her little girl Nour with her parents. She

reassured herself that all this hard work was going to be for her in the end, for the both of them. And with semester breaks and holidays planned it wasn't going to feel like being apart for that long. She told Marianne that she was lying to herself then, just like now when she was telling herself that this missed meeting between her mother, Nour and herself wasn't that bad. Beeta was beginning to tear up but she continued to hold her head up high. She told Marianne about all the times she woke up early to face time with Nour, the pictures and letter she would send her and the pictures her Mom would send her multiple times a day. She was learning to write and read without her. She was growing up without her. There were so few opportunities for Beeta back home, she really didn't have choice, but she hoped that with finding out about the library she could see Nour for at least a few hours. Traffic, trouble renting a car and getting lost in Vermont had foiled the plan and now she'd have to wait until next time. But when was there going to be a next time? She still has three years to go, maybe even longer and it's not like her mother can make the trip frequently. Will it really be three more years until she gets to hold her again? Will she understand what it was all for? It was getting impossible for Beeta to hold back the tears now Marianne notice through her own blurred vision. "In three years the world could look different. They could think differently," Beeta said wiping her eyes on the sleeve of her jacket. "We'll just have to wait and see." And with that, Beeta waved farewell to Marianne and walked out of the library.

Marianne didn't know why but she felt stung by the encounter. Her stomach felt tight and her face was hot. She felt guilty of something. Who was she in the grand scheme of things? What could she do to make things change? Marianne looked around her little sanctuary, a place that had become a safe place for strangers to come and connect with loved ones, all because of its peculiar spot in the world and this specific time in its long history and possible future. And how would fate have it that Marianne would work her at that exact time. Was it all just an honest coincidence?

Marianne thought hard for a while. Her own family was waiting for her to come home, she was so late already. She went and picked up her bag and was about to turn off the lights by the front door when she saw it, out of the corner of her eye. She walked up to the sign that announced that family meetings were forbidden and without a second thought she tossed it into the waste basket. Outside her car was the only one left in the carpark, even the border control agents had left. She wrapped herself in her coat and braced the cold walk from America back to Canada. It all felt so arbitrary and stupid to her but she had made up her mind that she would make these people's lives more difficult in this uncertain time. Not when they have traveled far just to hold her loved ones. Her journey to their embrace was only a 20 minute drive, it should be that easy for everyone.