

First Stop, Ellis Island!

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by Michael Peros

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Characters (in order of appearance)

Narrators 1 and 2

Paulina Spigos: a Greek immigrant

Ivan Erdman: a Russian immigrant

Nicolai Erdman: Ivan's son

Inspectors 1–4

Commissioner Curran

Stefan Brodsky: a Polish American

Ida Brodsky: Stefan's wife

Doctor

Act 1

Scene 1: 1912, in New York Harbor, on the deck of a barge approaching Ellis Island.

NARRATOR 1: Millions of people left Europe during the late 1800s. They fled their homes because of hunger, religious persecution, harsh governments, or the lack of jobs in their countries. For these immigrants, America was a land of opportunity. Wages were higher, and land was cheaper. Many had heard that the streets were paved with gold! From 1892 to 1954, Ellis Island was the first stop in America for many immigrants.

NARRATOR 2: Meet three new immigrants—Paulina Spigos and Ivan and Nicolai Erdman. They've already been checked for illnesses such as yellow fever, smallpox, and typhus. The ships they were on stopped in the lower part of the bay. Then doctors boarded the ships and checked the passengers. Now they're being taken by barge to Ellis Island.

PAULINA: The Statue of Liberty... she's so beautiful! Can you see the lady?

IVAN: Thank you, yes.

NICOLAI: (*to his father*): America! Everything will be fine now. Nothing bad will ever happen to us here!

Scene 2: Later that day. In the Great Hall on Ellis Island.

NARRATOR 1: As the immigrants arrived, doctors studied the way they walked up the stairs to the Great Hall. (This was known as the "six-second medical.") Then the doctors would do a more thorough exam. After that, inspectors asked the immigrants a series of questions. Chances were—if you were a man in good health, with no criminal record and good prospects for employment—you'd be allowed to enter America within a few hours.

NARRATOR 2: The rules, however, were more strict for women who were traveling alone, like Paulina.

INSPECTOR 1: Your full name is Paulina Spigos?

PAULINA: Yes, sir, Paulina Spigos. I'm from Greece.

INSPECTOR 1: The doctors tell me you're in good health. You're single?

PAULINA: I'm engaged to Spiros Paniotis of Chicago.

INSPECTOR 1: Uh-huh. And you know this Spiros Paniotis of Chicago?

PAULINA (*indignant, but nervous*): Of course I know him. I grew up with him. He came here two years ago with his parents. He says he is ready for me to join him. Here, it says so in this letter.

INSPECTOR 1: Do I look like I can read Greek? He's meeting you here?

PAULINA: No, Chicago is too far away. He works.

INSPECTOR 1: Uh- huh. Since Chicago is too far away, how will you get there?

PAULINA: I have money for a train ticket.

INSPECTOR 1: Uh-huh. Okay, Miss Spigos, only a few more questions: How much is five plus five?

PAULINA: Ten.

INSPECTOR 1: How do you wash stairs? From the top or from the bottom?

PAULINA: With all respect sir, I did not come to America to wash stairs.

INSPECTOR 1: I see. Your Spiros is rich, is he? You'll have someone washing the stairs for you? Is that what your Spiros has told you? You see, Miss Spigos, this is exactly why we don't like to let women in by themselves.

PAULINA: I've known Spiros all my life. I know exactly what my life here in America will be like. Do you want to know what my life was like in Greece? Do you care that I had no family there?

INSPECTOR 1: Just calm down, Miss Spigos. We just don't want you falling into the wrong hands. But you seem like a woman who can take care of herself. Just be careful. You can change your money here for American dollars. You can buy your train ticket here, too. Next!

PAULINA: Inspector? The stairs? From the top to the bottom.

Scene 3: Same day. An inspector's office on Ellis Island.

NARRATOR 1: About twenty percent of all immigrants were held for further questioning. About two percent of these were sent back to their home countries. People could be denied entry into the United States for a number of reasons: if they had criminal records, medical problems, or if they might not be able to support themselves.

NARRATOR 2: Sometimes families traveled all the way to America, only to be separated.

INSPECTOR 3: Mr. Erdman, why have you come to the United States?

IVAN: We had to. It was very hard for us in Russia.

NICOLAI: Inspector, we are Jewish. Last year, our family was forced to move. My father found it harder to work.

INSPECTOR 3: What was your business, Mr. Erdman?

IVAN: I was a tailor.

INSPECTOR 3: How much did you earn?

IVAN: About ten to twelve rubles.

INSPECTOR 3: Hmm... that's about three dollars a week. Nicolai, what kind of work do you do?

NICOLAI: I was a student—until the government said I couldn't go to school anymore.

INSPECTOR 3 (*to Ivan*): Do you have a job waiting for you?

NICOLAI: No, Inspector. We know that it is against the law to have a job waiting for us. But, well, my brother Leon is here. He is a tailor, also.

INSPECTOR 3: What does he earn?

IVAN: About twelve rubles—I mean, \$12 a week.

INSPECTOR 3: Does he have a family?

IVAN: A wife and four children. (*Shifting weight from foot to foot, looking tired.*)

INSPECTOR 3: Our medical examiner says your fingers are stiff and swollen. You look like your legs hurt. You probably have arthritis.

IVAN: No, no, it's nothing. It's been a very long day.

INSPECTOR 3: Nicolai, what are your plans here in America?

NICOLAI: I am strong. There are many things I can do here. My father will be well taken care of.

INSPECTOR 3: You have \$23 between you. Look at your father's hands—he can't work! And you—you have no job experience at all! Do you know how many strong, young men come into this country every day? I'm sorry. (*Marks the letters "SI" on the shoulder of Ivan's coat.*)

NICOLAI: "SI"? What does that stand for?

INSPECTOR 3: Special Inquiry. It means your father will be deported, sent back to Russia.

NICOLAI: But they will kill him! No, no, you can't send him back!

IVAN: Nicolai, do not say anything.

NICOLAI: Papa, I am not like you. I cannot say yes to everything. *(to the inspector)* I will take care of him. I will earn enough money for both of us to live.

INSPECTOR 3: *(shrugging)*: Maybe you can convince the Board of Special Inquiry. Explain your situation to the inspectors there. They'll give you a translator if you need one. Then they will decide if your father can stay. Next!

(Bewildered, Ivan and Nicolai leave the inspector's office.)

IVAN: Well, Nicolai, I'm afraid we must say good-bye.

NICOLAI: Papa, no!

IVAN: We have talked to so many people these past few days. I'm tired. And look at my hands! They're right... I can't work the way I used to.

NICOLAI: Please, Papa, no! We will fight this. We will figure something out. You cannot go back to Russia.

IVAN: It is my home, son. Just as America will be yours. My mind is made up.

Act 2

Scene 1: 1922. In the Great Hall of Ellis Island.

NARRATOR 1: Between 1901 and 1910, over seven million immigrants entered the United States through Ellis Island. The numbers dropped during World War I. But after the war ended in 1918, the numbers started rising. As a result, the First Quota Law was passed in 1921. This put a monthly limit on the number of immigrants who could enter the United States from any given country.

NARRATOR 2: Stefan Brodsky, a Polish-American man who immigrated to the United States two years earlier, is pacing in the Great Hall. Commissioner Curran, who is in charge of Ellis Island, approaches Stefan.

CURRAN: Good afternoon. Are you waiting for someone?

STEFAN: Yes, my wife Ida, Ida Brodsky. She's coming in from Poland. Her ship's a day late.

CURRAN: How long have you been in America?

STEFAN: Oh, we've both been here for two years. Ida only went back to visit her parents. Her mother's sick. I hope everything is all right.

CURRAN: No need to worry. I'm Commissioner Curran, and I can assure you that these little trips don't count against the Quota Law.

STEFAN: Thank you, Mr. Curran, but you don't understand—

CURRAN: You see, if your wife has already been admitted to the United States and then she goes back to her homeland, even if Poland's limit has been reached, she would

probably be allowed in... (*Ida Brodsky, carrying a bundle, enters the Great Hall. She is accompanied by the ship's doctor and an inspector.*)

STEFAN: I realize that, but you—

IDA: Stefan!

STEFAN: Ida!

CURRAN: What's that she's carrying?!

STEFAN: I believe that's our baby. Excuse me, Commissioner. (*hurrying to Ida*)

IDA: Stefan, look—he has your eyes!

DOCTOR: Mrs. Brodsky needs to stay here in the hospital tonight so I can check her out. The baby was born just last night.

IDA: Stefan, there's a problem—

STEFAN: What? What is it? Are you all right? Is it the baby—

IDA: No, nothing like that.

INSPECTOR 4: The Polish quota has been reached. To put it bluntly, the mother can stay, but the baby must leave.

IDA: Not my baby! I won't let it happen! Stefan, if our baby can't stay, I will return to Poland with him.

STEFAN: Commissioner, please help us.

CURRAN: Don't worry, Stefan. I'm sure we can work something out. (*to the inspector*)
Where was the baby born?

INSPECTOR 4: Aboard ship, sir. On the *Lapland*, of the British Star Line.

CURRAN: There you are. The baby wasn't born in Poland, but on a British ship. The deck of a British ship, no matter where in the world it is, is the same as British soil. Include the baby in the British quota.

INSPECTOR 4: Sir. The British quota was reached yesterday.

IDA: Our baby can't come in?

CURRAN: Wait, wait! The baby was born on the *Lapland*? That ship's home port is Belgium. There! The baby is Belgian!

STEFAN: My baby is what?

INSPECTOR 4: I'm sorry, but the Belgian quota is also full.

CURRAN: Inspector, what are you trying to do here?

INSPECTOR 4: My job, Commissioner.

CURRAN: Listen, I think I've got it. You see with children, it's the way it is with wills. We follow the intention. It's clear enough that Ida was hurrying back so that the baby would be born in America. And the baby had the same intention—he wanted to be born in America. But the ship was a day late, and that upset everything. So, under the law, this baby, by intention, was born in America. This baby is American!

INSPECTOR 4: (*with a sigh*): All right. (*filling out a form*) Baby's name?

IDA: (*whispering to Commissioner Curran*): What's your first name?

CURRAN: Kevin, ma'am. Kevin Curran.

IDA: Kevin, Inspector. (*Stefan and Ida link arms, and she passes the baby to her husband, beaming.*)

The End