

THE
LINES
WE
CROSS

RANDA ABDEL-FATTAH

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Summary: Michael's parents are leaders of a new anti-immigrant political party called Aussie Values which is trying to halt the flood of refugees from the Middle East; Mina fled Afghanistan with her family ten years ago, and just wants to concentrate on fitting in and getting into college—but the mutual attraction they feel demands that they come to terms with their family's concerns and decide where they stand in the ugly anti-Muslim politics of the time.

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“I think it’s religion that’s the problem,” he says casually. “Like Islam claims to be about peace but all we hear about is violence.”

I want so badly to raise my hand. But every instinct in my first-day-at-school body is warning me not to. I sit in silent agony, fighting with myself.

Mr. Morello is looking like he’s having a this-is-why-I-became-a-teacher moment as the rest of the class goes back and forth with their arguments. Then Paula surprises me and, bristling with indignation, says to Michael, “I really, *really* hate it when people in the West take the moral high ground. *Really.*”

Terrence groans. “Paula, is there anything you *don’t* have an opinion about?”

“I’m sixteen, Terrence,” she says coolly. “It’s a bit early to tell.”

Michael considers her for a moment and then, his tone careful, says: “But, Paula, it’s on the news all the time. It’s just differences in values. My dad says it’s not a personal clash between people. It’s more a clash of civilizations.”

Paula huffs with indignation. “So Hiroshima, Nagasaki, Guantánamo Bay, Abu Ghraib, bombs on Afghan weddings and parties, CIA torture, drones, white phosphorous—all wonderful examples of *civilized* behavior, right?”

“You can’t compare,” Michael says. “It’s the war on terror.”

I roll my eyes and doodle in the margins of my textbook.

“Are you saying stonings and cutting off hands are okay?” Terrence asks Paula.

“Obviously not,” she snaps.

Mr. Morello reads out a section from the textbook and throws questions back to the class for discussion. At one point Terrence, who I suspect has been marinating in testosterone for some years now, snorts loudly. “In Saudi Arabia, does downloading movies count as stealing? I mean, could you get your hands cut off for downloading the next season of *Game of Thrones*?”

In terms of the Muslims-are-barbaric joke theme, I’d give Terrence points for originality. It’s the general contempt that goes with the joke that leaves a sour taste in my mouth.

A guy called Fred, sitting beside Terrence, high-fives him.

“Oi, how do they high-five in Muslim countries?” Terrence continues, grinning. “It’d be wrist to wrist!”

That sends Fred and Terrence into another fit of giggles.

“One more inappropriate comment and I’ll see you in detention at lunchtime, Terrence,” Mr. Morello says coolly.

“I’m just saying,” Michael says, “that people have values in the West.”

The words escape my mouth before I even know what’s happening: “Try telling that to the people locked up and abused in detention because they were naive enough to think Australia would care about their lives.”

All eyes are on me. What a way to announce myself. I think trapdoors and invisibility cloaks.

A couple of the boys, led by Terrence, do the “Oooh, fight” stirring thing.

“Look, it’s not ideal, what they’re going through. But Australia has the right to protect its borders,” Michael says.

“Oh, because women, children, and men fleeing persecution are *such* a threat, hey?”

Michael frowns. “I didn’t say that. I meant, if you come by boat, you’ve jumped the queue.”

The bell rings and the din of noise rises as everybody starts packing their things and Mr. Morello tells us our weekend homework.

“There’s no *queue*,” I tell Michael as I slam my books into my bag. “I would know. I came here by boat.”

“Well, you have nothing to complain about then, do you?” Michael replies calmly.

Oh no. He didn’t just go there.