



# Boy, Everywhere

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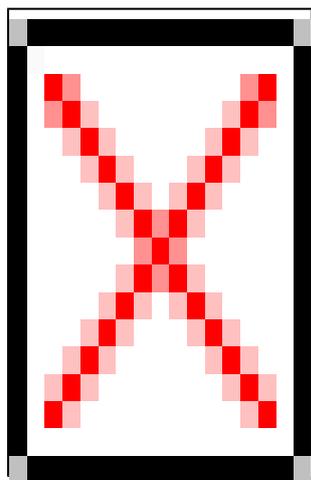
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5



One day 13 year-old Sami al-Hafez is at school in Damascus, chatting with his best friend, Joseph, about the next day's English test and looking forward to wearing his new Adidas Predators in the crucial football trial after school. Only a few days later, confused and frightened, he's driving with his Dad, Mum and little sister Sara en route for Lebanon and Beirut Airport, with just a few belongings crammed into his backpack. They've left behind the affluent family life his surgeon father and school principal mother worked hard to create. Men in overalls have carried the marble dining table and the big TV out of the house, while most of their stuff has been packed up in boxes. The maid, the gardener, the driver have all gone. His home has been sold. Through her wailing tears, Sami's grandmother, his beloved Jadda, has insisted on staying.

Sami knows what people are saying, at least in private, about the President and his tactics. He's seen on the news what's happened in cities such as Aleppo. But that was never going to happen in Damascus. Except it does, when a bomb explodes in the Cham City Centre shopping mall. His Mum and Sara had been there, and Sami knows it's his fault they were; he'd pestered his busy mother to pick up those new football boots from the store so that he could wear them in the trial. Mercifully, his mother and sister are both still alive, though Sara hasn't spoken a word since the explosion; she remains mute throughout the novel, a constant reminder lodged in Sami's conscience.

That's why they've packed up and left. Dassu takes them through Beirut to Istanbul where they spend several nights cramped in a filthy holding house. Sami meets 16 year-old Aadam, a lone refugee whose plight gives Sami - and us - a wider perspective on how desperate things are for so many others. Then they're smuggled in a fishing boat to Greece. The voyage spares the reader nothing, not least when Sami sees a large rubber dinghy capsize nearby; children screaming, drowning limbs flailing in the waves. What has always been a loving family comes close to breaking point. More grim days of waiting before a flight from Athens takes them to Manchester. There's a cold welcome here; the bureaucratic detention centre reduces the family to the anonymity of prisoners and Sami's father is viciously assaulted by another detainee. Even when they are able to move in with a Syrian family in Stockport, the mother and teenage son make it clear they resent the intrusion into their home. Sami's early days in his new school are acutely miserable until he makes one really good friend.

Dassu hopes her book will challenge stereotypes and break down barriers of misunderstanding. It may well also disturb the helpless remoteness we may feel as we watch images of the camps and bombed ruins from our settees. There is no room for humour in Sami's story. But events are all the more powerful since they are reported without melodrama; and the detail of Sami's narrative often carries sensory impact which will command readers' attention. As he wades ashore in Greece, utterly exhausted, his soaking jeans are 'stiff and heavy' on the legs of a boy as used to physical comfort as most of his readers will be. The smell of a hostel in Manchester is 'like a dirty toilet with bleach mixed in'. Then there's the loneliness throughout of a boy whose parents, for the first time in his life, are preoccupied and overwhelmed by anxieties.

Not a book to forget.

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