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The Lines We Crossed

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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

THE LINES WE CROSSED

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in

CREATIVE WRITING

by

Jane Deon

2014

To: Dean Kenneth G. Furton
College of Arts and Sciences

This thesis, written by Jane Deon, and entitled *The Lines We Crossed*, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

We have read this thesis and recommend that it be approved.

Lynne Barrett

Meri-Jane Rochelson

Debra Dean, Major Professor

Date of Defense: March 4, 2014

The thesis of Jane Deon is approved.

Dean Kenneth G. Furton
College of Arts and Sciences

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Florida International University, 2014

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

THE LINES WE CROSSED

by

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Florida International University, 2014

Miami, Florida

Professor Debra Dean, Major Professor

THE LINES WE CROSSED is a historical novel set in Umbria, Italy from 1943-1944. One October morning, Emilia Testadura awakes to find the Nazis have arrived in her village. Major Christoph Strauss presses Emilia into service as housekeeper for the soldiers who now occupy an abandoned palazzo in the village. As the stakes and complications rise in the war throughout winter and spring, so they do for Emilia. Brutal reinforcements arrive and conditions become very dangerous. Emilia realizes she is falling in love with Major Strauss. She learns secrets that change her view of her deceased father and herself. That knowledge leads her to take action which reveals Major Strauss's true colors before he is sent south to engage the Allies. Once the Allies take Emilia's village from the Nazis, Emilia makes a final discovery and a decision that leads her south, too, towards a future she had never imagined.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
Chapter One	1
Chapter Two.....	12
Chapter Three.....	19
Chapter Four	24
Chapter Five.....	40
Chapter Six.....	48
Chapter Seven	57
Chapter Eight	63
Chapter Nine	74
Chapter Ten.....	81
Chapter Eleven.....	88
Chapter Twelve.....	93
Chapter Thirteen	99
Chapter Fourteen.....	107
Chapter Fifteen.....	114
Chapter Sixteen.....	123
Chapter Seventeen	139
Chapter Eighteen.....	145
Chapter Nineteen	156
Chapter Twenty.....	162

Chapter One

A rumble like distant thunder echoed in the stillness of the morning air and drew me from my bed to the window that overlooked Via Castiglione. I pushed aside the curtain, but I saw nothing unusual as I looked out at the road, quiet now. I wondered if the noise had been my imagination, a leftover dream.

Our home, where I lived with my mother, was one of three apartments in a *casa colonica*, a sturdy brick and stone structure at the far western edge of our village, Casamaggiore. The *casa colonica* sat just a few meters back from the road and only a few minutes' walk from the village center. The apartment next to ours belonged to Marco, the postman. He had left for work one morning, more than two years ago now, and never returned. I often climbed the fence that separated our back yards to pick the figs from his tree. He was a kind man, and I knew he wouldn't mind. The third apartment belonged to a businessman from Firenze, Fabrizio Pozzo. Before the war, he would come during the summer months to escape the heat of the city.

The Santa Caterina Church, a narrow brick and stone construction with simple decoration, was directly across the street from us and silent save for one hour every Sunday. Padre Gallopi lived in a small apartment near the back of the church. He also served as the priest in the surrounding villages, and he was one of the few villagers who had a car. My mother kept house for him. He was a short and bald man with a strong, clear voice, one that had always comforted me. In front of the church was Piazza Santa Caterina, empty now but for a few benches, yet the scene of many celebrations in the village. It was October 1943, the Armistice had been signed a month ago, Germany was

our enemy now, and everyone in the village was anxiously waiting for the war to reach us.

Satisfied that nothing was out of order on Via Castiglione, I moved to the opposite window. I looked down at our small backyard. In one corner, the chickens scratched out their lives. A pig house, empty for more than a year now, stood in the other. Mama kept some pots of herbs on the wall that surrounded the small terrace. The bread oven was tucked up against the house, beside the door to the *cantina*. A hedge of rosemary separated our property from the hectares of olive trees that spread up the hills as far as my eyes could see.

I heard the rumble again and I returned to the window facing the street. This time I opened it and leaned out into the cold air. About two kilometers to the northwest, not far from where Via Castiglione intersected with Via Fioretti, there was a dip in the road. That's where I saw them. The Germans. They were coming from the west, from the direction of the village of Pozzuolo. The noise I heard was the sound of their motorbikes. My body grew tense and any leftover traces of sleep vanished. I tucked some loose strands of hair behind my ears and pulled my nightgown tight about me. I watched their approach.

I had been expecting them. Several months ago, Mussolini had been stripped of his powers and imprisoned in Campo Imperatore, and King Vittorio Emanuele III had assumed power. When the Armistice with the Allied Forces had been announced on September 8, I had imagined that the war would soon be over for us. But only four days later, Mussolini was freed by the Germans and relocated to the north where he formed a new fascist state, the Republic of Salò. Over 700,000 of our soldiers had been taken

prisoner by the German army and those who refused to swear allegiance to Mussolini's new government were transported to labor camps. The Allies had taken control of Sicily in August and had begun advancing northward. I knew the German army would soon be taking the fight to them. Casamaggiore, my village, stood in the middle between the two sides.

The motorbikes turned onto Via Castiglione and were now clearly in sight. Though the noise had suggested a greater number there were only two, one with a sidecar. The soldiers, I counted fifteen in all, walked rather than marched, at a pace that seemed almost relaxed, as if they were here to take in the sights, perhaps noticing how the sunlight bounced off the silvery green leaves of the olive trees lining the road.

I took a step back, realizing in a few moments they would be directly in front of my house. But then I came close again. The motorbikes passed, leaving a trail of dust floating above the white graveled road. The soldiers had slowed their progress, allowing time for the dust to settle. They wore gray-green uniforms, their steel helmets shadowing their eyes, and their rifles were slung over their backs. These men were definitely not in a hurry. On the contrary, they appeared to be assessing their new surroundings, maybe comparing our village with their last posting. They took turns gesticulating, pointing, and even laughing. I wasn't sure if that was good or bad for us.

The company was made up of unimposing young men, perhaps my age, twenty-two, perhaps even younger. Their faces remained indistinct as they passed, only a collage of noses and mouths, but their voices reached me. I had studied German while at school, but I had never been very good with the language and the snatches that drifted in through the window with the cold were incomprehensible to me now. I was surprised

because I also heard a few phrases spoken in Italian. A dialect, but I was certain it was Italian.

One soldier walked several paces apart from the others. He was taller than the rest of the company. I watched him pause, then turn quickly in my direction. He looked up and our eyes met before I could think to step back from the window. As he stood unmoving for that moment, I could make out the strong cut of his chin and the square line of his shoulders. He wore his jacket smartly, and adjusted the collar while he looked up. Then he nodded, a motion so slight I wondered if I had imagined it, and continued to walk towards the center of the village.

“Emilia, come away from the window.” I hadn’t heard my mother open the bedroom door, but as I turned I saw her standing just on the other side of the threshold. She was wearing her housedress, a faded blue cotton with an almost washed-out pattern of white flowers. Her hair was tied back in a kerchief. I had always thought that I favored my father; I could never find my mother’s features in my face. Her eyes were darker, the color of chestnuts, where mine were brighter, lighter, like blue sky after a long winter. And I lacked her softness, her delicate, slim nose and the high lines of her cheekbones. Her name was Giulia, a name that would have fit her when she was younger. Time and travail had made it difficult to see the youth, the strength, the connection to the emperor that her name denoted. We did share the same dark hair, a shade between black and brown.

I remained still. “Did you see them?”

She nodded, took a step back, and motioned for me to follow. I shook my head.

“At least close the curtain.”

“Why? I’m not frightened.”

She smiled at me, unexpectedly. “You’ve said that since you were this tall.” She brought her hand to her hip. Then the smile left her face, disappearing like rainwater into the soil in the fields. I watched her leave my room and listened to her shoes chart her progress down the stairs to the kitchen.

When I looked back the soldiers had already rounded the turn in the road that led to the center of the village and passed out of sight. Only their boot prints remained in the dirt, the ghostly impression of our village’s occupation.

When I joined her in the kitchen, Mama had already sliced the bread and cheese. A kettle of hot water rested on a red clay tile. We had seen the last of the coffee some time ago, but living in the countryside had its advantages nonetheless. In the cities food was rationed, but here we could eat whatever we could grow. I sat down at the table. The kitchen with its clay brick floor and dark, roughly planed wooden beams lining the ceiling, had always been a place of comfort. It was the heart of our house, and the space that held many fond memories of my father. The center of the room was occupied by a rectangular wooden table and four chairs, none of which sat entirely squarely on the floor. The fire burned in the large hearth, taking the chill from the stone walls. The walls themselves were lined with shelves and hooks, all of which were occupied by baskets, ceramic pots, pans, and carafes showing the marks of constant use.

I had dressed in brown trousers and a button down shirt, both a bit worn but still acceptable enough for going to the garden. At the sight of my outfit, and thus my intentions for the morning, my mother’s soft features took on a harder edge.

“Considering what we have just witnessed, Emilia, I think you should stay home