Life in a Refugee Camp

Bombs dropping during the night, gunfire never ceasing, and the oppressive heat scorching everything in sight. Fear of dying in my sleep from errant missiles flying through the air with a known target; yet, blessed to be a guardian angel to the thousands of people in need.

I have still not gotten use to the life at the Zaatari Refugee Camp. I am Kameron Antoine, a physician’s assistant; I have been in living in the Zaatari Refugee Camp since graduation from Columbia University. I work with the UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) to ensure the safety of refugees coming from Syria. As a humanitarian worker, the atrocities I have seen are too many to name. A typical night consists of nightmares of what I’ve seen and noises that would haunt even Dracula in his sleep.

Life in Zaatari is hard for the humanitarian workers, but it is even harder for the refugees. The refugees have lost everything: homes, money, and even family. The life they are used to living no longer exists. Imagine losing everything you have spent your entire life working for in a matter of minutes. I did not lose everything but as a result of my current living conditions, it took six months before I got used to the lack of running water and electricity. TV has become a faint memory and so has entertainment.

I only volunteered to go to Zaatari because I did not want to pay back the thousands of dollars in student loans, I have accumulated. Who knew that a simple act of selfishness would become an act of pure love? I never knew the joy I would get from working with people who have lost everything.

A typical day for me involves getting up at 5:30 am so I can shower and get dressed for the day ahead. After my shower, I eat a small breakfast which usually consists of cold oatmeal and fruit-mainly dates. Believe it or not I hated dates before I came to live here, but now I tolerate them only because I’m hungry. You learn to eat things and do things you would have never attempted to try when you live in a refugee camp.

I am usually joined by my friends, Malcolm and Brandi for breakfast. They are both humanitarian workers who are also working in order to be relieved of their student loans. Malcom is from California. He attended the University of Southern California. He is an English teacher. He teaches the students English. Brandi is a health care worker who does teaches basic healthcare and does immunizations.

Breakfast usually lasts for about 20 minutes. It often leaves me feeling as if I am in high school again. Shoveling down food quickly in order to move on to the next activity.

Today, I am going to drive along the Jordan-Syrian border looking for refugees. Brandi and Malcolm decide to come along to assist in any way that I need them. The drive is long and somber as we look for refugees and hope not to run into any Syrian rebels looking to keep any Syrian dissidents from crossing the border. This makes the job of looking for refugees hard as I am not armed and the rebels are heavily armed.

As I approach, the border I see a young girl in the distance. She is stooped over something that looks like a bloody rock. I speed up the jeep that has seen better days. When we get within 200ft of the girl, Malcolm jumps out and starts to run towards the young girl.

I yell, “Malcolm look out. A rebel is coming and he is heavily armed.”

Malcolm grabs the girl slowly and she begins to scream in Arabic. Neither of us understands her. Brandi jumps out of the vehicle and moves quickly towards the bloody rock. Brandi realizes that the bloody rock is the young girl’s mother. She cannot pick her up so I jump out of the jeep and run to help Brandi.

“Brandi, I’m coming,” I scream over the noise of the rapid gunfire and missiles being deplored.

As I approach Brandi and the young girl’s mother, a land mine explodes as a young rebel runs to intersect us. The rebel is blown into several pieces. I scream as blood and body parts (reigned) rain down on us.

Malcolm drives the jeep as close to us as he can and jumps out to assist us. He helps us manever the mother into the jeep. The mother is covered in (brusies) bruises and is (bleed) bleeding profusely from a head injury.

I whisper softly to myself, “I don’t think she is going to make it. Please don’t die.”

Malcolm drives us back to the refugee camp while I hold the mother and Brandi comforts her daughter.

When we arrive at the camp, I immediately take the mother to the makeshift hospital for treatment. I try to assess the situation while waiting (on) for the doctor. The mother is unconscious~~. She~~ with a head wound and several broken bones. Her pulse is faint as a result of the head injury and loss of blood. I try to stop the bleeding in vain while waiting for the doctor.

“Lord, please let her make it. Her daughter really needs her,” I plead with God.

The doctor finally arrives and decides the mother needs surgery. I leave the tent that serves as the hospital. I realize that the little girl may become an orphan before the end of the day. Death is always a constant in refugee camps.

I know that I must go back out to make another run to the border to find any refugees who are injured or too weary to make it all the way to the camp. This is my job until 1 pm when I assume a shift at the hospital.

On my second trip to the border, I am accompanied by Earl. Earl is a mechanical engineer. He is trying to find a water source near the camp so we can have running water. This is Earl’s first trip to retrieve refugees. Earl has only been in camp for a month.

Earl inquired, “Is it really as dangerous as people say?”

“I don’t understand your question. Do you mean helping refugees to find safety at the camp or coming this close to the border?”

“All of the above,” Earl said with a quiver in his force. He looked so nervous as if he was about to pass out from sheer fear.

“The only thing you really need to worry about are the rebels when they are close to border. Most of them will hang back and try not to be seen. You will find a few brave ones who will come up to you and try to drag the dissident back over the border. What you have to understand is there is no set border, meaning there is not border check or no wall. The land mines are a problem. There are not any on the Jordan side of the border; yet, there are plenty on the Syrian side. The scariest part of this journey is when a Syrian rebel blows to pieces from stepping on a landmine because the rebels often forget where they bury them. Crazy right?!” I exclaimed.

Earl shook his head in disbelief. I could feel what he was thinking. He looked like he was in shock. He stopped moving and looked as if he stopped breathing. I halted the jeep and gently shook Earl.

“Earl, Earl!!! You all right! Talk to me!!” I exclaimed.

“I don’t think I’m rrreaddy for this,” he stuttered.

“I know how you feel. It seems like it will take you forever to adjust. It just takes time. Life here is hard; however, the joy you receive from helping others is beyond anything you will ever know or feel. Just give it (sometime) some time; things will get better for you. What bothers you today, will not affect you tomorrow,” I professed.

Still in shock, Earl slowly shook his head in acknowledgment. He did not seem to perk up until we reached the border.

I scanned the horizon to the west looking for people; however, I did not see anyone. Subsequently, Earl was scanning the east and ~~I heard Earl~~ bellowing to me, “I see

someone, I see someone.” I ran to Earl with my fingers covering my mouth trying to get him to stop shouting at the top of his lungs.

“Hush, hush,” I whispered frantically. “You do not want to call attention to our presence nor the presence of the refugees to the Syrian rebels.”

“I apologize~~d~~,” Earl responded apologetically. “This is my first time remember. I’m just so excited I found ~~someone~~ a group of refugees my first time out.”

We slowly approached the refugees. Earl began to speak to the refugees in Arabic. “تحية طيبة. انت آمن. نحن هنا لمساعدتك. يرجى اتباع استخدام، ونحن سوف يأخذك إلى

الحرية. في حين أننا لا نملك وسائل الراحة المنزلية، وسوف نقدم لك ولعائلتك، وأصدقائك مع ملجأ من الحرب. في نهاية المطاف، ونأمل أن تجد لك منزل جديد حتى منزلك خال من الحرب. أهلا بك.

Greetings. You are safe. We are here to help you. Please follow use and we will take you to freedom. While we do not have the comforts of home, we will provide you, your family, and friends with shelter from the war. Eventually, we hope to find you a new home until your home is free from war. Welcome.”

Needless to say, I was in total shock; I could not believe my ears. Earl spoke to the crowd of 5 women, 10 children, and 3 men like he was talking to me. “Earl, you speak Arabic,” I uttered.

“Since birth,” he stated with a wide toothy grin.

The crowd of refugees began talking to Earl animatedly. Earl forgot about feeling nervous and fell into a comfort zone with the dissidents. Earl walked animatedly with the refugees all the way to camp. I know he will never forget his first day riding to retrieve refugees and I will never underestimate the power of human kindness and sheer willpower. After this act of heroism from Earl, I drove back slowly behind the (entrouage) entourage and contemplated what just happened.

I could not wait to tell Brandi and Malcom at lunch. Lunch and dinner consists of MREs (Meals Ready to Eat). This is the one time in my life where I miss fresh fruits and vegetables. The food is deplorable. One does not have to worry about keeping their figure (becase) because you will never get fat from these meals.

My shift is over at 7 pm. You might think that after my shift is over and I eat dinner that I go to sleep; sleep is a commodity due to the heat, gunfire, winds, and the constant influx of refugees needing medical attention. My life is a constant flow of ups, downs, and disappointments.

I would not change my life right now for anything. Being in Jordan, at the Zataari Refugee Camp has ~~let me know~~ taught me what life is all about. I no longer worry about status, what kind of car I drive, and the latest fashions. Life is truly worth saving and living to the fullest. When I return to the United States, medical school is a top priority since I can do so much more as a doctor working at the refugee camp.