*Untold Stories: Notes from a year of refugee reporting*

**November 2013**

I’m writing a story about Sudanese refugees in Amman, so I go to visit their homes. Many live just 10 minutes’ walk from my flat on Rainbow Street, where Amman’s hip kids come to smoke shisha and harass girls. There are neon lights, TV screens playing World Cup games and organic tea bars that look straight out of California.

I visit a room where 34 men crouched on the floor, telling me that they all sleep there and share the rent. The newest one came two days ago, the oldest two years ago. I notice that one man’s shins are thinner than my forearms. Little cockroaches crawl across the walls. I try not to react.

“We eat only lentils or beans every day,” one man tells me, grinning broad and genuine. I nod, taking notes, writing things they say.

“We all lived in camps. Darfur. But things are bad there.”

I nod, professional, journalistic.

“Our families? Maybe we can talk to them every one or two months. But it is expensive and sometimes there’s no electricity over there.”

One grown man starts trembling when I asked about his family. He clutches a bed sheet over his head, staring at the floor.

“Some of don’t have – we lost them,” my student cuts in, explaining.

*Oh, I see.* I take notes. *How many of you have had a family member die?*

Everyone raises his hands.

**December 2013**

At 55 years old, Mohamedain Suliman is the Sudanese refugee community’s informal leader in Amman. He loses his glasses all the time, often sports a beret and is never far from the grey sedan he drives daily as a Jordanian family’s personal chauffeur. We used this car to deliver more than 100 gas heaters to Sudanese and Somalis across the city this winter, after readers of an article I wrote decided to raise money for refugee winter supplies.

Mohamedain is from Darfur. He’s been living in Jordan for 11 years and is waiting for resettlement to the U.S. I’m more frustrated than he is, wondering why he was promised a plane ticket in 2008 but is here 6 years later, still waiting. I want to see his dreams fulfilled, his kids given a brighter future, his son Walid running college track and then going out for the national team. But a selfish part of me is glad he hasn’t yet left. “*Sho binsawy bidoon wiyak?* What will we do without you?” I ask for myself, but also for the Sudanese community here.

On my drives with Mohamedain, we comb the farthest corners of Amman. He leads me through twisted alleys to homes hidden halfway up hills and behind garbage dumps, to dank and damp and dark rooms where Sri Lankans, Somalis and Sudanese brush shoulders in the city’s margins. Mohamedain knows everyone we meet, where they’re from, what their problems are and who can help. He’s liaised with UNHCR on behalf of the Sudanese for years, without any pay or accolades.

Mohamedain carries two phones with three SIM cards. They ring constantly with Sudanese refugees telling him their problems and harassing him for help. They accuse him of not caring, saying he’s playing favorites and assuming he’s benefiting from this. Mohamedain takes it, reprimanding no one unless they are hurting another. “OK, give me your number,” he says. Those who are desperate, he soothes. Those who can wait, he asks to wait. “I will come back for you.”

**May 2014**

World Refugee Day is coming up, and UNHCR is planning a big event in downtown Amman with refugee children’s theater, art displays, cultural performances from every refugee population and an overall budget in the tens of thousands.

I’m driving with Mohamedain again, on our way to visit some Sudanese refugees at the hospital. They need money for operations, a few thousand JD each that UN agencies and NGOs can’t supply. So the Sudanese are collectively funding their own community’s medical needs, Mohamedain collecting a few JD from each refugee to cover the sick ones’ expenses.

UN staff did contact Mohamedain, he tells me, asking if he could send ten Sudanese guys to play the drums and perform a traditional song at the UNHCR event.

“My community has many needs. We’ll sing and dance for them, no problem,” Mohamedain says. “But I wish they would also listen to our voices.”

**July 2014**

One morning in Lebanon, I walk into an aid worker’s office. She’s flitting nonstop between two rooms, dictating emails and memos in Arabic, drafting debriefs on the day’s deaths in Gaza and juggling crises like spinning plates.

“Last night I hosted this big party,” she tells me.  It was a last-minute ordeal, a private gala pushing an appeal for refugees with protracted illnesses. They needed some tens of thousands of dollars for medical needs that could wait a few weeks: liver or kidney surgeries, dialyses, and so on. These treatments aren’t as urgent as emergencies like Gaza, she says. But without them, people will die.

“So I’m trying to wine and dine all these donors,” the worker says. The caterers are there and she’s prepped to explain the appeal, when they find that there’s no soup. It’s Ramadan. You’ve got to break fast with soup. Her boss starts yelling. She volunteers: “Don’t worry. I’ll make the soup."

It’s 7 p.m., half an hour to *iftar* and she grabs the hired musician. “Buy some vegetables. Any vegetables!” They throw it in a pot with a Maggi cube, then voila and *alhamdullilah*, soup for 20 people. It saves the day. She comes out frenzied, splotches of soup on her Valentino dress, but smiling and serving, and the donors are happy. Some even ask for seconds.

At the end of the night they’ve raised $50,000, plus a few donors pledging more. The refugees will get surgery – some of them, at least, which is good.

Still, she cringes. “Imagine. A life worth 1/20 of a pot of soup.”

**August 2014**

After a long day in Ma’an, I’m in a car inching through Zarqa traffic. Mahmoud, 29 years old and my new Syrian fixer-friend, speaks quick and fast in the dark.

“I remember the first days of the revolution. The first days after a whole life where we were fearful to even think our own thoughts, always watching ourselves, so careful and afraid – I remember how we stood in the streets shouting with the loudest voices we had, *houria!* Freedom! Freedom!”

It’s 8:30 p.m. We’ve been out since 7 in the morning. Cars are honking all around us, their red and orange headlights reflected across Mahmoud’s face.

“My whole body was shaking. That’s how it feels when you’ve been afraid all your life and now you can yell, stand in the middle of the street and yell, freedom! It is amazing. I feel I can never be afraid again. Even now I’ve lost my two brothers, my work, my home, my country – but even if I went back, I could never hear someone say, ‘Be quiet, don’t say that, what if something happens?’ I couldn’t take it.”

“You don’t regret it?” I ask. “So many people are sad now. I meet so many who wish they’d never gone to protest in the first place. Look at the chaos, suffering, death.”

“No.” Mahmoud looks me straight in the eyes. “Freedom is worth more than anything in the world. It’s better to die for truth than to live in silence and fear. There are people dying right now for this idea we had, this belief, this hope. If I could give more for it, I would.”

**September 2014**

Hasan the Islamist scholar is deep in his explanation of ISIS ideology, why jihadists will choose death as a guarantee of life, and how extremism results from hate that is larger than fear. Mahmoud and I are rapt, me clacking furiously at my keyboard as Mahmoud shoots questions in quick-fire Arabic. I lose track of the conversation – too much colloquial *ammiyah* too fast for me to catch, but we’re waxing deep and serious about the meaning of death, what makes dying worthwhile and what we want from life. Then suddenly Hasan’s telling a story:

“Last year my wife died of cancer.”

“*Allah yerhumha,*” Mahmoud murmurs. God have mercy on her soul.

“I didn’t know how to help, what to do, but in the last hour before she died, she was here in our house in the bed, head on my chest.

‘Can I bring you anything?’ I asked her. There was one hour left. ‘Water? Blanket? Anything you want?’

‘*Bidee aieesh*,’ she said. ‘*I want to live.*’”

Mahmoud and I are quiet. *May God keep you*, we murmur. *May God have mercy on her soul.*

**October 2014**

On the bus home the Sudanese are shivering. They’re rowdy, yelling, “Man it’s cold! It’s so cold!” *It’s not like this in Sudan, huh?* I ask. Ha ha ha ha sister, no, Sudan is desert!

*Ah, but Sudan is also forest and mountain and waterfall, I’ve seen it!* I saw pictures at Ustaz Saeed’s house, when his family invited me to lunch and told me about Saeed and his wife’s journeys from Sudan to Kuwait to Iraq to Jordan to Sudan again and then here. He just had a feeling when he saw her, Saeed says, hand on his chest, chuckling. “My heart! It went so fast!” *Love at first sight, that’s what we call it in English*, I say. Saeed’s wife laughs. “You just wanted me to do housework for you, huh?” But there is affection in her eyes.

Sudan’s government took the money Saeed left behind in Kuwait when Saddam invaded, and then didn’t give it to him. When he asked for more than the 8,000 out of 200,000 USD they’d taken, they imprisoned and tortured him for 3 weeks.

*Was this a long time ago?*

“No, this year, during Ramadan.”

**December 2014**

Charred black walls surround Ahmed in the darkness. A burnt smell still fills the room where he and 3 other Sudanese refugees live, and where a robber broke in while they were out looking for work today. He took 1200 JD, two laptops and five mobile phones, and then set their room on fire. By the time they returned, most of their belongings had been incinerated, including the refugees’ asylum papers, passports, birth certificates and diplomas.

Jordanian police came, took pictures and wrote a report confirming that it was arson, but told the Sudanese guys that’s all they could do. “You probably left the door unlocked,” Ahmed says they told him. UNHCR has copies of some refugee papers, but not passports. They have to go to the Sudanese embassy for that, an impossible danger for these Darfur asylum seekers.

Ahmed shrugs into the night, still standing. “This is the life with many problems. These things remind us more to pray,” he says. “*As-sabr jameel*. Perseverance is beautiful.”