

Merry Christmas from a Syrian refugee camp in Lebanon

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I started writing this post in my head on my London-Beirut flight last week and my original title was "Ten things I don't want to remember this year." This morning I felt this un-original title would make it on that list.

I will not try to be original. Instead, I will once again, allow myself to be the emotional woman I am and share with you thoughts from my week back home. My excuse this time is a) it's my birthday and b) it's Christmas. I am a holiday geek. All holidays.



(Photo taken during the filming of a POLIS documentary at an informal Syrian refugee camp in Lebanon's Bekaa valley-December 2015)

I wish you could all meet Maha. Translated from Arabic, the name means, "resembling the moon." She is the woman with a big smile and a pink headscarf in the photo above. I met her in 2013 on a routine media mission to the Bekaa valley back when I was doing communications for UNHCR in Lebanon. At the time, the region was dealing with a soaring number of people fleeing the dreary war next door. Earlier this year, that number hit the 4 million mark.

I will not turn this into a usual refugee story but hear this. It has been close to three years since I first met this brave woman from a Syrian village in rural Aleppo. Since then, I have changed jobs once, moved countries three times, had four phone numbers changed, had three wisdom teeth extracted, managed to get my heart broken once, visited eight countries and started a masters degree.

Last week, I went through my phone and dialed the number I had saved under her name. To my dismay, I heard the same awkward Christmas melody that plays when you ring the family's number. "Why do you still have that weird

phone service,” I joked with her brother-in-law when he picked up. We laughed. This meant however that the woman I have grown fond of over the years was still there, reachable on that same Lebanese SIM card; still living in that same stretch of agricultural land only 200 km away from Syria, in a tent.

Maha and I are almost the same age.

On that visit, the family shared the most wonderful piece of news. Maha’s niece, also called Maha, the little girl being hugged by her grandmother in a light purple headscarf, was now cancer-free. Like always, I spend a lovely time with the family and leave with the promise of staying in touch.

Never a dull day in this part of town.

I come from a magical but yes, almost schizophrenic place. Here too, we have Christmas trees, carols, Turkeys in the oven and Santa Clauses who sneak gifts while everyone is asleep. We also have hospitals filled with injuries from the war next door; we have Lebanese army men at checkpoints praying they will not be targets of a next radical attack; we have a garbage crisis that looms from having a greedy and corrupt government and we have refugees living in flimsy tents expressing how grateful they are for “WhatsApp”, the phone app that helps keep them in touch with family members scattered around the region and more recently, the world.

What we have most is resilience. The ability to make best out of what life throws our way. I know that because standing outside those tents, I promise you will hear laughs and giggles. You will also hear my friends make jokes about how barely anything in the country is functioning while they plan our next road trip and drinks session.

If you are celebrating this week, think about Maha, and take her with you. I let her fill perspective in whatever I do or will end up doing in life. While you might not be able to physically get to her or the thousands of brave women like her, surely you will meet or have already met other another Maha in your communities, the places you have visited and the stories you have read.

To each and every one of you beautiful people out there, wherever you may be, Merry Christmas and cheers, from where I am standing.

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