Imagine

I sat in the van, eating my Keebler Mini Fudge Stripe Cookies, drinking my Cherry Coca Cola Zero, and wishing that my bladder and I had been smart enough to take care of ourselves before the car ride to Salt Lake. I inadvertently looked down and noticed the bit of a bulge above where my pant line started and mentally rolled my eyes. “I really should start working out again,” I moaned to myself. But besides that and the fact that I needed to read for my biology quiz the next day, I was in a good mood. If only this car ride could go faster. Well and some decent-tasting lunch would have been nice too, I hadn’t eaten for at least four hours. But whatever. I updated my facebook status from my phone to “Christine Marie is loving today. Cherry coke (with caffeine!), sunny snowy day, trip to Salt Lake to meet one of the original lost boys of Sudan. Awesome.”

Looking out the window, letting my mind glaze over my problems—my boots that weren’t Uggs, my bank account that wasn’t plentiful, and my parents who wouldn’t listen to me—I took out my MP3 player that wasn’t an iPod, and turned it on. David Archuleta began to serenade me, “Imagine no possessions . . .”

Once we got to the Salt Lake Center, I studied Jial, the man we came to interview, out of the corner of my eye. He had his giant legs stretched out lazily from his seat on the couch, and greeted us with a polite grin. Though polite, that hint of a smile brightened up his entire face; the contrast between his smooth skin, reminiscent of gourmet extra dark chocolate, and his simple white teeth was beautiful. His understated assurance clashed with my childish expectations; perhaps I expected some kind of warrior, or maybe a haggard young man with a lone tear cascading down his cheek.
I grabbed another cookie, and sat down across the room from where he sat with the interviewer. He had a soft voice, laced with the accent of an uprooted life. I settled in as he began his story. It was interesting to start out with but my thoughts began to trail off: quiz tomorrow in bio I needed to do reading for . . . the boy in my ward with the dark brown eyes . . . needed to call my dad . . . summer internship . . . urine . . . wait, what? All other distractions dissipated as I heard him recount his story of making a 1200 mile journey in three months. Collecting his own urine and drinking it because there literally was no water for days. Five years old. Little boys with a couple of the elders from the village. Leaving behind those who couldn’t make the trip. Killing lions, hyenas, anything for food. Seeing his friends eaten by crocodiles as they crossed rivers. Dreams of going to school. No sense of where his family was. Chased by government troops. Cornered by the troops near a river, crossing the river over the shell-ridden bodies of those who had previously been his travel companions. His friends. His family. Lost.

For a moment, all was silent.

Oh wow, this was the same kind of sad as “How Green Was My Valley.” The stories were, of course, totally different but the same kind of thing where each new detail splashed a bit of acid onto my heart and I couldn’t do anything about it.

After the interview, the seven of us there for the shoot gathered around Jial to hear more, anything more he had to say. But instead of pontificating about his life, he asked us about our names, our majors, how we like BYU, etc. He was kind, classy, interested in us—in our pathetic, absolutely pain-free lives. We shared a pleasant conversation for about six minutes, then went our separate ways.

The car ride back was quiet, not because people weren’t talking, but because I wasn’t listening. Not really. I put my headphones back in and resumed “Imagine”

“No need for greed or hunger, a brotherhood of man . . .”

I was a bit peeved. Why did people tell these kinds of stories anyway? It’s not like I could do anything about it. I mentally rifled through the sad movies that had the same effect on me: making me
want to go to sleep for a long time. Maybe Hotel Rwanda . . . but I hadn’t seen that one. I sighed a deep, troubled sigh. What a frustrating life I led.

On the approximately 5.5 minute walk home from the parking spot to my apartment, the cold began to infiltrate the space between my coat and my clothes, then advanced to the space between my clothes and my skin. I mentally rolled my eyes. Hearing the story had helped get me out of my comfortable American bubble but . . .

Wait, had it really?

Sure, kind of like “Life is Beautiful” had. I mentally pulled out the “Yes I’m a spoiled American, but at least I’m an enlightened spoiled American” list. I knew that sad things happen in the world, that life isn’t always good, that I lead an extraordinary life, that I need to spend more time being sad about things I can’t control, that although things like this aren’t really real, the stories . . .

Not real?

I had shaken Jial’s hand. That deep smooth black, almost violet, hand had lifted bits of lion’s flesh to his mouth. It had rested on the African desert, wondering if it would feel the warmth of the sun for another day. It had reached up as an infant, and touched its mother’s face—a face it would be without for most of its young life. Did that hand remember how his mother’s face felt? That hand could tell me stories that would cause my hands to want to shield my ears. And I had touched it.

This wasn’t a plotline that some tubby Hollywood writer with weekend stubble came up with while drinking his coffee, this had really happened. To Jial.

Once home in my dorm room, I kicked off my shoes, changed into my grungiest, most comfortable clothes, and went straight to the computer, ignoring the biology book staring at me from across the room. The Facebook status changed to “Christine Marie is just a spoiled brat” and I sat there, uselessly, trying to solve the problem of real life. What else was real, was out there, separated from me by only a plane ticket, that I didn’t know about?
I browsed a few websites until I found a video about an organization that helped girls escape from the life and mentality of sex trafficking in Cambodia. Little girls no older than thirteen stared back at me with empty eyes. They looked like they could be the sisters of Emily, Eden, and Sarah: the little girls I had been a nanny for my senior year of high school.

Then, there was one about child soldiers. It showcased pictures of children, younger than my little brothers, holding machine guns. Real machine guns. My little brothers and I used to play “Bang bang, you’re dead,” which always ended with a giggle or two, followed by a move to the Lego table to build a green, yellow, blue, and red superstructure of a grandeur that the world had never seen. These little children carried real guns. They really killed, or were killed.

My brain, heart, and stomach all combusted at once. I had to get out. But it was cold outside and loud in the lobby, so I just went into the bathroom, turned on the tub and got in. Clean, clear water surrounded me. I could drink it, I could bathe in it, I could even throw it out. Instead, my emotions spilled over as tears into it.

After a bit of catharsis, I got out and rummaged through the piles of clothes in my dresser. Many of them had really never been worn much—three girls camp shirts, t-shirt from late summer honors, the faded pair of jeans that made my thighs look huge. Many of the Lost Boys traveled naked through the desert. Jial talked about trying to remember his last meal. I surveyed the now-empty bowls left on the desk by my roommate and I: evidence of 2:00 a.m. snacks. He couldn’t find his family. Before college I was counting the days until I could lose mine. He had nothing, I had everything. What was I doing with everything?

Not much: school, church, friends, baking cookies for someone here and there.

The stories meant nothing if I didn’t do something. I opened my laptop and went back to the site about child soldiers. I clicked on the sky-blue “Donate Now” logo, gave them my debit card information, and selected how much I could give. It wasn’t much.

But it was something.
I can’t go save the world on my own. I can’t swoop over to Africa and save sweet little boys from becoming killers. I can’t fix all the evil in the world.

But I can do something, even just a little bit.

That’s just for now, though. Assuming I continue my plans to graduate with my undergrad and then go to law school, I will have the resources to do more.

“You may say I’m a dreamer, but I’m not the only one.”

I turned off my MP3 player. I refuse to just dream, I’m going to do. Which meant I needed to get back to biology. To graduate, I’d need to pass. To get into Columbia Law School, I’d need an A. So instead of rolling my eyes or moaning inwardly, this time I picked up the dreaded biology book with determination. I updated my status one last time to “Christine Marie is just a spoiled brat who’s going to change the world,” shut my laptop, and began reading.

“Chapter 3: Biological Molecules”