



Alive in the burning flames

It's March 22, 2016, and a nightmare happens—an explosion—in Brussels, Belgium, the heart of Europe. I am at Brussels International Airport, on my way to visit relatives in sunny Florida, USA, when the first of three bombs explodes just metres away. I was too close to avoid it and too far to be instantly killed. I am swept off my feet in the midst of burning flames.

I never made it to Florida; instead, I awoke to a living hell in the intensive care unit (ICU) of Erasme hospital in Brussels. I was on sedatives, antibiotics, and dozens of other medications; was in an artificial coma for several weeks, fighting multiple infections; and had almost 30 operations to spare my leg and hip, which had both been destroyed as a result of the blast. Doctors, nurses, physiotherapists, and all the other medical staff were present 24 h a day, for me and for all the other victims of the bombing. I remember briefly waking from the coma in excruciating pain and thinking, "Where am I? What the hell happened?" Just touching any part of my body would make me scream and the medication caused me to vomit frequently. I thought the nightmare would never end.

Despite the pain and suffering, I have some good memories from my time in the ICU, including the warm smiles of the nurses. Sometimes they would put a hand on my shoulder to comfort me, although I often wished I could have more physical contact, such as a hug, and more verbal exchange. They would often push me outside in my bed to enjoy the sun, but I had to wear sunglasses because my eyes were still damaged from the flames.

After 3 months of being confined to the ICU hospital bed, unable to move, with a urinary tract, a feeding tube, a peripherally inserted central catheter line in my arm, an external fixator in my leg, and vacuum-assisted closure therapy, I was transferred to an internal medicine department.

On the day, the bomb swept me metres away, but its long-term effects have set me back more than 30 years in

terms of my physical health. For 3 months I had to relearn how to sit up and eventually stand up. After weeks of daily practice, I was finally able to take a few, exhausting and painful, steps. I finally made it from my bed to the door of my hospital room, which at this point seemed more like a prison cell. I remained on the orthopaedic and trauma unit for 5 months, continuing to fight ongoing battles of infections, to have operations, and to learn how to use a wheelchair and walk down the hall. Despite the long recovery, all hope was not lost.

In February, 2017, I was transported by ambulance to a rehabilitation centre where I received more intensive physical therapy and became more mobile and autonomous. For the first time in over a year, I was finally able to have my first shower. Before the bombing, I had taken many things for granted: a hot shower, a warm bed, a nice meal, my family, the sun, the rain, good sleep—but no longer.

The road to recovery was long; I would see patients come and go and wonder when it would be my turn to leave and go home. Not a day went by that I would not cry. No amount of physical training in my previously athletic life could have ever prepared me for the physical and mental pain I suffered: it was unparalleled. My body, skin, and each cell were in pain. I constantly felt the burning flames of the explosion on my skin and my mind was in constant turmoil; the scene of the explosion would play over and over again in my mind. Not one night would I sleep well. In total, I spent 2 and a half years at the rehabilitation centre, with multiple treatments (kinotherapy, ergotherapy, psychotherapy) and even more operations, but I also enjoyed the sun, smiles, books, and exchanges with other patients.

Similar to soldiers who return from the battlefield and learn to cope with post-traumatic stress, or to people with depression, I am currently coping with both. I am still on medication (antidepressants, vitamins, and sleeping pills) and have good days and bad. I still have reoccurring thoughts or flashbacks of the attacks, but I strive each day to look forward, continuing my therapies and thanking the hospital staff for their multiple interventions and patience.

On March 22, 2020, it will be 4 years after the bombings in Brussels. People tend to forget as time marches on, except for the victims, their family and friends, the community, and the hospital staff. To this day, I have undergone over 50 operations, have had more needle injections and blood samples than I can remember, but I continue to look out to the horizon each morning with hope.

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