

Sends Photos Whatsapp

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Refugees' travel requires invisibility. Crossing deserts, seas, forests in the dark. Keeping their heads down, crossing one border and hopefully the next. A month, six months, a year, several years. Finally, they arrive somewhere safe enough and ask for permission to build new lives. In Brussels, some of those waiting for an answer are given lodging here, in an old hospital turned reception center. And this is where we meet them.

In the middle of the old hospital is a wide ramp once used for wheelchairs, its smooth plaster walls spiraling up eight floors. We start at the bottom, writing on the wall in thick black ink: SEND PHOTOS WHATSAPP beside our phone number. The center staff have printed a dozen pages of photos taken on field trips, so we begin with those. We cut them out and paste them onto the wall with watery glue from a plastic bucket. People passing by pause to watch and we turn from the swish swish of our stiff paintbrush to say hello.

Where is my photo? they ask us. *You have to send them to us, then we will put them up*, we say. *I can have my photo on the wall?!* They don't believe us at first. *Which ones? Whichever ones you want.*

They send photos of themselves trying on this new country. Posing in front of landmarks like tourists, sunglasses reflecting the silver of Atomium. On a boat ride in Bruges, smiling and flashing peace signs for the camera. Arms crossed as they lean carefully against a shiny black BMW. On a tour of the European Parliament, rows of empty desks curving away behind them. Huddled together in front of a gray chateau, under a cold sky, hands deep in their pockets.

(Was this winter the first time you saw snow? Yes. What did you think? I thought it was strange, wallahi!)

Do we exist if we are not seen? SEND PHOTOS WHATSAPP. We cut and glue. They send photos to leave a trace, joining those who were here and those who will arrive. They send photos, signatures in a guest book to say *I was here*. Day-old babies swaddled in pastel blankets, eyes gently closed. Iftar celebrations, platters of rice and soda bottles spread out across a table. Children stacking red and yellow blocks or riding bikes in the hallway. Men lifting weights in the center's makeshift basement gym, grimacing with muscles flexed. Someone standing on a bright beach, on the side of a road, on the route to here.

(This Turkey border. Two boys, an arm stretched to take the selfie, empty land behind them. Is your friend in the picture also in Belgium now? No. Do you know where he went? I don't know.)

We type our phone number into their contact lists and tell them to send photos whenever they want. They give our number to others, who want their photos on the wall, too. Sometimes they send us messages or voice recordings, asking how we are, what we are doing. They write in the morning waiting for language class to start, in the middle of the night while breaking their Ramadan fast.

(How are you sister? Come to table)

The first wall fills and we move on to the next floor. We cut and glue as people pass, some stopping to point out certain photos – that man was here but left, that woman was funny, this child was noisy, that was the day we went to the zoo, this is me with my friend. A young couple lifts their son out of his stroller, holding him up in front of his photo. He coos as his mother kisses his cheeks and his father's laughter echoes down the ramp.

(Where is this city? This is in the northern part of Belgium. Netherlands or French? It is in Belgium, but they speak Dutch there.)

If we are slow to print new photos, the next time they ask where their photos are. While we sit on the floor and cut, they flip through the stack of printouts, looking for themselves. I was here. Sometimes they sit with us and pick up the extra pair of scissors or show us where a photo has started to peel away from the wall. One late winter afternoon, before the hallway lights have turned on, someone holds his cellphone up to illuminate the wall so we can keep working. We ask them and they teach us greetings in Dari, Arabic, Portuguese, Swahili, Pashto, Somali. They offer us coffee or tea or candy bars, ask if we will be back again tomorrow. It feels like we can never work fast enough; there is always someone getting ready to leave before we reach them.

(Why don't you paste my photos? I am waiting.)

Some show us photos on their phones before sending them, as if they need permission. *This one ok?* they ask. *This my baba.* One man shows us photos of his son in a hospital bed, after brain tumor operation, and gestures at the wall, looking concerned. *Ok for this?* We tell them to send any photos they want, as many as they want. They send photos of brothers and sisters back home, of *baba* on a blue bench in the sun, far away. Selfies with girlfriends, football practice, TikTok screenshots. A boy asks us to take a photo of the Neymar Jr. screensaver on his family's tablet. A few send photos of themselves in crowded rubber boats, crossing the Mediterranean Sea. Sometimes, when they have moved on to other corners of Belgium, they keep sending photos, so we paste them up and send them photos of their photos.

(How are you? You're good? Thank you, thank you very much. I love you.)

Four little girls troop by one morning, each with a purse draped over her shoulder, smiling mischievously. They huddle nearby, covertly sharing a stolen lipstick before presenting themselves to us to be photographed. Several weeks later, their photos now up on the wall, two of the girls call their mothers over, pointing at themselves and their friends. We offer small squares of colored paper for the kids to draw on. The youngest ones make loops and scribbles and ask us to write out their names for them, while the older ones draw smiling hearts and sunflowers. We place the drawings on the wall, little pops of pink and green and yellow nestled in between the photos. Late one afternoon two boys spend a long time laboring over their papers, crumpling a half dozen before they are satisfied with their work, which they paste up themselves. *Roanado v. Messi Messi Loser.* We try to keep all of them, the hundreds of stories, on the wall. Over and over, we replace photos torn down by carelessness or boredom, covering the empty places with photos from new residents. Those that are missing, who will know they were here? We discover that someone has reattached a few photos with chewing gum, carefully placing a small sticky piece at each of the corners. Using scotch tape, someone adds a watercolor painting of a rainbow, placing it high up so it can't be easily taken down. One afternoon we bring permanent markers for people to write on the wall. Some of them type translations into their phones, carefully copying out the letters of what they want to say. *Hello I am happy to see you today. Thank of you God Bless. Man is a social animal. My name is John.*

Sometimes we lose them and it is only their trace on the wall that's left. They move on to other refugee centers or leave Belgium, their telephones break or their phone numbers change – the little checkmarks rest at one instead of two, our WhatsApp messages suspended somewhere in space. Sometimes they just stop responding, disappear, and we have to let them go.

(Just checking to see how things are at your new center? Not sure if you got this, are you there? How are you doing? We miss you! Is everything ok?)

But on the wall they are still here, part of a gigantic family photo album spanning countries and years, present to everyone who walks by. Someone's mother on another continent across the sea is now also in Belgium, smiling down on us as we work. Someone's little sister, on the other side of a mountain pass thousands of kilometers away, gazes calmly at passersby while someone else's uncle frowns from his perch. We gather them together and give them a place in the story of their sons and brothers and nieces waiting here, in this old hospital. A social network in print form, a paper Facebook or Instagram, created by and for those who have come through, their faces looking back at all of us. A new resident stops and asks, *All of these people have been here, in this center?* As we work, a staff member stands in front of the wall, gazing at the all of the faces, a stack of files in her arms. *It's strange to see some of the residents who were here but now have been gone a long time.*

One afternoon we arrive to find coffee splashed across a swath of the wall, staining the photos. Someone's bad news becomes part of the story and we leave it untouched. *I was here.* We cut and glue, rewriting our phone number on the wall when it is covered over with new photos. Sometimes, someone will ask, *How much?*, pointing at the photos. *It's free,* we say. *Just send, we will print and put them up.*

One man pauses to watch as we adjust the corners of a photo and sweep across it with a brush full of glue.

Why do you do this? he asks us. *Because you should be seen.*