



Anything
out of nothing

Everybody knows the stories about refugees
These are the stories of refugees







‘When I returned to my birthplace in Jordan, local villagers said: Hassan, you left here as a normal man. You return as a refugee.’

While her father Hassan tells the tragic story of their family, I’m watching his little daughter Rachad. She’s six and no one demonstrates more clearly the coarse arbitrariness that decides if you become a refugee or not. She’s a little ballerina, so elegant. The cabin she lives in is really quite ugly and yet it’s also very beautiful. Because I see meticulous care and attention in every detail. In the colourful blankets on the walls, in the blue curtains, the games in the cupboard, the pile of cuddly toys on top, the brick wall her father is building around the cabin for the winter.

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Hassan: ‘I grew up in this Jordanian village, Umm el-Jimal. I swam in the swimming pool beside the ruins of the old town. I went to school here. I had all my friends here. Ten years ago I sold my house to go and live with my brother in Syria. It was the right decision at the wrong moment.

‘Our new house in Syria was finished, the children were born and then the war broke out. I fled with my brother to Umm el-Jimal. We first rented a house. But the owner needed it himself. So I bought this cabin and built a brick wall around it.

‘It’s good to wait in my old village until the war is over and not in a camp like many Syrians. My children don’t quarrel because they don’t live in a packed, crowded place like Za’atari. They can play outside, the neighbours know their names. My family is free. I used to have a house here. Now we may live in a cabin, but at least it’s ours.’

*Rachad (6) from Dara’a
Umm el-Jimal, Jordan*





Safa'a is a little uncomfortable when I talk to her. She gives short answers. Falls silent. So I start about school. 'What's your favourite subject?' 'Arabic.' 'Do you write anything yourself?' 'Yes.' 'What do you write?' 'Poems.'

I am surprised. 'Can you recite one?' She shakes her head. But then she takes a small piece of paper out of her pocket and begins to read aloud. Her shyness fades and her monotone voice changes to a lilting chant.

*Keep calm, wait, keep calm
Because we are far from home*

*Send my peace and my love
To our country, where we grew up*

*Send the birds in our country my greetings
Because they shall sing when we come home*

*Greet our lemon trees, greet my family
Who fed me, who sang to me, who taught me life*

*My mother still smells her bed from home
Greet my neighbours, my beloved ones*

*Greet all courageous people
Bow to our last strength*

That we gave together for our country

*Safa'a (15) from Dara'a
Al-Za'atari camp, Mafraq, Jordan*





‘Winter is coming. But we’re not afraid.’

Suleyman lives with his family in a skilfully constructed tent in Umm el-Jimal, Jordan. He collected plastic and jute sacks which his wife turned into tent cloth. It took the whole family about a week to build their new home.

The tent is spacious, cool and clean. As long as it is so hot, a tent is much more comfortable than the cabins often used in refugee camps. However, in the winter it’s a different story. And winter is on its way.

This tent is not watertight. And it’s a lot more difficult to heat than a cabin. Yet Suleyman is not really worried. ‘In the winter, you have to lay plastic sheets under your tent cloth. You make a hole in it to let the smoke escape. That’s basically all. You do need a fire and you have to make your tent watertight. And you shouldn’t complain. Because that’s not going to help you.’

*Suleyman (42) from Dara’a
Umm el-Jimal, Jordan*

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‘Hussein is my friend. We have lived next door to each other all my life. When I fled to Lebanon, he came too. To be with me.’

Anaz and Hussein live in Sabra, Beirut, where many Palestinians live. Hussein is shy. Anaz is very open. When Anaz talks about their friendship, he also speaks on behalf of Hussein. It’s a story that isn’t easy for people in the west to follow, because friendship between men is different here.

‘We have been inseparable since childhood. We used to live a hundred metres away from each other in Hama. Every day we walked to work together. After that we had dinner and we often slept at each other’s house. And because we are both still single, we are more important to each other than family.’

‘When I fled to Lebanon, Hussein came too. He couldn’t live without me. And I couldn’t live without him. First he found a job some way away, at Mount Lebanon, as a building worker. It paid better than here in the city and there’s more work there. But Hussein gave up the job.’

‘Hussein, did you give up the job for Anaz?’

‘Yes.’

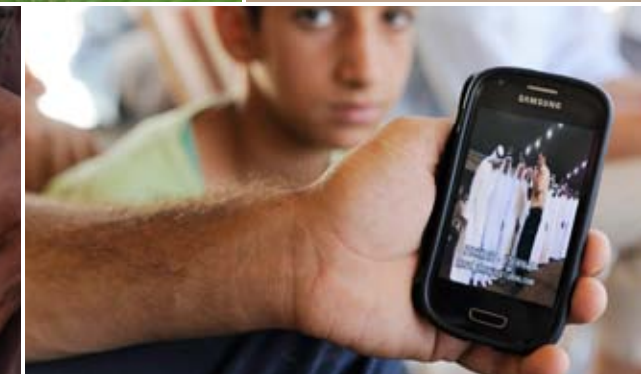
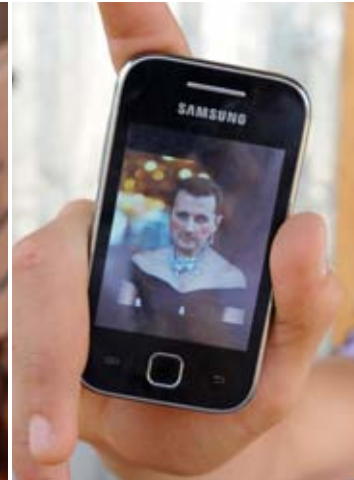
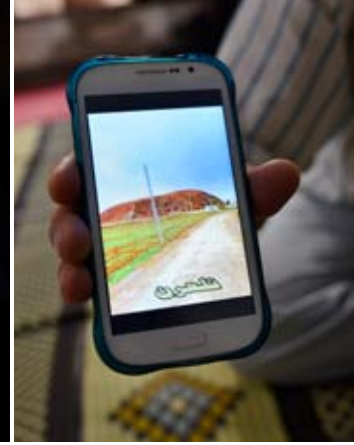
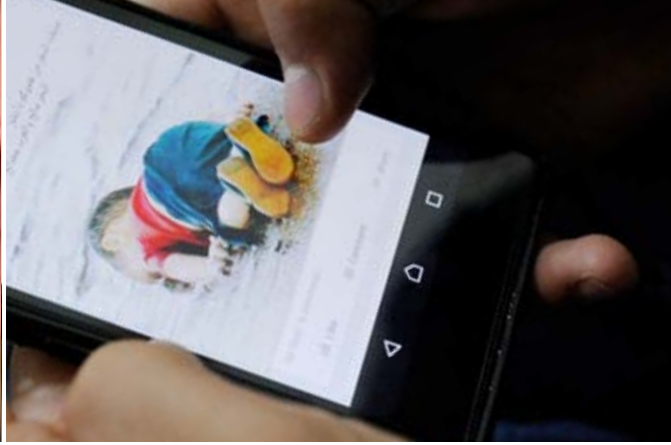
‘Why? It’s very difficult for Syrians to find good work in Lebanon.’

‘My friendship with Anaz is more important than money, work, family, whatever. We have to be together every day.’

Anaz: ‘Only then are we happy.’

*Hussein (31) and Anaz (28) from Hama
Beirut, Lebanon*

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'My wife was pregnant with our third child. She needed a Caesarean. In Lebanon that costs two thousand dollars. I can't afford that. In Syria it only costs a hundred dollars.'

'When she was eight months pregnant, I took my wife, son and daughter to get a taxi. Her family in Hama was waiting for her. It was April. When I waved good-bye, I had no idea when I would see them again. Or whether they would arrive safe and sound.

'Six weeks later, her aunt called me. My son was born fifteen days earlier. But because there hadn't been electricity for weeks, she couldn't call any earlier. His name is Yezan and he's completely healthy. I was so happy!

'It's three and a half months later now. I can see my son growing up via Whatsapp. The electricity is off so often that a message may take days. I am not with my family. I'm very worried about their safety, because there's a lot of bombings in Hama. I don't know whether I can ever bring my family back to Lebanon, because now it costs a lot of money to get them in.

'I can keep this up for a few more months. If they're not here by then, I'll go back to Syria. We'll just have to live there.'

*Hayel (30) from Hama
Beirut, Lebanon*





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Preface

Most Syrian refugees have but one overriding desire: to get back home. Back to their beloved home country, their village, their neighbours. People talk endlessly about the mountains they love, the river that flows past their home, the bread from the baker in their street and the olives from their own trees. Oh, Syria...

But now their lives are standing still. They're not allowed to work, the children often don't go to school and the future is far from clear. Anyone who lives in a large, official camp like Al-Za'atari in Jordan is basically imprisoned. There are armoured army vehicles all around the camp to prevent the refugees from leaving without permission.

Yet the stories we share in this book are not about caged people in need of help. They are about willpower and the ability to cope. That is what touches us time and again: people's ability to make something of their lives, even when the world around them is collapsing. Hope, trust and warmth – to my great surprise – are what we most often see when we talk to refugees.

I can feel it in the way families still function here. They give so much attention and love to the children and each other. I can tell by the way they welcome us. Even the very poorest families somehow manage to bring out tea and a cookie. And it is also apparent in the stories people tell. 'Too much problem,' we keep hearing. And yet hardly anyone gives up.

This is the story we want to share. Without politics or judgement. No right or wrong, no good or bad. But what would we call the book? One day I was walking through Al-Za'atari, and was obliged (much to my dismay) to have policeman Abdul at my side. He was just as surprised as I was by how fast the camp was changing, in a positive sense. Abdul pointed at the way all kinds of materials are recycled; the refugees are very skilled at that. 'These people can make anything out of nothing,' he said admiringly.

Abdul didn't realise, but he'd just given us a title for the book. Because these four words sum it all up. The incredible resilience of the Syrians. The way they never bow their heads. Whatever happens, however great the setbacks. The endless creativity to survive in places where we would probably give up after only a couple of days. The dignity with which they do that.

Anything out of nothing.

Thijs Heslenfeld

thijs@thijsheslenfeld.com