

Belgrade Express

ONE LAST ROAD TRIP

WITH MY BROTHER

This brochure tells the story of a few days travel to Belgrade, hitchhiking and catching buses, of two activist brothers on a journey to meet their Serbian comrades, who've been fighting for months against the deep-rooted corruption of an authoritarian regime. Their uprising began after a tragic accident took the lives of 15 people in Novi Sad on November 1st, 2024. Since then, a wave of protest has swept across the Balkans, calling for justice and real democratic change.

The goals of this road trip were modest but heartfelt: to meet as many people as possible along the way, to show support to the Serbian people, and to draw inspiration from their tactics and spirit – building bridges between struggles, from here to there.

LES EDITIONS AUTOGEREES



Since November 2024, Serbia has been experiencing a massive wave of mobilization, led particularly by students. The Novi Sad tragedy (the collapse of a train station canopy), attributed to construction flaws linked to corrupt projects involving numerous political figures in the country, sparked a wide-scale anti-corruption movement. Thousands of protesters regularly gather, organize blockades, and occupy universities...

The demonstrators are demanding the full release of renovation documents, effective legal prosecutions, snap elections, and a drastic increase in the higher education budget. Several ministers have already resigned, but no real accountability has yet been established. In this context, President Aleksandar Vučić—criticized for his authoritarianism—is considering early elections without setting a date, while accusing the protesters of being manipulated by foreign powers.

Despite public pressure, the authorities continue to silence the press, the police respond with heavy-handed repression, and pro-government militias intimidate students. In an increasingly tense geopolitical climate, Serbia, currently negotiating its accession to the European Union, is seen by Brussels as backsliding democratically. Isolated on the international stage, Serbians continue to fight alone for justice and radical political change.

JOUR " 1

9:30 a.m., Wednesday. Market day in Joyeuse, Ardèche.

Our bags are packed. We're traveling light: a few clothes, sleeping bags and hammocks, a book each, a film camera. My brother's carrying his manual label maker, I've got my mobile tattoo kit, to trade or share along the way. No fixed plans for sleeping. Just a paper map with a rough idea of the route, and clean phones (no social media, just a Signal chat to share updates and photos with loved ones).

We leave Ardèche with our thumbs out, the trip begins. That's the beauty of hitchhiking: it's all about who you meet, it's fast and simple. We make it to the border pretty quickly. A retired IT guy picks us up and drops us in Oulx, a little alpine village in northern Italy, around 5 p.m.

That's when the first struggles hit. In some countries, hitchhiking can be tricky, and Italy's one of them. Our mistake was getting dropped off outside the highway. Even standing on the proper ramp toward Turin, no one stops. Night falls. We walk into town to grab some food and find a place to crash.

My brother goes around the restaurants, he's a pro at foraging (and the occasional swipe). He comes back with slices of pizza, warm rice, some veggies, and gyozas. We feast like kings, and it brings a bit of warmth to the evening.

Our chances of finding a place to stay are fading, so we decide to "camp" by the roadside behind some trees. My brother heads off to check the dumpsters and comes back with two huge, clean cardboard boxes. "Cardboard's great insulation!" he says. He's not wrong — we lay down inside them with our sleeping bags.

It's 2°C, and a cold breeze keeps me from sleeping. I keep one eye on our stuff, and take in my first night under the stars in a long time.



JOUR 2

We wake up at the crack of dawn. My brother cuts up a piece of cardboard to mark out our destinations (Turino, Milano, Venice, Slovenia). We set up again by the roadside, and for four hours, just like the day before, no one stops. Even if we're two dudes with kind of scruffy looks (my brother with his beard and hobo clothes, me with a shaved head and visible tattoos), we keep smiling and throwing big friendly waves to win people over. The only car that pulls up that morning? The police. Passport check, everything's in order.

By noon, we're wiped. There's a train from Oulx to Milan. It's cheap and honestly, we need the break. While we wait, my brother does his magic scavenging around the station, we end up with so many veggies and cheeses that we have to leave two crates behind on the platform. We make ourselves some sandwiches and recharge on the train.

Once in Milan, we start walking toward the highway. My brother found a gas station on the map to try hitchhiking again. But the highway access is locked down by huge fences, gates, and cameras everywhere. No big deal. My brother spots a trail running alongside the fence. After 200 meters, he pulls up part of the fence and slides underneath, tossing his bag over first. I'm not feeling it, way too sketchy. I'd rather head back into the city and find a safer way out. But he's already through, waving at me to follow. We sneak along the highway for about 400 meters, climb a few barriers, and finally make it to the service station, dodging all the cameras. Relief.

Coincés sur une aire, il faut dépasser
la crainte de pomper l'air, l'air de rien.
La pompe nous sert, mais la Serbie semble
bien derrière, et on serre nos derrières pour
éviter passer la frontière.

Je suis bien content de voir qu'il y a
des gens qui y croient...



En direction
de l'Italie

le chantier TAV Lyon-Turin

The goal is to stick to our route by getting dropped off at highway rest stops. It's easier to talk directly with people there, and we start practicing our little catchphrase: "Ciao, scusi, siamo due fratelli de Francia e viaggiamo in Serbia..." My brother gestures wildly each time, stumbling over his words, mixing English, Spanish and Italian. I laugh a lot. But it works, and the few Italians who give us rides lift our spirits a bit.

In the evening, we find ourselves near Venice, dozing off slumped over a table inside a highway rest stop. At least it's warm, and not too noisy...



JOUR 3

Hitchhiking resumes, and an English guy takes us all the way to Ljubljana in Slovenia. We chat a lot, mostly my brother, who shares stories from his previous hitchhiking trips through Slovenia and Croatia, his travel philosophy, and how he sees each encounter as meaningful. For fun, I say, "Me? I'm just travelling with my brother to make sure he's okay!"

Slovenians and Croatians are lovely people, super warm and easy to talk to. We get to Zagreb in the evening, dropped off by Matjaz, a guy so cool and moving that as soon as we step out of his car, I tell my brother, "We're definitely gonna run into him again someday."

There's a FlixBus from Zagreb to Belgrade overnight, perfect, we'll be able to rest while saving a night in a hostel... We take our time strolling through the streets, putting up stickers and subversive label messages, grabbing a pint of beer and a kebab (Ali Kebaba near the Zagreb bus station, five stars for real).

We're so hyped about finally arriving that we forget to sleep, reminiscing about childhood memories. I love my brother, even if he's a bit scatterbrained and forgot that Serbia isn't in the EU. Good thing he remembered to bring his passport...

JOUR 4

Saturday, April 12, 4 AM. Here we are, in Belgrade. The timing is perfect because we read somewhere that a big protest was planned for the day. But we quickly realize we didn't have all the details: it's a weekend of festivities organized by the government to downplay the previous mobilizations (almost 400,000 people on the streets in March) and create the illusion of massive support for President Aleksandar Vučić.

There's a strange atmosphere in the capital, huge stages are set up in the avenues, loudspeakers blast a mix of folk and old-school techno, flags are waving, and all the fascists in the country are parading. Thousands of them are coming from the surrounding regions, even Kosovo, with their travel, meals, and accommodation paid for by the presidential party. Classic propaganda.

We quickly cross the city center to finally drop off our bags at the hostel. We're welcomed by the manager, Zach, an American in his fifties, who seems pretty nice until he opens his mouth. He's super excited about the rally organized for the weekend and invites us to join the festivities, "it's gonna be amazing." The New Yorker is a turbo-conspiracy-fascist, pro-Trump-Putin, and spreads all the government propaganda lies. We exchange a side glance with my brother, and we pretend to be two apolitical tourists who just arrived and are discovering what's happening here. My brother plays it up, asking him questions to see how far his reality-denial goes.

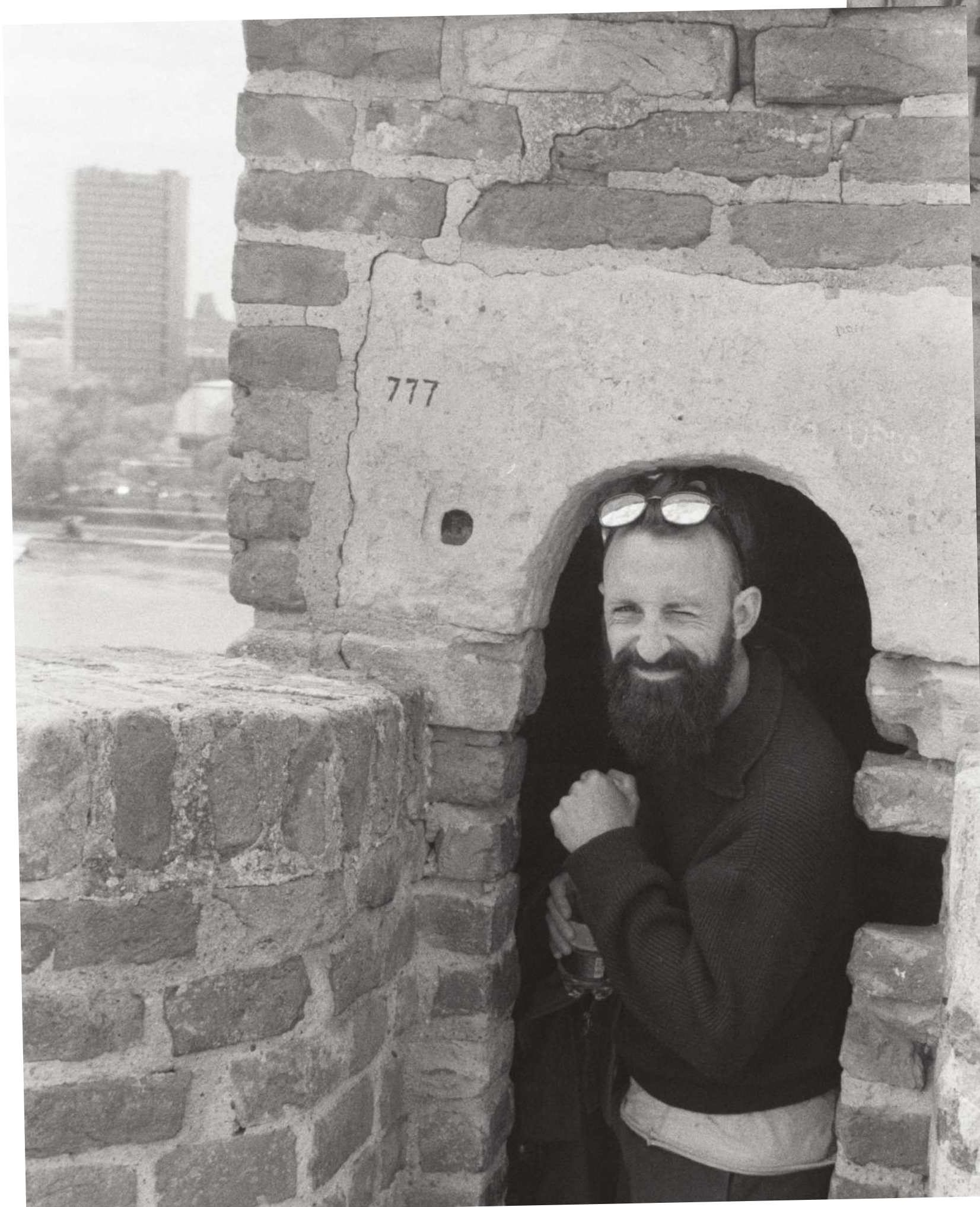
When I go to take a shower (the first one of the trip!), Zach quietly slips to my brother that the people in the dorm next door are undercover cops, here to help with the rally. Great, we're right in the lion's den... We hide in our room to rest a bit and prepare for what's next. In the afternoon, we stroll through the historic center before crashing the parade. The corruption and political smoke and mirrors are everywhere. The organizers are passing around forms to join the president's new support party, people are playing the violin, the accordion, and the kids are dancing in traditional costumes. The number of shaved heads per square meter is alarming...



We take a breather as we leave the crowd, the universities aren't far, and the students have been blocking the buildings for months. It's from them that the protest movement started, the citizens organized themselves and marched to the capital. Despite the government's media stating they're manipulated by "foreign agents", most Serbs aren't fooled and see in them the innocence and purity of youth ready to fight to put an end to this illiberal regime.

A few students are hanging out outside one of the universities, we chat with them for a bit, and we part ways after exchanging firm handshakes and a few contact details.

It's 6 PM, back to the hostel for a short nap, which ends up turning into a long night.



JOUR 5

We wake up feeling refreshed after 15 hours of sleep, and head out for a walk in Zemun, a bohemian and artsy neighborhood to the west of Belgrade, by the Danube. After an hour of walking, we hop on a bus to speed things up a bit. But 100 meters later, traffic is stopped. Peeking outside, we see people and banners in the distance at an intersection. We join the group on foot and realize where we are.

It's 11:52 AM. And every day since the accident at the Novi Sad train station square, students and citizens gather in the streets, block traffic, and observe 15 minutes of silence for the 15 victims. For us, having just arrived, this moment is intense and heavy. People get out of their cars to pay their respects, the police whisper, and a drone hovers above the crowd. All generations are present, and passersby stop, lowering their heads. Not a sound, not a honk, just the song of the birds and the ticking of the pedestrian lights.



A whistle signals the end of the long fifteen minutes. A guy in the distance just shouted some things, which seems to upset the protesters, who rush towards him to encircle him, applying pressure, always without violence, until he is escorted out of the crowd by the police. We follow the group for a few minutes, until we reach a large building. It's the agricultural faculty, and in front of it, choirs are singing, others are giving speeches, or presenting the week's program. You can eat and drink for a donation, and we take the opportunity to chat with a few students. The welcome is warm, and one of them, Alex, invites us to enter the faculty.



ТРУЛО
ДО
СВ

ГОДИШНИКОВЕ НА ОКУПАТОР

НИКЕЛИ

The building is huge, and surprisingly well-maintained for a place that's been occupied for months, not a sticker or graffiti on the walls. A few students are handling security at the entrance, everything seems well-organized. A long hallway has been turned into a massive pantry and kitchen, where food and supplies are pouring in from all over the neighborhood. The lecture hall has become a direct democracy assembly, where every decision is voted on by the students. Some classrooms have been converted into dorms, where each student has their own little "room" behind partitions and towels hung up. We warmly thank Alex for showing us all of this, and we offer to come back the next day to give tattoos to anyone who wants one, and potentially sleep there in exchange. We exchange our numbers, and go out to continue our walk in Zemun. An hour later, a message from Alex: many students are up for tattoos, and they'll vote soon to see if we can sleep there. This is looking good. Either way, the meeting is set for the next morning, around 11 am, before the moment of silence.



JOUR 6

We leave the cursed hostel to join our student comrades in their faculty. What a welcome, they guide us to the "guest" dormitory, a classroom filled with mattresses, duvets, and incredibly fluffy pillows. This is going to be the best sleeping arrangement of the week, that's for sure.

The tattoos are scheduled for the whole afternoon starting at 2 pm, but already a few students, excited about the event, come to keep us company. I have no idea what designs I'll be tattooing on them, and neither do they, it seems. Some ideas come up, but the one that grabs their attention is from one of their badges: a rotten apple with flies around it, and the words written in Serbian on the fruit: "Rotten to the core", their symbol of the fight against corruption. I do a few sketches and the first student steps up. It's her first tattoo, and she wants it on the inside of her arm, discreet and small. I get to work. And so, it begins—a few hours of tattooing on about twelve volunteers, almost all rotten apple designs, with or without flying flies, more or less big, in various places on their bodies. My brother takes photos and videos, passionately chatting with them. Next to us, they're listening to 2000s music, making beads to turn into bracelets. They give one to each of us.



The moment is intense and marks five months of blockade and direct action, the first political protest movement for most of them. Some haven't left the campus since, and most are determined to go all the way, to raise their demands high, force the current regime to abdicate, and rebuild a just society, free from authoritarianism. They are strengthened by the support of an entire population, and they will inspire generations of young Serbs to come. That very evening, a flash protest is organized in front of the national TV station's offices, to protest the unfair treatment and demonization of the protesters in the media. We would have joined, but the day was exhausting, and we need to leave early the next day. Another time.

JOUR 7

We leave the agricultural faculty early in the morning to catch the bus to Zagreb, Croatia. A bit too confident in the efficiency of Serbian public transport, we miss our bus by a fucking minute after running the sprint of our lives. We spend half an hour catching our breath and book our seats for the next bus, which leaves a few hours later. We arrive in Zagreb much later than expected, a short tram ride to the edge of the city, and then the thumbs go up again. It had been a while. After an hour of walking to get away from the city and closer to the highway, a car stops. It's Matjaz, the guy who had picked us up a few days earlier. Our savior. He was heading home but decides to take us as far as he can, crossing the border and dropping us off at a gas station in Slovenia.

It's already late, cars are few and people are in a hurry, so we sit on the terrace of the highway rest area. My brother gathers chairs to make a bench, slips into his sleeping bag, and tries to sleep a little. I can't get a wink of sleep; all night, school buses unload streams of Serbo-Croatian kids who settle around us, yelling everywhere. I connect to the café's wifi, and the weather for the next few days doesn't look good—it's raining all along the way back. The energy is no longer the same as it was on the way here, we're exhausted. I consider all the options, but the best one is to take a bus from Ljubljana at 11am the next day to head back to Lyon or Paris. 20 hours of travel for 50€ each. Fair enough.





JOUR 8

Since hitchhiking still isn't working, my brother negotiates with a bus driver to take us to Ljubljana, about a hundred kilometers away. We book our return trip to France right away, and in the meantime, we visit the city center. It's cute as can be, we pass through the autonomous neighborhood of Metelkova, a cultural and social center that has been squatted since 1993, and we leave some last stickers there.

It's time to head back. The return trip is long, but what comfort there is in being carried all the way home, and especially in sitting next to my brother. We debrief our week of wandering, plan a future road trip to Athens, promise to meet our Serbian students again, and talk about a thousand upcoming projects... My brother just bought an old Volkswagen van and plans to convert the whole interior to live as a nomad between Ardèche and Brittany. It's a new beginning for him, and the summer season is already all planned out, between the vineyards, street theater, activist gatherings, swimming, family, and friends.

I spend the rest of the journey admiring him discreetly, my brother, observing his beautiful face, his mischievous eyes, and his punk hair shaved on the sides. I feel an immense pride in my being for having experienced so many adventures with this incredible human being I've known since his birth.





The bus is soon arriving in France, we catch a glimpse of the town of Oulx in the distance, and we laugh about our first night in our cardboard tents. A snowstorm surprises us while crossing the Alps, but the bus keeps going despite all the trucks we pass, stuck across the road.

It's 3 a.m., and we arrive at the Lyon bus station. This is where we part ways. I hug him tightly, whispering that I love him more than anything. As he exits, he makes a heart with his hands, and disappears into the night with his backpack, while the bus continues its journey to Paris.

It was the last time I saw my brother. He passed away two weeks later near Joyeuse, in Ardèche, while crossing a beautiful, rushing river, searching for a swimming spot or a place to hang his hammock... My brother was as free as water and as intense as fire. I still feel his energy in the bark of a tree or the song of a bird.



