

The Road to “Moïse and Friends”

(an ode to being an artist)

A part of me always wanted to be a photographer exhibiting her work, or a filmmaker screening her films, but I pushed it down to pursue the more structured and saintly path of becoming a public school teacher somewhere I'd be needed. But the long and winding road of life has its way of twisting and turning you onto your predestined path in spite of, or due to, your best efforts. Tonight, my “work” is a far cry from Philly public schools: I'm exhibiting a photo taken in Cameroon in a Parisian gallery after a 15-month film festival journey that's taken me to more countries than I can count. It's not exactly the life I expected for myself, maybe because I'd never seen one lived this way. I thought I'd share a bit about how I got here for those interested (namely me, because, in the words of my infamous idol Kanye West: “how swae?”).

Exactly one year ago today, I showed my feature film, “Le Meilleur du Monde” at a film festival in Trento, Italy. It was my third festival showing the film, but the first one that felt like the real thing: there was a gala dinner, I was photographed and interviewed, my film screened after a multimillion dollar animated film made by Disney legends (every first-time filmmaker's dream act to follow...). At the dinner squeezed into a new dress (I'd bought a new wardrobe for the first time in my adult life), I invited the Italian director, sitting next to me, Andrea, whose film had impressively won best documentary the year prior, to see the film, and, after tucking his young son into bed, he came to the 10PM screening. After watching, he commented on the clearly low-budget quality, but applauded my initiative (or insanity) in writing, directing, acting in, and editing a feature at 25. He mentioned needing help with a feature documentary in Cameroon about a nearby non-profit, suggesting I might be helpful in translating, as he doesn't speak much French. I had heretofore never worked behind the camera on a project that wasn't my own, much less one in another country, and immediately jumped to show my enthusiasm at the prospect.

After the festival, I returned home to Paris and picked up teaching my cinema class to middle schoolers and continued my online job consulting and teaching children, some of whom were making documentaries themselves. In the hopes of convincing the government of my cultural contributions to France for my upcoming visa application, I began co-organizing a children's festival in Paris with the first festival who'd screened my film. I managed to convince several of my virtual students from around the world to attend and screen the films I had helped them make. Plane tickets were bought, films were subtitled into French, instagram stories were posted. Then, 11 days before the festival, I recieved a call from Andrea informing me the non-profit had agreed to fly me to Cameroon to help with the project as an “assistant b-camera”.

10 years after first picking up a borrowed DSLR to make movies about kids and education and intercultural exchange, my first job on an education-related documentary arrived. I was incredulous. After years of thinking I couldn't be a director because I couldn't afford film school, and months of wondering how to possibly convince the French government that I made a living as an artist after pursuing every avenue from taking professional headshots to being a replacement dance instructor, it actually seemed impossible to believe.¹ But despite the miraculous good news, doubt quickly set in. I'd promised all these people to attend the children's festival. Think of the kids! The parents and school officials counting on (and employing) me! What kind of flake would I seem like? They say there is no art without limitations. And for once, I was presented with one. This was bigger than me letting someone down. It was about my papers. My future in Europe. My concrete need to be paid as an artist. The festival was volunteer, this wasn't. I accepted the job.

For the first time in my life, I picked film over education.²

¹ Realistically, it isn't that crazy. It took me two years to start showing it, but the second I shared my work, more work came. Finish your stuff and put it out there.

² As I trace the story of my artistic career, I realize the extent to which what I do is influenced by my choices. I practically had to be threatened with deportation from the only country in which I'd built an adult life to finally choose myself, my own wants and needs for my life, which, has always been for me very much defined by my work. You are how you spend your time. Please, don't wait, pick you, put in the work doing what you love while you have the energy to do so.

So, in November 2025, I traveled to Cameroon with the Italian non-profit organization “6events”. As soon as I touched down and slid the batteries into my Sony A6500, I began enthusiastically interviewing every child, school official, and non-profit volunteer I could find with as much gusto as the energizer bunny. On day 2, I was promoted from “assistant b-camera” to co-director. This is as much due to Andrea’s incredible patience, generosity, and humility as it is to my American work ethic, sociological background, and francophone abilities. I followed the story relentlessly while navigating the technical difficulties associated with new equipment and shooting in a place with frequent power outages and high temperatures. I was forever changed by moments shared with the students supported by the organization, many of whom have mental and/or physical disabilities. During interviews, I learned that these children had been cast out by their families, some even physically thrown in the trash, and were often mercilessly bullied at home and at their prior schools. During an interview with a student and her mother, a group of these wonderful, resilient, and joyful children gathered around and asked me to take their picture. I snuck away between interviews and, with their help, began shooting.

The creative force behind the shoot was a middle schooler named Moïse, who, despite having been born blind, managed to place himself and his friends in interesting positions, and give me an array of arresting expressions to work with.

After the shoot, I sent off all my pictures from the trip to the organization, saving the best to exhibit as promised, but, amid the shoots and festivals and grant applications of the months that followed, wasn’t able to give them a second look.

5 documentaries, two shorts, a migrant reintegration initiative program, and a spectacular burnout later, it’s late August, and I’m back on the 6events shoot, this time in Riva del Garda, Italy, where their organization is headquartered. When I enter the president’s house, I’m floored to see my pictures printed and hung up all over his walls. I’m honored, surprised, and thrown back to those moments filming, learning, laughing and crying alongside the kids, teachers, and volunteers on my first film job in Yaoundé.

While in Italy, I got an email inviting me to participate in a collective art exhibit in Paris where I’d exhibited the year prior. I had solely applied so I would look like an artist on paper for my artist visa application, but it had been a meaningful experience in the end, as, it turns out, art is better displayed than hiding behind your mini-fridge. I debated participating again, but since I knew I was supposed to be helping run a Palestinian film festival in London until just a few days prior, was in no financial place to be covering the gallery fee, and, the day before, finally picked up my long-awaited 4-year artist residency card, I decided to do the prudent, responsible, reasonable thing for once in my life and not apply.

Flash forward to London, where I meet with Marie, a French screenwriter of Cameroonian origin who had watched the trailer of the 6events film a few months prior. She told me that seeing the trailer had made her want to participate in the organization, to donate to the kids in Yaoundé. I also knew that the photos I’d sent the President had been transformed into calendars, shared in the local newspaper, hung up at fundraising events, and plastered across social media in various iterations.

One of the biggest conclusions I’d come to in Cameroon was that the social workers taking care of the kids needed some serious TLC. They alone were the reason the kids were clean, educated, fed, well-loved, and joyful. They were also severely understaffed. One woman described going weeks without seeing the sun because she couldn’t take more than a 5-minute break. Having worked in similar social work roles where it feels like you’re replacing a parent to not one child but many, I felt acutely that these women were in danger. A school-wide social worker I interviewed for hours was dying of cancer, bereft at the thought of leaving all the orphans under her gentle wings without a caregiver, and I wondered how much of her illness could have been avoided by some semblance of fair working hours. When I explained this in a passionate late-night rant in imperfect Italian to the non-profit board, they listened, and pledged to put pressure on the school until they provided the women with more support.

Though the idea of exhibiting my work initially felt like a frivolous, ego-stroking endeavor, it occurred to me that my photos and videos contained a subtle but present power, because,

through freezing feelings in time, the hopes and hurts that accompany growing up in an environment unfriendly to those who look or act like you, they sparked seeds of understanding and generosity in people miles and miles away. And I began to see that these seeds were only watered when the captured moments left my hard drives and reached their tendrils to the world. I wondered if they'd raised enough for a third social worker's salary.

I had convinced myself: As I bid Marie adieu and headed to London Stansted airport, I chose the best of the pictures from the Moïse shoot and asked the gallery to exhibit it (even though "it" existed nowhere outside of my computer). An AI-automated email reply promptly agreed. I'm glad it liked the photo.

At this point in time, I was on my way to show *Le Meilleur du Monde* at its 26th film festival. Another day another festival, right? Not so much, as this one was held in an active war zone, with my movie screening in a bomb shelter in Western Ukraine.

I had been warned by the festival organizers that Russia had been targeting Ukraine's power plants and electricity was not guaranteed. While charging my power banks, I began texting my assistant (who may or may not have birthed me), asking for help in printing the photo.

24 travel hours later I arrive in Ukraine, and the festival is incredible: I saunter across the red carpet in a leopard-print dress, am able to show Ukrainians a bit about what it's like to live abroad as a refugee and learn from them about what it's like to be under attack for 6 years, and, to celebrate a successful screening, spend the night climbing a Carpathian mountain with a Ukrainian DJ and the lead singer of a Norwegian heavy metal band, arriving back in time for breakfast and interviews for Ukrainian TV that I was most definitely prepared for. I later discover that said mountain was also heavily frequented by bears. Horrified, I asked the DJ why he brought us there. He responded that the chances of seeing a Russian drone or missile were higher than that of seeing a bear.

Touché.

As I prepare to leave Ukraine, I check in with my assistant about her progress on printing the photo. The update is not great. She apparently had better things to do than harass the print shops of Paris (she spent the week undergoing emergency surgery while simultaneously navigating the U.S.' fucked-up insurance policies, all while caring for a husband immobilised by a lacerated tendon from jumping on his cat's water bowl. When it rains it pours.). But I don't have time to dwell on her unsatisfactory performance as my personal unpaid assistant, as I discover that my bus that afternoon has been canceled, as a train has exploded on the route I was supposed to take. Thanks Russia! This means I am trapped in Ukraine another day, with no telling when I'll get back to Paris. Trapped in this case means staying another night at the 4-star hotel hosting the festival. I am excited at the prospect of potentially sleeping in the fancy bed I've been accorded for the first time, but this dream is soon shattered by the news that I will now be sharing my room with Ringo, the heavy metal singer, and, through this experience, I am both emboldened and dismayed to discover that there exists someone more disorganized than me. The bathroom is now not only filled with mud from cleaning the mountain off of my new Italian leather cowboy boots, but also with the heavy metal singer's extensive skincare products.

Once I manage to catch the bus from the hotel to Uzzhorod (which is no easy feat, given that there is neither a set time, nor a set location, with the only information given being: "sometime between 3 and 4 on the mountain"), I turn my attention back to the looming exhibit, now only days away. I begin texting my backup assistant (my mother's sister, Laura), asking for solutions for printing the photo and booking a flight out of Hungary. She gets to work finding a flight (which Ringo has kindly agreed to cover when I informed him I planned to hitchhike back) and begins an order from a Parisian print shop. Finally some progress.

I then have the fabulous idea to put both assistants in a group chat to stoke competition and improve performance.

It backfires. My aunt asks my mom to please finish the order, as she's going to the dentist, and my mom replies that she needs to drive my Dad somewhere. Fuck.

I become convinced that I need a real assistant, based in Paris and preferably not a member of my family with bigger fish to fry, and spend my remaining phone battery writing a job posting asking for an assistant, which absolutely no one will respond to, since I am in this situation because I cannot afford one.

My phone dies, so I spend the hours stopped at the border reflecting on my financial ruin. Upon arrival, my fiscal woes are momentarily washed away by the warm waters of Budapest's thermal baths and the soothing accented English of the blonde waiter who I spend the majority of the 3-course dinner overtly flirting with in my freshly acquired Hungarian. High on the euphoria of successfully leaving Ukraine, cold plunges, and eating dinner in an economy I could afford (just kidding, Ringo paid), I decide to tag along with a hostel pub crawl until my morning flight, or until they realize I don't have a wristband, whichever comes first. After a few hours fending off the advances of drunk 21-year-olds on vacation not at all grasping the reality of the war blazing a few hundred kilometres away (#stillgotit), I receive a message that might be the answer to my financial problems. A random French man wants to send me money! I bite, thinking that perhaps I won't have to do anything unsavoury. Wrong. He wants me to insult him. I do this to men for free and am thinking I might have finally found an arrangement that could allow me to pursue my business, non-profit, artistic career, and avoid spectacularly burning out again. When I arrive back to the hotel, I ask my fellow war survivor, the self-proclaimed loaded Ringo, if I should go through with it, thinking he will support my new side hustle. He instead suggests that this guy might use my voice for AI, and advises against it. Visions of my voice used as some kind of AI chatbot dominatrix flood my mind and I immediately shut it down.

I have to say, doing the "right thing" at each one of these critical junctures has gotten me nowhere. Well, it's gotten me lots of places, except to one of financial security. While reflecting on my life decisions, I receive a message from a participant in my non-profit's Ivory Coast migrant reintegration program, asking me if I've managed to raise the money to finance all of the participants' businesses yet (in the ballpark of 100K USD). I consider writing him back asking if he would be willing to swing me some XOF to cover next month's rent.

A few hours later I'm on the plane, back to the rhythm that has become routine over the past 2 weeks, the wonderful state of much-needed sleep interrupted by crying babies, flight attendants, and the ever-increasing cricks in my neck.

I arrive back in Paris the day before the last possible day to drop off my artwork at the gallery. I am nothing short of overjoyed to arrive back to my 12m2 apartment in the city of light. With T-48 hours 'til the deadline for photo drop-off, I grab my bike and laptop and set off to the print shop.

Before leaving, I ask Victor (the Ukrainian DJ who dreamed up the suicide mission to the mountains) to pray for me as I navigate the city on 2 wheels and no more than two functioning brain cells, sending a selfie of my helmeted head, thinking I look a bit like a soldier. I then receive the solemn reply that he cannot pray for anyone sporting a Gazprom shirt. Still an ignorant American at heart, I assume this is the name of a German football team, having gotten the shirt at a thrift shop on a recent trip to Germany. I am only slightly dismayed that his fervor for football has outweighed his penchant for oversized sportswear, having hoped for a compliment on my very stylish and cool biking outfit. When I exit my home and prepare for the arduous journey to the print shop, a homeless man sees me and starts yelling "non non non non" and waving his finger at me. I assume I've broken some biking rule, but realize he's pointing at my shirt. What is going on?? I realize that this man is either politically on his shit or just really into PSG when I get a text from Victor breaking it down. Apparently, if something were to happen to him, Gazprom, a Russian oil drilling company, would be 7-9% responsible. Horrified, I myself risk death for the umpteenth time in the last week, and screech to a halt. Determined to change my shirt, I pull over at a "Brocante" (antique shop), not wanting to risk spending money anywhere that I should be boycotting.

As I walk in, I see frames in a cardboard box outside. Thrilled, I pick one out. The shop owner comes out and immediately comments on my outfit, saying the only way he could tell I was a girl was by the bright orange nail polish exposed by my sandals (which were previously reserved exclusively for cleaning or the beach). I am unsure if this is a compliment or an insult, but either

way I interject that I came here to change, explaining that I'd just gotten out of Ukraine that morning and wasn't thinking clearly. "You wore that in Ukraine?? That's like wearing a giant swastika into a Nazi death camp!".

On that note, I take my new frame to the print shop.

When I arrive, any happiness about getting out of Ukraine unscathed is replaced by the reminder of why I would rather be in a war zone than continue to fraternize with Parisians. The clerk at the photo lab looks aghast at my printing request and asks me if I think my order deserves to go before everyone else's. I gather from his tone that it doesn't. I meekly reply that my "assistant" called in advance and was told that the order could be processed in 24 hours, and I was there 24 hours in advance. I have not slept in 3 days and counting, am dressed like a teenage boy having an identity crisis (who has never watched the news), and am unable to answer basic questions about the photo's dimensions (which have changed since finding the frame). This combination of factors frustrates the photo printer to no end and I try to leave as quickly as possible, already plotting a trip to Kyiv. I realize I am still sporting Russian propaganda and go buy a new shirt, further decimating my dwindling savings. Though originally planning to donate the proceeds of the photo sale to Cameroon, I now decide to funnel that money toward personal expenses. I am one ethical decision away from selling an organ.

I bike home and begin taking apart my loft bed with my Belgian friend François, and experience a brief reprieve from Parisian hostility in his kind and cartesian presence. My neighbours, who have had 2 weeks of peace while I've been gone, are out of luck that I survived my voyage, and complain about the sounds of our (de)construction. I apologetically promise to be quieter and finish the dismantling in near silence to avoid expulsion from my illegal sublet. A few hours later, all the wood crashes to the floor spectacularly. Great. I reach for the new (old) frame from my backpack to store it away from any incoming wooden avalanches in the night, and as I pull it out, am dismayed to discover that the glass has shattered. I suppose that's what I get for supporting Russian oil. I dump the glass in the trash, push away the day's trials and tribulations, and settle into bed. At midnight, I am horizontal for the first time in 40 hours.

I wake up on the floor, happy as a clam. I excitedly inform Victor about my night of sleep, and inquire about his. He replies that there wasn't one: the Russians bombed Kyiv, and, like most nights, he spent half of it in the basement. Unsure of what to say from my place of comparative privilege, I offer up the tasteful reply that, the Russians, having learned of my proximity with the Ukrainian people (and bears), attacked my apartment as well, and sent him a video of my luxurious living quarters. Just as I began to fret about the insensitivity of my retort, I receive 2 minutes of maniacal laughter in response, and am informed, in broken English, that chez moi (filled with wood and shattered glass) looks worse than his friend's place, which was in the throes of the bombing. I am glad to have provided some levity to the situation.

At 2pm, I get a message that my photo is printed. I place the now empty frame into my backpack and trip over wooden panels as I search for my keys. I put on a skirt I bought in the London airport for the Ukrainian festival, and my new shirt. This is what I had planned to wear to the exhibit the following day, because it is my only relatively nice outfit not covered in sleepless sweat, mud, or Russian propaganda, but I can't bear the thought of once again provoking the disdain of the Parisian fashion police (comprised of my homeless neighbors, the antique shop keeper, and the lieutenants at the photo shop), so I wear it today as well. Less than 5 minutes into the ride, my skirt is ensnared in my bike's spokes and becomes as tattered as a Ukrainian city. (Alright, too far.).

I am now on foot, down a shirt, and a skirt. At this point I am thinking of pulling a Marina Abramović and presenting my work naked. Maybe that will prove more lucrative than last year's artistic earnings.

I walk to my storage unit and grab a framed photo from a prior exhibit, no longer convinced of my ability to make it to the gallery by 6pm, or as an artist in general. I take it on the metro on the way to the frame shop. While on the metro, we are stopped because of someone on the tracks (for the second time in the 2 days I've been back). I reflect on how Ukrainians have been fighting for 6 years to live in peace, while Parisians disrupt commutes with their urge to die. It's 3:30pm.

I've only taken a few steps off the metro when I encounter a man lying on the ground, limbs splayed like Jesus on the cross, with a swollen, blistering bump on his forehead and blood streaming down his eerily beautiful features. I watch his stomach rise and fall under his ribcage. A man on the phone gestures toward the fallen man while blocking traffic. The scene is silent, as if we've all been here before (we have).

I keep walking. I have a photo to frame.

I pick up the photo. The man I'd spoken to yesterday is on the phone and acknowledges neither me nor my outfit picked out specially for him. I shake it off and make a beeline for the antique shop. I arrive at 4:45 and begin looking for another frame. No luck. I head to the back of the store, where the shop owner is sitting across from a girl around my age. I explain that I broke the frame from yesterday and ask for help finding a solution. The owner replies that he was about to do some reading, and promptly launches into an animated declamation of a graphic novel. I begin messing with the photo and the frame to the sounds of the adventures of a Moroccan taxi driver and the girl reacting appreciatively. The shopkeeper closes the book proudly, and informs me that he's written it. I congratulate him (Can everyone in this city successfully finish and distribute their creative work except me??) and, unsure of what to do, ask the girl for help. She suggests I walk to an art supply store. I have 5% on my phone and do my best to find the place. I arrive, and ask the woman at the register for help. "I'm busy", she replies. I try again. "Do you have any colleagues available?" "They're busy too". I once again begin daydreaming of moving to Kyiv. I walk to the back anyway, and eventually one of the "busy" colleagues redirects me to a different store. It's at number 30, and despite arriving to numbers 29 and 31, the store is nowhere to be found. A kind bystander with an accent (not French) directs me down the wrong street. Do I now have only 45 minutes to find a new frame, frame the photo, and get to the exhibit 30 minutes away with no phone? Sure. But at least my dignity as a human person was recognised by a fellow human.

It is now 5pm. My mind drifts to the backup photo I left at the antique shop, and I realize that if I leave now, I could be sure to get a picture of my beautiful sister, expression blank, arms crossed in front of a French 16th-century castle, to the gallery before it closes.

I then flash back to the moment, after taking a particularly striking photo, that I asked Moïse for his consent to exhibit my pictures of him in Paris. Overwhelmed with excitement, he practically jumped up and down.

"Vraiment ?" He panted. Les gens à Paris vont voir ça ?"

I pick up the pace. After a few wrong turns, I arrive.

When I enter the store, a dirty blonde woman in a black and white sweater with a brush of red lipstick across her very French mouth is helping an elderly woman decide between two different wooden frames. After a few bouts of indecision, which I would respect in any other circumstance, the woman tells the lipsticked clerk "I will reflect and get back to you", but it is apparently out of the question that the store clerk abandon her in her time of need, and she stays focused on her until she finally picks one out, ignoring my imploring glances. I check my watch anxiously. The woman finally checks out, ultimately picking a black frame. The store clerk begins wrapping her frame to her caddy with plastic wrap, seemingly in slow motion. My phone is at 1%, it's 5:25PM, and my photo remains unframed.

It is at this point, as often happens with my creative projects when the finishing details and technical complications start to get the best of me, that I lost sight of the plot. Why am I spending two days printing and framing an 18x24 photograph (hey, at least I figured out the dimensions)? Why do I rush by people literally dying around me to exhibit this or screen that? Why can I travel through the Moroccan Sahara with undocumented migrants, narrowly escape malaria in Senegal, run educational programs without plumbing or air conditioning in 100-degree Ivory Coast, and hike a mountain in land-mine-filled Ukraine without an ounce of fear, but can't look a French person in the eye and tremble while asking them to work while they are... in their place of work?? Why, when I tried to adopt a cat to stave off the loneliness brought on by my only social interactions being with people who work for me, did said people insist that where I live is not fit

for an 8-pound animal? DOES NO ONE SEEM TO HAVE AN ISSUE WITH THE FACT THAT IT IS NOT FIT FOR A 142-POUND WOMAN??

I then remember the exhibit last year, where I displayed a triptych of my mother experiencing three emotions accompanying the discovery that her unforgiving 26-year-old boss had been poisoned. Yes. I like to put myself in danger in Eastern Europe, but that's a story for another time. I had transformed the harrowing facts of my situation into something that, for whatever reason, while hanging in a crowded Parisian gallery, was currently making a young woman cry. This woman, a painter who had recently started pursuing art professionally while going through a painful breakup (funny how those two facts of life seem to always be inextricably connected), seemed to be finding solace or strength from my photo of my mom, or it touched a nerve-- I don't know, I don't claim to know her or anyone's inner worlds, just transform my own into different forms of artistic expression until someone is crying...³

My thoughts are interrupted by the sounds of the indecisive woman's caddy wheeling outside. I look up, relieved and desperate. "Can I help you?" The French shop clerk asks. I explain the problem, and she slowly says some words I don't understand about glass. I jump into action, and run upstairs to find what she was talking about, meekly repeating the mystery words to a woman sporting an effortlessly cool red bandana forcefully cutting cardboard while listening to an even-more-cool playlist. Without looking up, she points to some shelves filled with stacks of glass photo backings, and I begin the hunt for the proper dimensions. God I miss America where some equally cool bandana-sporting lady would actually find the glass for me.

I bring the glass down to the checkout, and the woman tells me the price and gives me some loose instructions for how to frame it "at home". I crack and finally explain the situation: "I have to deliver this to an exhibit in 30 minutes! Can I please do it here?" Her eyes widen, suddenly understanding the desperation of the previous minutes, and she gestures upstairs. "Sure, you can do it there".

I go back upstairs. "She said I could frame up here" I mumble to the bandana lady. The woman nods wordlessly and goes back to her cutting.

I rip open the packaging of the glass and begin the arduous process of trying to make something worth looking at, not to mention buying. I attach the photo and the cardboard backing to the glass with the metal fasteners and then push and push, trying to get them both to squeeze into the frame, destroying the top of the photo with the metal fastener in the process. I send a photo of the situation to François, with the words "help", then realize he is at work like a normal person and cannot actually teleport to me and find me a solution in the next 30 seconds.

At the tail end of almost every project, I am hit with a moment when, because of lack of funding, time, or both, all my safety nets are unavailable, and I find myself on my own, alone with a problem my brain, body, and circumstance don't feel equipped to solve. It is at this moment that something clicks into overdrive. I think it is in this moment that I earn the "directed by" or "photographed by" credit. It's just you and the work. For "Moïse and friends", 5:12PM on Thursday, September 17th, 2026, is this moment. I miraculously force the photo into the frame and feel my first semblance of pride after what is now hours of disappointment in my incompetence and poor time management. When I bring down my handiwork to show the shop clerk, she looks at my efforts and cocks her head. "Hmm." She then proceeds to undo everything I've just done and slide the glass in first, then place the photo, then the cardboard backing, atop it. She gets rid of the metal fasteners, one of which was hiding the destroyed bit at the top. Specks of dust dot Moïse's face and a lone fingerprint has smudged the bottom left corner. Incredulous and relieved to be looking at a finished piece after the two week saga, if a little disappointed at its imperfections, I muster out a "Thank you", and ask if I could pay before my phone dies. The clerk proceeds to tell me I don't have to pay if my phone is dying (I am tempted not to, but that pesky Quaker value system pushes me to insist), and, when I ask for directions to

³ Because my autism makes me obsessed with the truth, in all honesty I didn't actually have an existential freakout at this moment. Like other moments when I'm up against a deadline, I was just trying to get the job done propelled by the ludicrously optimistic belief that things would work out. But these are things I have thought or said, and I like the idea of playing a whiny and out-of-touch artist in the movie that is my life.

the gallery, she prints me out a map. If you're reading this Sophie, you've restored my hope in French people and have singlehandedly stopped me from moving to Kyiv. Bless your heart.

I set off running, and immediately get lost. I go to ask for help in a Tabac, and an older man sitting outside vaping stops me and says "Ask me, ask me!". I stop in my tracks and begin trying, gesturing at my map, and he is clearly struggling to respond. "What language do you speak?" I ask. I don't have time for B1 French. "Italian". Relieved, I switch over, explaining once again the street I'm looking for. Speaking his language is getting us nowhere, and I end up asking to use his phone. As I frantically write down instructions from Google maps, he offers to actually give me his phone and have me bring it back tomorrow (Oh, Italian generosity!), but I've got what I need and run off. "Grazie mille!!".

I arrive at the exhibit in the nick of time, and set up shop on the floor, correcting the dimensions on the price sheet and creating the photo's label by hand, inventing a price that seemed to me too high but I now realize would not even cover me being paid minimum wage for the hours spent taking the photo, editing it, framing it, and applying to and attending the exhibit, much less the camera equipment, flights to Cameroon, experience...

Just after 6PM, a Greek woman comes in to the gallery, asking to hang her artwork. "I'm so sorry", she exclaims, "But I was just robbed on the metro. They took my phone, my papers, everything."

I flash back to being robbed on the metro in the Parisian suburbs on my way home from my master's in Education. And in the 14th, while walking with a petulant 8-year-old I was babysitting during my first year here. And in the 18th, while carrying heavy groceries in the rain. And the most recent two times I was pickpocketed, when, my reflexes sharpened by the 3 robberies prior, I actually got the phone back. In these instances, I remember firmly telling the respective men that they "shouldn't do that", and walking off, thinking that they could be my student and probably needed the money. Currently in a situation where I was a week late paying rent a tenth of the price paid by same-aged graduates from my university, it occurs to me that nothing could compel me to take someone's connection their work, family, and friends, for a quick buck. At the time though, I was dead-set on defending them, and any other committer of wrongdoings, despite painstakingly avoiding committing any such infractions myself. When I saw a man steal another man's phone in the metro, and I happened upon the slighted man choking the thief against the wall, I, aghast, told him to stop. Bad idea. In the moments that followed, he'd crashed a bottle over my friend Casper's head, slapped my other friend Alix, and then, when Martin called the police, they blamed it on him and threw him to the ground. This recollection, along with those of being groped on the canal (which provoked a street brawl), incessantly harassed walking home (hence the bike), and witnessing a murder in cold blood several feet away from me, prompts me to come to the conclusion that Paris may be its own kind of war zone.

Every one of my pieces; film, photo, or song, is a mosaic of a series of intuition, anxiety, justice and love-driven adventures, each zanier than the last. My refusal to cut corners through technology and inability to cut them through money makes it so that each one is also infused with the hands of strangers and friends helping me along the way.

My commitment to being a truth teller makes it so every waking moment is spent (and there are a lot, since I barely sleep) getting these projects, including this story, from my soul to yours. I set out to write the script for an instagram reel promoting my exhibit tomorrow night (well, tonight, as it's now 5:00am), and this came out instead. My knees ache (I'm writing on my floor-bed), my throat is dry and scratchy, I have to pee, and I am fully clothed in my not-so-new shirt and tattered skirt. I have a meeting to prep the weekly English through cinema class I teach in a few hours, my one consistently paid gig, for which I take home 25 euros a week after taxes. I am almost positive I will give away the photo of Moïse and friends just like I have given away every other photograph I have put up for sale (the MOTHER triptych is now hanging on the painter's wall, where she says it inspires her daily, and her painting is hanging on mine, and it does the same for me). Even though my newly acquired visa requires my art to be commercialised for me to stay in the country, I seem to be allergic to the concept. I know in my heart that this allergy is what keeps me an artist.

I can't derive profit off of my feelings, off of a blind child. I have been given the gift of forever learning about the world, because, despite all my 21st century whining, some higher power has decided that I deserve this beautiful, exploratory life where the only dangers I face are ones I seek.

I am writing this because, after spending my days working on excavating every last truth in my soul while filming and editing my films and photos, the only energy remaining for publicly available real-time thoughts focuses on the facts, the overview, the "highlights". In reality, my highlights are not the glossy images of me smiling in front of a festival banner but the frantic zoom call had in the guest room of a festival attendee who invited me over for lunch, or the 12-year old who saw my film and asked me if I really went on a date with that guy in that scene telling me it made him laugh, or watching the silhouette of the Ukrainian couple sitting in front of me, one's head on the other's shoulder, with one turning to occasionally kiss the other's forehead, immobile until the last frames of my film.

These are the moments I can't remember when I'm going too fast. The memories replaced by the glossy photos in an instagram feed.

I told Victor, the Ukrainian DJ, that he better live, otherwise I would make a sad movie about the guy I went to the mountain with being martyred. The idea of being a dead victim in someone else's story horrified him, and he promised to go to the shelter even when he was tired and would rather sleep. I, too, am choosing life. I will sacrifice sleep to spend the night writing if that's what it takes to appreciate the gifts I have been given. And I will share it in the chance it makes you slow down and reflect, too.



If you'd like to buy a print or share your thoughts about my photograph, or my new, Russian-propaganda-free shirt, or both, my contact information is at marionstandefer.com.

Or, if you'd like to pay me 100 USD to insult you over instagram DM, and promise not to use it for AI, that would work too.
