

non-fiction

My dogs never let me down!

Johann van Rossum

Of course people are all right, most people are all right. I am rarely disappointed by my fellow men; when I have been, it has left scars.

Traces of the past from which I have learned.

On occasion, I once called someone an ‘untrustworthy dog’.

A completely inaccurate characterisation, not of the person in question, but of the four-legged creatures to whom I did not do justice with such a label.

You can count on dogs! Dogs have always been there in my life; they have been there for me and I have been there for them. They have given me unconditional loyalty.

Whether it was Herta, my grandfather’s police dog; Lessie, the Papillon from home; Prince Igor, our first Siberian Husky; Nanouk, Ayka, Odin or Saga from the team; the four Alaskan Malamutes Iljaq, Yurok, Milalek and Arkan. Sometimes I was there when they were born; I was always there when I had to bid farewell to them. They have never let me down; I am in their debt!

At the moment we have Goof, the loyal Rhodesian Ridgeback, and Guus, the rabid Beagle. Well-deserved qualifications!

Johann van Rossum

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IGOR

Komaksiut's Arctic Prince Igor

Komaksiut's Arctic Prince Igor

'of royal blood'

Our first dog was Igor, a Siberian Husky. The black and white male was given the royal name of Arctic Prince Igor.

Igor soon found a mate. Igor and Nanouk; I was as proud as a monkey with seven tails.

Never let a Siberian loose! They go hunting!

In those days I made a habit of being stubborn.

In the park, a five-minute walk from our house, the two dogs could run to their hearts' content, and they always came back when I called them.

Even on the eighteenth of April; I will never forget that date!

At the entrance to the park on Bizetlaan, I let the dogs go and walked into the park. The dogs ducked into the bushes; sometimes they need a bit of privacy. They were out of sight for a while.

Suddenly, from the garden of the fine villa on the Marinus de Jongstraat, I heard a lot of noise and shouting. Something serious was happening to the De Haan family.

I called my dogs. Nanouk came immediately, but Igor took a little longer.

But in his wake was a very angry Mr De Haan, showing a bloody white rabbit.

"Your dog has bitten our granddaughter's birthday present to death!"

I could not take away the horror of the guests at the birthday party in the family garden; I paid for the damage and also found a children's book about sled dogs for the granddaughter.

Little did the five year old granddaughter know that many years later she would meet in-laws who once had a kennel of sled dogs 'Van het Huis het Loo'.

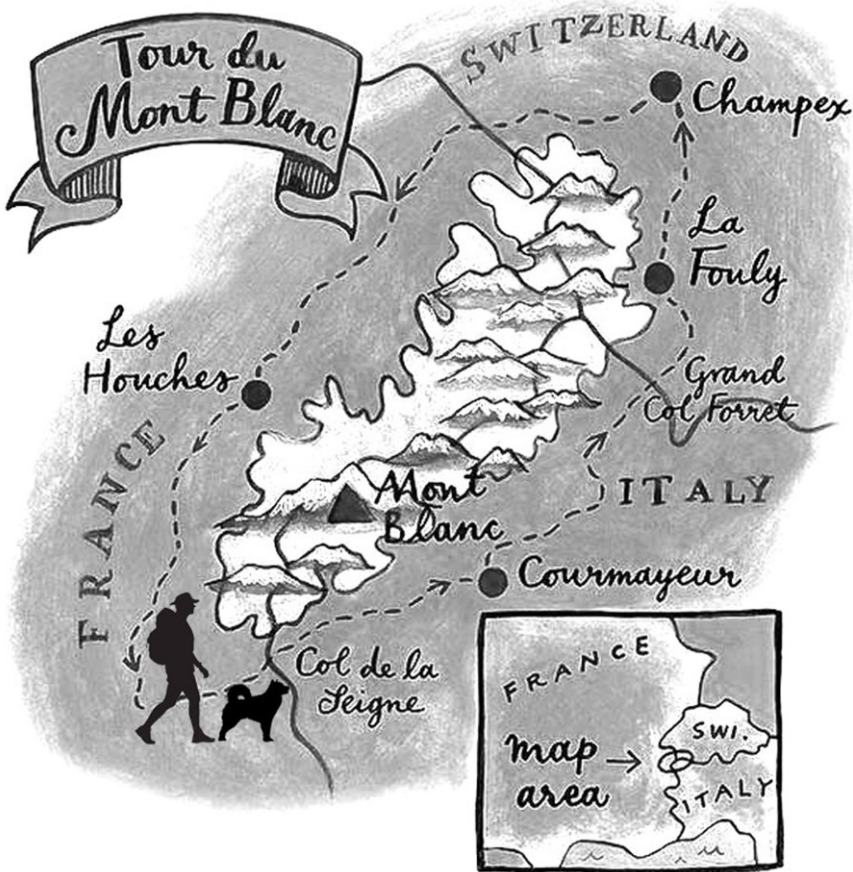
I sincerely regret that I may have caused the wife of Prince Bernhard van Oranje-Nassau, Van Vollenhoven, a traumatic experience with a dog in her early childhood.

*'Igor wist van de prins geen kwaad.'**

*There is a saying in Dutch "Of the prince know no evil",
meaning: as innocent as an unborn baby.

Tour du Mont Blanc avec mon chien

Around Mont Blanc with my dog



Zharkova's Yurok

Le samedi, quatorze juillet.

Saturday, 14 July.

Holiday for the French.

We have covered almost a thousand kilometres, mostly on the motorway. My passenger takes a very modest seat on the three-seater bench behind me; Yurok lies curled up asleep with his thick tail over his nose. So my Alaskan Malamute is also lying in the snow, braving the winter cold.

It is now the middle of summer and the thermometer at the petrol station, where I had gone to make sure there was enough fuel in the tank of my gas guzzler, read 30 degrees in the shade. The sled dog in the back seat has absolutely no reason to cover his sensitive snout. It is a matter of habit.

I had not noticed his typical way of sleeping before. Only today, after more than half a day of driving, did I notice it. As we drove through Belgium and eastern France, I sometimes clicked the rearview mirror into dim mode to combine images of my sleeping companion with the soft sounds of snoring behind me.

Yurok is one of four dogs in my sled dog team. I train them to pull sleds, something they are naturally good at and love to do. I try to keep them in good condition. In our country we are not blessed with much snow, so I have to make shift with a training cart, a sled on wheels, for training.

However, as soon as snow is expected in the winter sports areas, I take the racing sled out of summer storage and get everything that has anything to do with sled dog racing ready for the weekend trip to Winterberg in the Sauerland, Liebenscheid in the Westerwald, Todtmoos and Bernau in the Black Forest or Clausthal-Zellerfeld in the Harz.

Races in the French Jura and the Alps are only possible during the Christmas and spring holidays. Unfortunately, there is not much sympathy at school for unpaid holidays.

It is summer holidays now; I have no school obligations for seven weeks. Admittedly, my supervisors do not like to see me taking my

first steps across the threshold of the school at the same time as the pupils.

For the next ten days I will be walking the Tour du Mont Blanc with Yurok.

For the three dogs left at home, I have arranged excellent baby-sitters; our sons have promised to give Iljaq, Milalek and Arkan plenty of exercise during these two weeks and to clean the kennel. My lovely wife makes sure they get their food on time. I don't have to worry about the home front.

I can concentrate fully on my furry companion. I carry dry dog food for a fortnight with me. A fairly comprehensive dog first-aid kit is standard equipment when I travel with my dogs. My rucksack contains a similar kit for repairing my own body.

I have swapped the working harness Yurok wears when we train for a harness used by police and army dogs. On the back is a handle for the dog handler; I suspect I will need to have my dog very close to me at tricky passages on the mountain trails.

I have booked a room at the Hotel Le Prarion. A hot bath, a good bed and a good breakfast tomorrow morning will do me good after two days in the car.

Yurok spends the night in the back of the car on his own blanket; the car is allowed in the guest car park below the hotel.

Tomorrow I will leave the car in the big car park near the cable car.

The first day of the official Tour du Mont Blanc is on tarmac and off-road: according to the guidebook, this route is particularly boring and unattractive, apart from the magnificent views.

I choose the 'alternative and magnificent' route from the guide. The main car park is a ten minute walk from the Bellevue cableway. That's where we'll start tomorrow!

Sitting in a warm hotel bath, I read that we can take the cableway to the top station at 1801 metres and then walk along a path through the forest to the glacier tongue of the Glacier de Bionnassay. These are the plans for tomorrow. We'll see where the descriptions are right and where we might be going wrong. Adventure awaits us; Yurok in the back has no idea.

I rarely oversleep; today is a prize! At nine o'clock I am jolted from my sleep by the sound of the housekeeping trolley in the corridor.

I don't wait for a modest knock on my door to ask for permission to change and clean; I get up quickly, get dressed and leave the door ajar so that the staff know they are welcome with their cleaning and polishing equipment.

It takes a while for them to knock anyway; in the meantime I have freshened up and shaved.

“You can have breakfast until 10.30, sir,” says the cleaning lady.

Breakfast is always available; Yurok comes first now. No doubt he has to go to the toilet, and he is used to get half of his daily ration by eight o'clock.

At the car I am greeted less enthusiastically than I expected; Yurok is still curled up, perhaps he did not hear me coming.

I open the door and the burly sled dog slowly comes to life. Slowly he straightens up, stretches, and then faces me with his imposing body; the broad, friendly head comes close; his tongue leaves a wet trail on my cheek. I embrace my companion to prevent the wash from spreading.

At night, a large bowl of water is within Yurok's reach; I throw the water away and measure out the dry food for him. Again, I wonder why food manufacturers go to so much trouble to make the food taste good; Yurok gobbles the food without even tasting the Canadian wild salmon and the organic beef ragout.

I do not take towels and soap after a hotel stay, but the spare roll of toilet paper with the logo of this lodge and some cheese croissants from the breakfast buffet disappear into my rucksack.

The car can be left free of charge for ten days in the large car park outside the village. It is looking for a parking space; I am not the only walker to leave his vehicle here today. My van takes up almost nine square metres, more than most cars that stay here for a week.

Yurok gets into the cable cabin effortlessly, saving us the least interesting part of the official route. I expected more resistance from the forty-plus-kilo male at the cabin entrance; this is the first time he has stepped into such a rickety contraption.

Apparently, and rightly so, he has complete trust in me and knows that I will put his safety first. It is with the same confidence that he and the other three dogs pull my sled across the racetrack and over untracked snowy trails in the winter.

Yurok comes into the cabin and sits close to my leg, his broad head resting on my thigh, his eyes closed. He exudes more calm than his

owner. I am not a fan of cable cabins; I have seen too many James Bond films. Based on the recommendation in the hiking guide, I chose this option.

We are both at peace with it; Yurok a little more than I.

We leave the Bellevue mountain station behind us. The promised rocky path is rockier than we would like. Yurok clearly has less trouble with it.

I stumble over stones regularly; the heavy pack is certainly a significant factor in these near misses.

I've kept my pack to a minimum; three and a half kilos of dry food for my dog, a couple of outdoor sports meals, light cooking equipment, a two-person tent, some clothes, sleeping bag and mattress; I don't carry much more.

My camera, a sketchbook and some pens are the extras; they won't be a burden for the next two weeks. I'll probably enjoy recording our journey for posterity.

The path that takes us to the Col de Tricot at 2120 metres is quite steep. If Yurok lives up to his sled dog ambitions, he will pull me down with him. I grab the handle of his harness; this close to me, I have the locomotive of sled dogs pretty much under control.

With small steps we follow the rocky path downhill; in a rainstorm, this part of the trail would cause involuntary slips.

The almost horizontal forest path after the descent is a treat for my calves.

In this French section, the route is well marked with the red/white Grande Randonnée stripes. In Italy and Switzerland, we follow the yellow markings.

On the open plain near Chalet de l'Are, Yurok can run loose. In the distance, a group is walking; a moment later, they have disappeared into the hillside. I walk here alone now; no one can be bothered by my dog running free. Smelling freedom, Yurok turned to the right, the foothills of the Grandes Jorasses in the distance. With his nose to the ground, he stomps down the grassy slope. I wonder if there are rabbits or hares here in the mountains; hunting small game is in every dog's genes.

A low bark and then a shrill whistle! Yurok stops and pricks up his ears. There is suddenly a lot of movement on the grassy slope; the sentry of a group of Alpine marmots have sounded the alarm. I had

no idea that marmots could grow so large; they must be well over half a metre high! The main enemies of these rodents are foxes and eagles; with such a good warning system, the hunters will suffer relatively few casualties among the population.

A dog must be an unusual sight here; the colony is taking precautions; the marmots are disappearing into their burrows and shelters for now.

Yurok has also realised that there is no honour in this; at his ease he comes to me when I call.

He lifts his paw with some regularity and leaves his scent flag on the way back to the Tour du Mont Blanc trail.

Few other walkers with dogs will pass through here and let their four-legged friends know of the Malamute's claim to this piece of Europe's highest mountain.

Demoiselle Colette Renard

As I pulled into the car park, I realised that I was not alone on one of France's oldest Grande Randonnées. On this summer Sunday, the day after the storming of the Bastille, many sports enthusiasts have taken a few extra days off to walk or cycle along the route.

I kept my distance from the groups of hikers, and was repeatedly cut off by mountain bikers who seemed to think that this beautiful little world belonged only to them.

I continue to follow the signs for Col de Tricot/Mirage.

After the open plain of L'Arc, I turn right. A sign indicates that the Nepal Bridge is open.

I have no idea how to imagine a bridge from the Himalayas in the French Alps.

Behind me I hear a woman's voice. A young woman, in her mid-thirties, is speaking into a dictaphone. She is speaking French; she is describing the landscape and the condition of the footpath.

When she is beside me, she switches off the machine and puts it away.

"Bonjour, monsieur. What a beautiful dog. A sled dog, right? You do the tour with your dog? Can he handle it? The most difficult and spectacular part of the whole tour is the last section at the Col du Brévent. Passages with bars and ladders where you have to secure yourself. You'll never be able to manage this via ferrata with your dog. There is a safe alternative across the snowfield between the Col de Brévent and the Brévent. Look it up in your guide book, it's probably in there."

"You know a lot about it. Have you done it before?"

"This will be my sixth time. I wrote the guide. This week I am going to check the route again before sending the manuscript to the publisher for the revised reprint. The mountains are constantly changing; my guide is updated every two years."

Colette is her name, Colette Renard.

"Named after my grandmother, the *chansonnière*; you've probably never heard of her."

"Now you underestimate me. I love French chansons; Colette Renard, Piaff, Juliette Gréco, Jacqueline François, Brel, Bécaud, Patachou, I love them all."

“I’m impressed! You have a special dog, you are sporty and you have taste. I think I’ll go for a walk for a while with you. Are you married?”

“Yes, and we have two beautiful sons.”

“Oh, and they didn’t want to go on this trip with you?”

“There are three other Alaskan Malamutes. I’m glad they’ll be well looked after at home.”

“With four such strong dogs, you should be here in the winter!”

“Do you look surprised when I tell you that I do? In winter they pull a sledge. Sometimes a racing sledge over distances of twelve to twenty kilometres. These are speed races. For the longer distances I use a tobogan, a sledge that can carry a lot of luggage, and then I travel for several days with my dogs and bivouac in the snow.”

“It seems very exciting. And in the summer you take one of the dogs on the Randonnée, I think that’s something special.”

The path becomes steeper and stonier.

Colette points out the unique view of the Glacier de Bionnassay: “You don’t get to see the glacier like this anymore. If you want to take photos, you have to do it here.”

“It’s an advantage that you’ve walked the route before, you know the spots. Can I make some sketches here? I’ve got my drawing stuff in my rucksack; if I can just set something up, I’ll work it out later.”

“Of course, I’m curious to see what you make of it. I brought hot water, would you like some coffee?”

Colette makes herself comfortable on the largest boulder nearby; Yurok is at her side as she digs out the contents of the top compartment of her rucksack.

“Can he have a hartkeks?”

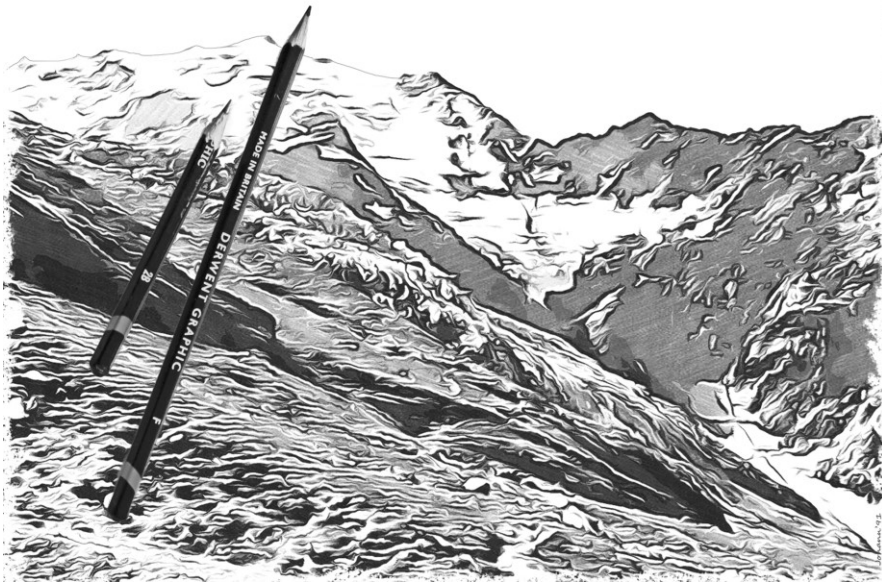
I take occasional sips of the instant coffee and try to sketch the glacier’s rock formations. The hiker behind us stops and looks over my shoulder at the little sketch that is emerging from my pencils.

“Very nice, sir. If only I could draw like that! Have you had education for this? Do you draw the whole tour? I prefer photography, but this is clever!”

Yurok also comes to have a look. As soon as the man spots my dog, he hurries along the trail without waiting for me to answer his questions.

“Not a dog lover,” Colette concludes, “let’s see what you’ve drawn. Wow, that’s good! You don’t need to do much, you’ve got the details

right. Maybe it's something for my walking guide? Having an illustration like that in it makes it special. Think about it. You might do more drawings on this trip. I'm interested, and probably my publisher is too!"



Glacier de Bionnassay - 4052 m

"That will look like work, Colette. I'm on holiday, remember?"

"Think about it anyway. We'll exchange addresses later."

We walk on across a gently sloping alpine meadow. The hiker who had just watched with interest as I drew the Bionnassay glacier is now standing doubtfully by a cable structure over a gorge.

"The Nepalese suspension bridge," Colette reveals, "the only way to cross the glacier river."

The hiker has heard us coming, and the presence of his four-legged companion has probably made him decide to cross the slightly wobbly bridge anyway.

We wait until the man is on the other side.

The suspension bridge is a sturdy construction of thick cables and wide planks over a roaring river that springs from the glacier's mouth.

Yurok takes his first steps on the bridge a little unsteadily, his legs sagging as I have sometimes seen in roaming Border Collies. Staying as low as possible seems to be the safest way for him to get over this obstacle. I continue to walk beside him. This should give him confidence.

After two wide planks there is an opening and I have to be careful not to let Yurok put his paw there. The experienced sled dog, who knows how to avoid weak spots and cracks in the ice, knows how to negotiate this tricky spot. He puts his paws down carefully, ignoring the depths beside him.

After the bridge, there is an easy, slightly ascending path. We walk through alpine flora with blueberries, alpine roses, glacier ranunculi's and adder's root with its long pink flowering stem.

"Look, the peaks of the Aiguille du Goûter and the Dôme de Goûter!" exclaims my companion.

"No Mont Blanc?"

"You have to wait a while for that one."

The altimeter on my watch reads 2120 metres at the Col de Tricot.

"Go straight on at the Tricot and follow the signs to the Chalets de Mirage. You descend steeply in zigzags. You can already see the Chalets de Mirage. This slope can be slippery in wet weather; there are no deep pits," Colette dictates into the device.

Almost three hours after my departure from the Bellevue top station, we pass the Refuge de Mirage, the terrace of the chalet inviting a break on this sunny weekday.

"If you're not too hungry or thirsty, leave the attractive terrace of the Mirage on the left; half an hour's walk away is another inviting terrace, that of the Refuge du Truc, which also sells local cheeses. Be tempted by the tomme and reblochon," Colette dictates to her dictaphone and, I suspect, also to me.

The terrace of the Mirage is full. There are many parents with children, the youngest about 10 years old.

"Kids can do parts of the walk without any problems. The difficulty is well indicated in the guides; T3 routes are not suitable for children because of the risky passages," says my companion, "most hikers with children take the turnoff to Les Contamines-Montjoie from the Mirage and from there return to the starting point of the tour by public transport. You rarely meet young walkers on the routes ahead."

A Motorola!

We walk on, the path through the alpine meadows offering breathtaking views of the limestone cliffs of Mont de Truc.

Colette is right: the half-hour walk, with the magnificent panorama of the French mountains all around us, is rewarded with a warm welcome on the terrace of the Refuge du Truc.

The place is pleasantly crowded; we find a seat under an advertising parasol. In the shade of an advertisement for a mineral water, we order a Pinot Noir, the most expensive wine on the menu, and, of course, the unsurpassed local fromages.

Yurok likes to drink the ice-cold water from the mountain streams when we hike in the mountains; now I take out his bowl and fill it at the water tap in the hut; the mention of '*eau potable*' should reassure me that no one has fallen ill yet.

"There is an interesting difference between *eau potable* and *eau buvable*," Colette observes after taking a sip of the robust red wine, "*Potable* simply means that it is neutral for your health, neither good nor bad. *Buvable* means it doesn't taste bad, but it's often an unflattering term. I could drink a buvable wine, but I prefer a good one."

My head spins at the linguistic waterfall; I am not that good at French!

Colette cuts a piece of Tomme de l'Alp. Before tasting it, she tells: "*Pâte pressée non cuite à croûte fleurie!* Uncooked pressed cheese with a flowery rind! A cheese made from whole raw cow's milk. No doubt from one of the cows we met along the way. The cheese is soft on the palate and develops powerful aromas."

She talks about it like a sommelier talks about wine.

"Try the Reblochon," she challenges me. Yurok sits down close to me, as if the invitation is addressed to him.

On the cheese board, the saffron yellow rind and fine white froth of the Reblochon Chabert contrasts beautifully with the grey outer layer of the Tomme. The soft, ivory-coloured cheese tastes slightly sweet and creamy. There is a hint of hazelnut. It is a real treat after the mountain hike.

It is still early afternoon and we take our time.

We have now walked for three and a half hours; we have not been disappointed; we have beautiful weather. It will be a lot less pleasant here in the rain and cold.

When there is only air left in the wine bottle and Yurok gets the last piece of Reblochon as a reward for his patient waiting, we put our rucksacks back on and continue.

“Did you know that all the food has to be brought here every week? It must be very expensive to run a refuge like this,” says Colette.

“There's a Landrover Defender parked behind the hut; I think the haul is not too bad. The trails are narrow, but should be manageable with an off-road vehicle like this. Don't forget that the lodges are closed from mid-September to mid-June; during those three summer months it's touch and go as far as supplies are concerned. August is the busiest month.”

“You've done your research too!”

“I like to travel safely, especially when I have to look after my dog.”

“Yurok really is your buddy, isn't he? He loves being with you, you can tell.”

“I don't have a favourite dog, all four are equally dear to me. Yurok and Iljaq are the lead dogs in my team; these dogs can carry out the commands for the sled perfectly. Sometimes I take Iljaq with me; she is the oldest of the four. This week she has just gone into heat, so it is better to keep her at home.”

“And the other two dogs?”

“They are two close friends, Milalek and Arkan. They run right just in front of the sled; they are the strongest dogs in the team. They have learnt to make the sledge take wide turns; together they are the steering-gear of a sledge that can hardly be steered on its own. I shouldn't separate them; either I take them both, or they both stay at home.”

Chalets du Truc is a collection of about five houses, probably rented out as holiday homes. An agricultural track is the only access for vehicles. I see no parked cars; the residents and their luggage are probably brought in by all-terrain vehicle.

A Bernese mountain dog comes barking from one of the chalets; I hesitate to let Yurok off the leash. The Swiss shepherd has a temperamental reputation; the Romans used them as war dogs at the beginning of our era. An Alaskan Malamute is no brawler; Yurok

will certainly be able to hold his own against the burly mountain male.

A very convincing “*Stephan, ici!*”

The mountain dog immediately slows down. Stephan obeys the command instantly; he hesitates for a moment, then returns to his master at the same speed as he came.

“Phew! That was a close call!”

“In more ways than one!”

Colette wittily hooks into one of the few English expressions I have in my vocabulary.

It was close; I was not prepared for such a confrontation.

After the Chalets du Truc, the romantic narrow roads are over. On roads that are better suited to off-road vehicles, we walk through a fragrant forest. The chestnuts are not yet ripe, but the other trees are vying for attention with their many shades of green and brown. Many trees have been snapped or uprooted by the spring storms. This is the natural way to get rid of weak or diseased specimens. Still, the wrecked bundles of branches and roots, gasping for water, make a desolate sight.

Fortunately, there is some good news. Bright green new shoots on healthy conifers contrast like nail polish on thunder-green hands. Here and there, along the jeep track, we see foxglove in bloom.

When I point out the plant to Colette, with its trumpet-shaped pink cluster of flowers, I try to remember its French name.

“*C'est la digitale,*” the French guidebook author knows.

Yurok ignores it and places a fragrant flag against the flower cluster.

“The plant is not only beautiful, it is also an important medicinal plant. It is used to make medicines that are very good for heart disease. Although it is poisonous, as it does not bear attractive fruit and the fresh plant has a foul taste, poisonings are rare.”

“How and why do you know this?”

“Didn't I tell you I'm a biology teacher?”

After the forest, there is a bifurcation to the left for La Fasse and Les Contamines-Montjoie.

“If you want to do some shopping or stay the night, you have to take the exit here.”

“I have everything I need with me and I am not tired. How far is the next shelter?”

“I think about three hours from here. If we get to the Tré-la-Tête shelter before four, there might still be room. I just don't know if you can take Yurok in. The dog is not allowed in the dormitory anyway.”

“I was counting on that. I have my little tent; Yurok will sleep with me.”

“I had already figured that out.”

We climb slightly; the road has turned into a narrow path. We enter the Combe d'Armancette, through a semi-open landscape of woods and bushes.

Countless streams cross the path, which is full of raspberry and blueberry bushes.

We have a breathtaking view of the immense walls of the Dômes de Mirage, a line of snow-capped peaks.

We stop; I take out my sketchbook and pencils; I have to capture this.

Soon I have as many people looking over my shoulder as a street performer on the Place du Tetre in the capital of this beautiful country. There are still a lot of people on the southern part of the Tour. I hope they have not all reserved a place in the next shelter. I don't need a place to sleep in Tré-la-Tête, but I'm sorry for Colette that she has to continue then for another hour and a half.

Colette wouldn't be Colette if she didn't find a solution; she digs out a mobile phone! I've never seen anything like it.

Her dictaphone didn't surprise me. But a telephone, and here in the mountains!

I am not the only one following the young woman with her mobile phone with a certain degree of surprise; my audience's attention is now entirely focused on my companion. She has to open the device; the small cover covering the buttons is obviously the microphone. She pulls an antenna out of the Motorola. She immediately finds the phone number of the refuge in her own guide to the Mont Blanc walks.



Dômes de Mirage - 3673 m

It takes a while for the hikers to realise that Colette has at least found a place to sleep at Tré-la-Tête and has casually arranged for me and Yurok to camp on the adjacent meadow.

“Jesus, a phone! How did you get one? How much does it cost? Isn't it incredibly expensive to make a phone call?”

“It's not mine, mind you. The publisher bought it in the USA; they are very popular there. I just had to take it on my trip, he thought. It's much safer when you're wandering around alone. The bill for the ringing will be paid by the publisher, as long as I don't get too crazy. But I had to insure the thing for three thousand dollars.”

In long serpentines, we walk up to a bifurcation, where the tasty ascent gives way to an almost horizontal, narrow path next to an impressive abyss, the Chemin Claudius Bernard. Due to the dense vegetation, we hardly notice the abyss. All the more reason for me to keep Yurok close; with the shortened leash, he walks close to my leg.

The last stretch to the Refuge de Tré-la-Tête is a short climb through the green landscape of the Réserve Naturelle des Contamines-Montjoie.

Colette is greeted by the refuge manager as his recovered daughter; she seems to be a familiar face here.

Günther, *l'hôte du refuge de montagne*, has a reasonably flat spot for me in the field next to the hut; I can use the washroom and toilet; the dog is allowed in the '*salle de séjour*' unless someone objects. The sleeping quarters are off-limits to my four-legged friend; I had already taken that into account.

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'return arrow' top left***