

## STARTING POINTS

Sometimes a voyage away from the familiar is proof that it's possible to live a life instead of simply to wish it

**N**ot much bigger than a wine barrel, the hotel elevator I step into is one of those cage-style carriages typical in ancient Parisian buildings, embellished on three sides with delicate gold swirls and flourishes, and an industrial crisscross gate for a door that collapses and expands in graceless clacks. And I'm not alone. There's a woman with me, and even with my back pressed against the farthest edge of the elevator, she is close enough to touch.

"Would you push five for me?" she asks. "I'm having trouble with my hands today."

I poke the black button next to the cutout number five, then the one next to the six, my floor. The gate slams shut, and my knees plié at the jerk of the taut cables. With a steady robotic thrum the elevator begins to ascend sluggishly, as if being hand-heaved by two men in the basement.

I stare at the elevator panel for a few seconds, wanting the digits to light and extinguish more quickly, but I can't help but notice the woman's crutches. They're not the type you buy at the drugstore then toss into the attic after a weekend of use, or a temporary scaffolding to protect the underlying anatomy while it heals. Hers are permanent buttresses that prop her erect and tether her thin legs and feet to steady ground. There are no padded ledges beneath her armpits on which to rest. Instead, rigid 4-inch cuffs lock around the black long sleeves covering her slight forearms.

A cell phone shrill breaks my stare. The woman struggles as she



**Notre Dame:** "Arriving in France, for me, was more than just a trip."

maneuvers her hands around the zipper of a brown saddle-shaped purse slung across her chest.

"Can I help you with that?" I ask, nodding toward the purse.

"Yes, thank you," she says.

I reach over and slide the zipper open, pull out the phone, and place it in her open palm.

It's her mother, I conclude, who is waiting in their room.

"She's always so worried about me now," the woman tells me when she hangs up. "I just wanted to be alone for a while."

I nod. As a mother, I empathize with the fear of losing a child, whether to the fever of a foreign city or to a malady. As a daughter, I understand the desire to veer off a course that is planned for you and chart one that is meant for you, even if it's just for one morning in the streets of Paris.



Two decades earlier, I'd taken my first trip to Paris for reasons spawned by quixotic stories and a poster of the Eiffel Tower I'd pinned to the closet door of my bedroom in second grade. But arriving in France, for me, was more than just a trip. It was proof that it was possible to live a life instead of simply to wish it. For years I'd listened

to my mother dream aloud of going to Hawaii, Maine, Greece, and other far-flung places. When the foggy June mornings arrived in our Southern California neighborhood each year, she'd tell me it was her favorite time to be at the beach. But she never went. Nor to Hawaii, or Maine, or Greece. Her wishes were checked

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behind excuses of time, money, and fear. "Maybe someday," was her shrug-of-the-shoulder response whenever I asked why she didn't at least take the easy drive from our house 25 miles to the shore.

When I became a mother, I vowed to myself that I would endeavor to fulfill all reasonable whims. And thanks to Ludwig Bemelmans' Parisian-themed Madeline books, it didn't take long to find one. My daughter Chloé, who read each book until the pages creased, asked me if I'd show her the Eiffel Tower one day. When she turned six I took her to Paris, and as we rounded a corner and crossed the Pont de l'Alma, the celebrated landmark came into view. It was night and the lights sparkled like the Fourth of July. Chloé

gasped. I watched the curiosity and wonder twirl in her eyes as she reconciled the cartoonish sketches from her bedtime stories with the shimmering, larger-than-life monument before her.

“It’s so big!” she said.

Though I wanted to clutch her close to me forever, I hoped I’d also planted a seed of wanderlust in her, and that somehow I’d made her world a little bigger too. But mostly, as a mother, I wanted Chloé to bask in the real feasibility of “someday” becoming today.



The woman in the elevator drops the phone back into her open purse then interlaces her fingers, caressing the length of each before putting them back on her crutches. “I’m having so much trouble with my hands today,” she says.

It’s the second time she’s said it, and the statement now feels more like an invitation to ask. I stare at my feet; the carpet; the rubber tips of her crutches. Saying nothing doesn’t feel right, but is it OK to ask her what’s wrong with her hands, or is it wrong

to use the word wrong?

“So, what’s going on there?” I ask, adding a quick jerk of my chin.

“I’ve been diagnosed with ALS,” she says.

I’d expected her to say arthritis or some other familiar name, not an acronym that sounds medically formidable. I’ve heard of ALS but don’t know enough to respond, so I just shake my head.

“Lou Gehrig’s disease?” she prompts.

“I’m sorry,” I say. “I don’t know what that is.”

“It’s OK,” she comforts.

With academic succinctness she explains that ALS is the acronym for amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, a neuromuscular disease that attacks and degrades muscles and motor skills, like those in her hands and legs, until they atrophy and die.

The word die lingers in the air next to the hum of the elevator motor. A lump clogs my throat.

“How long ago were you diagnosed?” I finally ask.

“Nine months,” she says.

“And you’ve had a second opinion?” I murmur.

She gives a half laugh. “A second. A third. A fourth.”

Another weighty silence caws between us.

“Is this your first time in Paris?” I finally ask.

She nods.

“I’ve always dreamed of coming here,” she says. “And I wanted to see it before I couldn’t.”

For the first time in the moment we’ve been together, I really see her. Under the halo of a small overhead light, and with the golden elevator trimming the backdrop, she looks posed like a portrait in a gilded frame. She’s older than me by about 10 years, 50ish. Her black hair parts in the middle and ripples against cheekbones that chisel sharp edges below her brown eyes and shade the hollows of her cheeks. Her skin gathers like a cinched sack at the outline of her rose-tinted lips, which hint at both a smile and something else I can’t quite decipher.

Stretching out my right hand instinctively, I introduce myself. She squeezes it harder than I expect and says her name is Leigh.



When we finally reach the fifth floor, the gate bangs open and I hold it while she shuffles toward her white-haired mother who beckons her into outstretched arms. I step out too and the elevator gate slams behind us.

We say goodbye and I watch as Leigh’s mother places one hand on the small of her daughter’s back and the other over the rigid cuff clamped to her daughter’s arm.

“I can do it, Mom,” Leigh says, pushing ahead.

But her mom doesn’t waver and pulls her daughter a little closer. Leigh lets her.

Watching them, I understand the only way they can conceivably bear their fear and grief is by doing it together. Their strength is like a punch to my gut. It’s something I both admire

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“Of course history was easy for you. There was a lot less of it when you were my age.”

## MY WORD

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and hope never to have to summon.

Before she enters her room, Leigh turns back toward me.

“What’s your favorite place in Paris?”

I had just spent that morning wandering the familiar cobblestone streets that had awakened me years ago. *Paris is my favorite place in Paris*, I’d like to say.

Instead I suggest Notre Dame Cathedral.

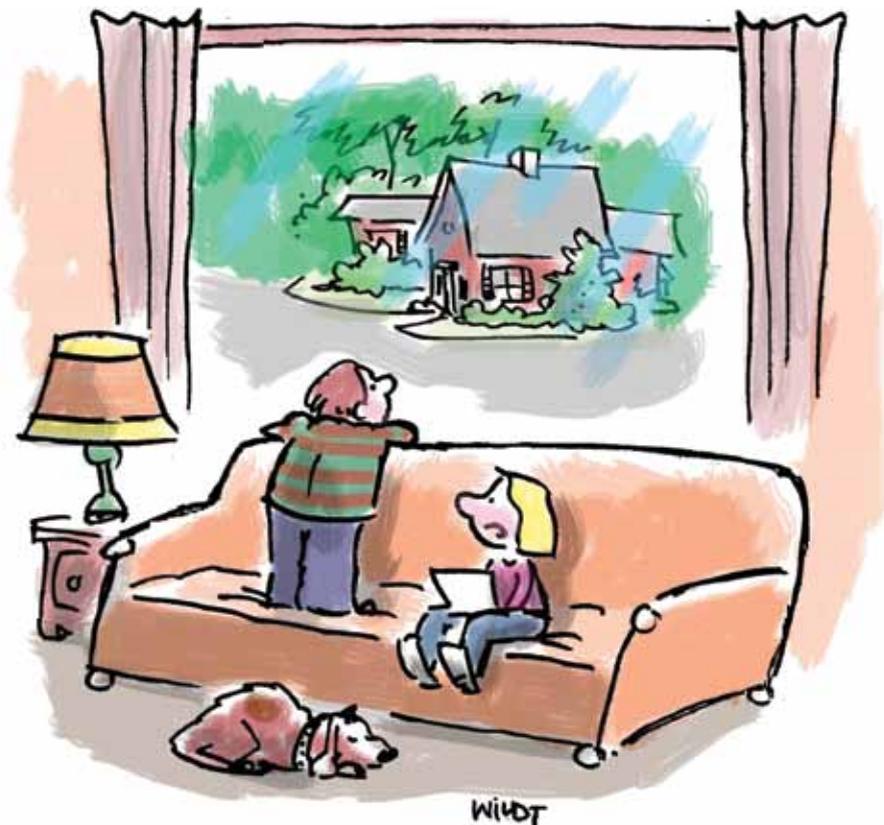
“There’s a bronze star in front, set in the cobblestones,” I tell her. “It’s from there that all road distances in France are measured. The star is point zero, the starting point.”

It was a place I had stood when I came to Paris as a young woman, a starting point and a place to dream about my road ahead. And it was there that I took Chloé during her first trip to Paris, presenting her with the same idea; that life is full of endless dreams to chase.

The door of Leigh’s room shuts, and I climb the final steps up to my room on the sixth floor. Outside my window I see the peaks of ancient rooftops pierced by attic rooms, where lights flick on and off, and occupants ebb and flow in life’s familiar tableau.

And I see the crown of Notre Dame in the distance, below which I picture a mother and daughter standing on a star, fulfilling a child’s wish at the starting point of a different kind of road.

*Kimberley Lovato has written for National Geographic Traveler, AFAR, American Way, among many others.*



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