

One Last Trip

Karen Zemanick

His posture has always been stooped. He wears grey plastic-frame glasses and a plaid wool shirt-jacket. Ice clinks as he sets his martini glass on the front left corner of the dresser scarf and opens the second drawer—where the socks, underwear, and handkerchiefs are kept, as well as money beneath one of the stacks. The wood of the dresser is dark and carved in relief, and the knobs are burnished brass. I hear the drawer slide—slightly musical like a fiddle bow—and smell the cedar. He has changed out of his work shirt and tie and is ready to go with me to the library.

At the municipal library he sits in the corner with the financial papers. We come here each week so he can look into his stocks and bonds. I don't think he has many investments, but he is fastidious about them.

His rounded back is bent in a boxy chair over a thick set of bound journals. His hands look like mine, but broader all around. The fingers are short, and the nails are ridged and flat like a new tin roof.

I can pick up anything in the room and happily occupy myself. I can go downstairs to Young Adult Fiction as I often do, but I've already read pretty much everything of interest on the shelves. Dad recommends instead P.G. Wodehouse, or Graham Greene's *The Heart of the Matter*. He likes to think it reflects well on him that I read these adult materials, nothing girlish or romantic, nothing that I really enjoy. I'll make concessions to please him. I am twelve.

Resurrected after fifteen years, my high school French guides us through the streets of Montparnasse. My father trails behind. From this angle he walks so slowly he seems to be actually walking backwards. His habitual gestures, like extending his hands flat open while he talks, now fill up empty pauses in his speech when he can't find words. When he forgets what we just talked about, my stomach lurches. I have brought him here for one last chance to earn his approval before it's too late for him to know me at all.

He knows what's happening to him intellectually, but he has no more emotional insight than he ever did. Old habits grow more stubborn, and our conflicts intensify, as the Army captain in him takes charge. He wants to convince himself, and me, that he has done all he can to stave off his illness, so he does puzzles and studies French and sticks with his low-fat diet.

I see him with his thick, grey-framed glasses, rubbing his hand over his head, pausing at the Metro map and writing notes to himself in handwriting that is so like my own that I've changed the slant of mine so that I can have my own voice back. I don't believe in the afterlife, but he does. I do believe in the soul of a person, and that as the faculties slip away, so does the soul. The real tragedy is not death, it's living in an empty room.

We are in Paris and no matter how slowly I walk, he keeps walking slower. He will not try to keep up with me nor will he release me to go ahead on my own.