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The Paris Wife

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Published by Virago Press

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THE PARIS WIFE

Paula McLain



virago

Prologue

Though I often looked for one, I finally had to admit that there could be no cure for Paris. Part of it was the war. The world had ended once already and could again at any moment. The war had come and changed us by happening when everyone said it couldn't. No one knew how many had died, but when you heard the numbers – nine million or fourteen million – you thought *impossible*. Paris was full of ghosts and the walking wounded. Many came back to Rouen or Oak Park, Illinois shot through and carrying little pieces of what they'd seen behind their kneecaps, full of an emptiness they could never dislodge. They'd carried bodies on stretchers, stepping over other bodies to do it; they'd been on stretchers themselves, on slow-moving trains full of flies and the floating voice of someone saying he wanted to be remembered to his girl back home.

There was no back home any more, not in the essential way, and that was part of Paris too. Why we couldn't stop drinking or talking or kissing the wrong people no matter what it ruined. Some of us had looked into the faces of the dead and

tried not to remember anything in particular. Ernest was one of these. He often said he'd died in the war, just for a moment; that his soul had left his body like a silk handkerchief, slipping out and levitating over his chest. It had returned without being called back, and I often wondered if writing for him was a way of knowing his soul was there after all, back in its place. Of saying to himself, if not to anyone else, that he had seen what he'd seen and felt those terrible things and lived anyway. That he had died but wasn't dead any more.

One of the best things about Paris was coming back after we'd gone away. In 1923 we moved to Toronto for a year to have our son, Bumby, and when we returned, everything was the same but more somehow. It was filthy and gorgeous, full of rats and horse chestnut blossoms and poetry. With the baby our needs seemed to double, but we had less to spend. Pound helped us find an apartment on the second floor of a white stucco building on a tight curving street near the Luxembourg Gardens. The flat had no hot water, no bathtub, no electric lighting – but it wasn't the worst place we'd lived. Not by a long shot. Across the courtyard, a sawmill buzzed steadily from seven in the morning until five at night, and there was always the smell of fresh-cut wood, and sawdust filtered in under the windowsills and doorframes and got in our clothes and made us cough. Inside, there was the steady report of Ernest's Corona in the small room upstairs. He was working on stories – there were always stories or sketches to write – but also a new novel about the fiesta in Pamplona that he'd started in the summer.

I wasn't reading the pages then but I trusted his feeling about them and trusted the rhythm of every day. Each morning, he'd wake early and dress and then head upstairs to his room and begin the day's writing. If things weren't hitting for

him there, he'd take the notebooks and several well-sharpened pencils and walk to the Closerie des Lilas for a café crème at the marble table he liked best, while Bumby and I breakfasted alone, and then dressed for a walk or went out to see friends. In the late afternoon, I'd head home and if the day had gone well, Ernest would be there at the dining table looking satisfied with some nice cold Sauternes or brandy and seltzer, and ready to talk about anything. Or we would go out together, leaving Bumby with our landlady, Madame Chautard, and find a plate of fat oysters and good talk at the Select or the Dôme or the Deux Magots.

Interesting people were everywhere just then. The cafés of Montparnasse breathed them in and out; French painters and Russian dancers and American writers. On any given night, you could see Picasso walking from Saint-Germain to his apartment in the rue des Grands-Augustins, always exactly the same route and always looking quietly at everyone and everything. Nearly anyone might feel like a painter walking the streets of Paris then, because the light brought it out in you, and the shadows alongside the buildings, and the bridges which seemed to want to break your heart, and the sculpturally beautiful women in Chanel's black sheath dresses, smoking and throwing back their heads to laugh. We could walk into any café and feel the wonderful chaos of it, ordering Pernod or Rhum St James until we were beautifully blurred and happy to be there together.

'Listen,' Don Stewart said one night when we were all very jolly and drunk as fishes at the Select. 'What you and Hem have is perfect. No, no,' he was slurring now, and his face contorted with feeling. 'It's *holy*. That's what I meant to say.'

'That's swell of you, Don. You're all right too, you know.' I cupped his shoulder lightly, afraid he might cry. He was a

humorist, and everyone knew the funny writers were the most serious sort under their skins. He also wasn't married yet, but there were prospects on the horizon, and it was all very important to him to see that marriage could be done gracefully and well.

Not everyone believed in marriage then. To marry was to say you believed in the future and in the past, too – that history and tradition and hope could stay knitted together to hold you up. But the war had come and stolen all the fine young men and our faith too. There was only today to throw yourself into without thinking about tomorrow, let alone forever. To keep you from thinking there was liquor, an ocean's worth at least, all the usual vices and plenty of rope to hang yourself with. But some of us, a very few in the end, bet on marriage against the odds. And though I didn't feel holy, exactly, I did feel that what we had was rare and true – and that we were safe in the marriage we had built and were building every day.

This isn't a detective story – not hardly. I don't want to say, *Keep watch for the girl who will come along and ruin everything*, but she's coming anyway, set on her course in a gorgeous chipmunk coat and fine shoes, her sleek brown hair bobbed so close to her well-made head she'll seem like a pretty otter in my kitchen. Her easy smile. Her fast, smart talk – while in the bedroom, scruffy and unshaven and laid flat out on the bed like a despot king, Ernest will read his book and care nothing for her. Not at first. And the tea will boil in the teapot, and I'll tell a story about a girl she and I both knew a hundred years ago in St Louis, and we'll feel like quick and natural friends while across the yard, in the sawmill, a dog will start barking and keep barking and he won't stop for anything.

One

The very first thing he does is fix me with those wonderfully brown eyes and say, 'It's possible I'm too drunk to judge, but you might have something there.'

It's October 1920 and jazz is everywhere. I don't know any jazz, so I'm playing Rachmaninoff. I can feel a flush beginning in my cheeks from the hard cider my dear pal Kate Smith has stuffed down me so I'll relax. I'm getting there, second by second. It starts in my fingers, warm and loose, and moves along my nerves, rounding through me. I haven't been drunk in over a year – not since my mother fell seriously ill – and I've missed the way it comes with its own perfect glove of fog, settling snugly and beautifully over my brain. I don't want to think and I don't want to feel, either, unless it's as simple as this beautiful boy's knee inches from mine.

The knee is nearly enough on its own, but there's a whole package of a man attached, tall and lean, with a lot of very dark hair and a dimple in his left cheek you could fall into. His friends call him Hemingstein, Oinbones, Bird, Nesto, Wemedge, anything they can dream up on the spot. He calls

Kate Stut or Butstein (not very flattering!), and another fellow Little Fever, and yet another Horney or The Great Horned Article. He seems to know everyone, and everyone seems to know the same jokes and stories. They telegraph punch lines back and forth in code, lightning fast and wisecracking. I can't keep up, but I don't mind really. Being near these happy strangers is like a powerful transfusion of good cheer.

When Kate wanders over from the vicinity of the kitchen, he points his perfect chin at me and says, 'What should we name our new friend?'

'Hash,' Kate says.

'Hashedad's better,' he says. 'Hasovitch.'

'And you're Bird?' I ask.

'Wem,' Kate says.

'I'm the fellow who thinks someone should be dancing.' He smiles with everything he's got, and in very short order, Kate's brother Kenley has kicked the living room carpet to one side and is manning the Victrola. We throw ourselves into it, dancing our way through a stack of records. This boy is not a natural, but his arms and legs are free in their joints, and I can tell that he likes being in his body. He's not the least shy about moving in on me either. In no time at all our hands are damp and clenched, our cheeks close enough that I can feel the very real heat of him. And that's when he finally tells me his name is Ernest.

'I'm thinking of giving it away, though. Ernest is so dull, and Hemingway? Who wants a Hemingway?'

Probably every girl between here and Michigan Avenue, I think, looking at my feet to hide my blushing. When I look up again, he has his brown eyes locked on me.

'Well? What do you think? Should I toss it out?'

'Maybe not just yet. You never know. A name like that could catch on, and where would you be if you'd ditched it?'

'Good point. I'll take it under consideration.'

A slow number starts and without asking, he reaches for my waist and scoops me toward his body, which is even better up close. His chest is solid and so are his arms. I rest my hands on them lightly as he backs me around the room, past Kenley cranking the Victrola with glee, past Kate giving us a long, curious look. I close my eyes and lean into Ernest, smelling bourbon and soap, tobacco and damp cotton – and everything about this moment is so sharp and lovely, I do something completely out of character and just let myself have it.