



# BookBrowse

**The Paris Wife: A Novel**  
by Paula McLain

## 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. He's 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 keep from 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.

TWO

There's a song from that time by Nora Bayes called "Make Believe," which might have been the most luring and persuasive treatise on self-delusion I'd ever heard. Nora Bayes was beautiful, and she sang with a trembling voice that told you she knew things about love. When she advised you to throw off all the old pain and worry and heartache and smile--well, you believed she'd done this herself. It wasn't a suggestion but a prescription. The song must have been a favorite of Kenley's, too. He played it three times the night I arrived in Chicago, and each time I felt it speaking directly to me: Make believe you are glad when you're sorry. Sunshine will follow the rain.

I'd had my share of rain. My mother's illness and death had weighed on me, but the years before had been heavy, too. I was only twenty-eight, and yet I'd been living like a spinster on the second floor of my older sister Fannie's house while she and her husband Roland and their four dear beasts lived downstairs. I hadn't meant for things to stay this way. I assumed I'd get married or find a career like my school friends. They were harried young mothers now, schoolteachers or secretaries or aspiring ad writers, like Kate. Whatever they were, they were living their lives, out there doing it, making their mistakes. Somehow I'd gotten stuck along the way--long before my mother's illness--and I didn't know how to free myself exactly.

Sometimes, after playing an hour of passable Chopin, I'd lie down on the carpet in front of the piano and stare at the ceiling, feeling whatever energy I'd had while playing leave my body. It was terrible to feel so empty, as if I were nothing. Why couldn't I be happy? And just what was happiness anyway? Could you fake it, as Nora Bayes insisted? Could you force it like a spring bulb in your kitchen, or rub up against it at a party in Chicago and catch it like a cold?

Ernest Hemingway was still very much a stranger to me, but he seemed to do happiness all the way up and through. There wasn't any fear in him that I could see, just intensity and aliveness. His eyes sparked all over everything, all over me as he leaned back on his heel and spun me toward him. He tucked me fast against his chest, his breath warm on my neck and hair.

"How long have you known Stut?" he asked.

"We went to grade school together in St. Louis, at Mary Institute. What about you?"

"You want my whole educational pedigree? It's not much."

"No," I laughed. "Tell me about Kate."

"That would fill a book, and I'm not sure I'm the fellow to write it." His voice was light, still teasing, but he'd stopped smiling.

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing," he said. "The short and sweet part is our families both have summer cottages in Horton Bay. That's Michigan to a southerner like you."

"Funny that we both grew up with Kate."

"I was ten to her eighteen. Let's just say I was happy to grow up alongside her. With a nice view of the scenery."

"You had a crush, in other words."

"No, those are the right words," he said, then looked away.

I'd obviously touched some kind of nerve in him, and I didn't want to do it again. I liked him smiling and laughing and loose. In fact, my response to him was so powerful that I already knew I would do a lot to keep him happy. I changed the subject fast.

"Are you from Chicago?"

"Oak Park. That's right up the street."

"For a southerner like me."

"Precisely."

"Well, you're a bang-up dancer, Oak Park."

"You too, St. Louis."

The song ended and we parted to catch our breath. I moved to one side of Kenley's long living room while Ernest was quickly swallowed up by admirers--women, naturally. They seemed awfully young and sure of themselves with their bobbed hair and brightly rouged cheeks. I was closer to a Victorian holdout than a flapper. My hair was still long, knotted at the nape of my neck, but it was a good rich auburn color, and though my dress wasn't up to the minute, my figure made up for that, I thought. In fact, I'd been feeling very good about the way I looked the whole time Ernest and I were dancing--he was so appreciative with those eyes!--but now that he was surrounded by vivacious women, my confidence was waning.

"You seemed awfully friendly with Nesto," Kate said, appearing at my elbow.

"Maybe. Can I have the rest of that?" I pointed to her drink.

"It's rather volcanic." She grimaced and passed it over.

"What is it?" I put my face to the rim of the glass, which was close enough. It smelled like rancid gasoline.

"Something homemade. Little Fever handed it to me in the kitchen. I'm not sure he didn't cook it up in his shoe."

Over against a long row of windows, Ernest began parading back and forth in a dark blue military cape someone had dug up. When he turned, the cape lifted and flared dramatically.

"That's quite a costume," I said.

"He's a war hero, didn't he tell you?"

I shook my head.

"I'm sure he'll get to it eventually." Her face didn't give anything away, but her voice had an edge.

"He told me he used to pine for you."

"Really?" There was the tone again. "He's clearly over it now."

I didn't know what had come between these two old friends, but whatever it was, it was obviously complicated and well under wraps. I let it drop.

"I like to think I'm the kind of girl who'll drink anything," I said, "but maybe not from a shoe."

"Right. Let's hunt something up." She smiled and flashed her green eyes at me, and became my Kate again, not grim at all, and off we went to get very drunk and very merry.

I found myself watching for Ernest the rest of the night, waiting for him to appear and stir things up, but he didn't. He must have slipped away at some point. One by one nearly everyone did, so that by 3:00 a.m. the party had been reduced to dregs, with Little Fever as the tragic centerpiece. He was passed out on the davenport with long dark wool socks stretched over his face and his hat perched on his crossed feet.

"To bed, to bed," Kate said with a yawn.

"Is that Shakespeare?"

"I don't know. Is it?" She hiccuped, and then laughed. "I'm off to my own little hovel now. Will you be all right here?"

"Of course. Kenley's made up a lovely room for me." I walked her to the door, and as she sidled into her coat, we made a date for lunch the next day.

"You'll have to tell me all about things at home. We haven't had a moment to talk about your mother. It must have been awful for you, poor creatch."

"Talking about it will only make me sad again," I said. "But this is perfect. Thanks for begging me to come."

"I worried you wouldn't."

"Me too. Fannie said it was too soon."

"Yes, well, she would say that. Your sister can be smart about some things, Hash, but about you, nearly never."

I gave her a grateful smile and said good night. Kenley's apartment was warrenlike and full of boarders, but he'd given me a large and very clean room, with a four-poster bed and a bureau. I changed into my nightdress then took down my hair and brushed it, sorting through the highlights of the evening. No matter how much fun I'd had with Kate or how good it was to see her after all these years, I had to admit that number one on my list of memorable events was dancing with Ernest Hemingway. I could still feel his brown eyes and his electric, electrifying energy--but what had his attentions meant? Was he babysitting me, as Kate's old friend? Was he still gone on Kate? Was she in love with him? Would I even see him again?

My mind was suddenly such a hive of unanswerable questions that I had to smile at myself. Wasn't this exactly what I had wanted coming to Chicago, something new to think about? I turned to face the mirror over the bureau. Hadley Richardson was still there, with her auburn waves and thin lips and pale round eyes--but there was something new, too, a glimmer of potential. It was just possible the sun was on its way. In the meantime, I would hum Nora Bayes and do my damndest to make believe.

THREE

The next morning, I walked into the kitchen to find Ernest leaning lazily against the refrigerator, reading the morning newspaper and devouring half a loaf of bread.

"Did you sleep here?" I asked, unable to mask my surprise at seeing him.

"I'm boarding here. Just for a while, until things take off for me."

"What do you mean to do?"

"Make literary history, I guess."

"Gee," I said, impressed all over again by his confidence and conviction. You couldn't fake that. "What are you working on now?"

He pulled a face. "Now I'm writing trash copy for Firestone tires, but I mean to write important stories or a novel. Maybe a book of poetry."

That threw me. "I thought poets were quiet and shrinking and afraid of sunlight," I said, sitting down.

"Not this one." He came over to join me at the table, turning his chair around to straddle it. "Who's your favorite writer?"

"Henry James, I suppose. I seem to read him over and over."

"Well, aren't you sweetly square?"

"Am I? Who's your favorite writer?"

"Ernest Hemingway." He grinned. "Anyway, there're lots of famous writers in Chicago. Kenley knows Sherwood Anderson. Heard of him?"

"Sure. He wrote Winesburg, Ohio."

"That's the one."

"Well, with your nerve, you can probably do anything at all."

He looked at me seriously, as if he were trying to gauge whether I was teasing or placating him. I wasn't. "How do you take your coffee, Hasovitch?" he finally said.

"Hot," I said, and he grinned his grin, elastic and devastating.

When Kate arrived for our lunch date, Ernest and I were still in the kitchen talking away. I hadn't yet changed out of my dressing gown, and there she was sharp and fresh in a red wool hat and coat.

"I'm sorry," I said, "I won't be a minute."

"Take your time, you deserve a little indolence," she said, but seemed impatient with me just the same.

I went off to dress, and when I came back, Kate was alone in the room.

"Where did Nesto run off to?"

"I haven't the faintest," Kate said. And then, because she clearly read disappointment in my face, "Should I have invited him along?"

"Don't be silly. This is our day."

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