

To Paris and Back

The tragic saga of a Washington debutante

BY DONNA EVERS

The story of Katherine Elisabeth Johnson's life reads like a novel. In fact, her daughter, Patricia Daly-Lipe, did write a book about it,

"A Cruel Calm: Paris Between the Wars." Elisabeth, as she was called, grew up in the early 1900s Washington society. Her mother, Katharine Hemmick, married Oliver Hazard Perry Johnson, the president of the National Metropolitan Bank of Washington. She was a friend of Alice Pike Barney, the heiress who built Studio House on Sheridan Circle to promote the arts in Washington. When Alice married Katharine's brother Christian when she was 53 and he only 23, it made the sort of headlines neither family wanted.

Shortly after Elisabeth's debutante party, she met Malcolm Whitaker, a good-looking and well-connected young man who asked her to marry him. Katherine and Perry Johnson were delighted since he certainly seemed like "the right one" for their daughter. The newlyweds went to Paris to live, where Whitaker could pursue his interest in aviation. They found an apartment on the Ile Saint-Louis and threw themselves into an exciting cultural milieu that would have thrilled Gil Pender, the main character in Woody Allen's film, "Midnight in Paris." James Joyce was their upstairs neighbor, and Elisabeth bought her copy of "Ulysses" from her friend, Sylvia Beach, the publisher and proprietor of the famous bookstore Shakespeare & Co. Elisabeth went to literary get-togethers with Natalie Barney, Alice Pike



Barney's daughter, whose salon was only rivaled by Gertrude Stein's. She rubbed elbows with Djuna Barnes, Coco Chanel and William Carlos Williams. She and her husband were among the thousands of excited spectators at Le Bourget airfield on May 21, 1927, when Charles Lindbergh landed after his historic solo flight across the Atlantic.

Photograph of Elisabeth Johnson, circa 1925.

They had a perfect life, except for one thing. Their marriage was never consummated. When Elisabeth discovered that her handsome but

distant husband was having an affair with another man, she was shocked and betrayed. Being Roman Catholic, she began an unsuccessful odyssey to get the marriage annulled. Meanwhile she fell in love with a dashing young aristocrat, Count Amedee Costa de Beauregard. The count wanted to marry her, but she refused to do so until she got the annulment because French society would never accept her or the marriage if she had been divorced.

This went on for years. Finally in desperation, Elisabeth left France. Having no other recourse, she went to Reno, Nevada, to get a divorce. She and the count continued to correspond and when she returned to New York, she got word that he was coming to America to get her. Bringing her uncle Christian Hemmick along for courage, she went to meet his ship. When he started down the gangplank, she went up and met him halfway. They had a conversation after which he slowly turned and walked back up into the ship, never to set foot on American soil or to see her again.

Elisabeth met and married Daly Highleyrnan, a

successful businessman and inventor. they had a daughter, Patricia, but the marriage did not last. Elisabeth and Patricia then divided their time between homes in Georgetown and La Jolla, California. Elisabeth battled cancer for years, and died when Patricia was only 18 years old. When Patricia went to La Jolla to close their California house down, she stumbled upon hundreds of letters bundled and tied neatly together with ribbons. They were the many years' worth of love letters from the heartsick young count to her mother.

Decades later, Patricia and her husband were visiting the town where her mother was born, and went to the church to look for family records. There they found a yellowed and crumbling letter that apparently had never been forwarded to Elisabeth, granting her the annulment she had so desperately sought for much of her young life.

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