

# An Afternoon with Colette

by Deborah Elliott Deutschman

Some time ago, when I lived in California—a particularly bad time in my life, one Sunday afternoon I was driving along the coast around Santa Barbara. One of those glittering days, with the water a sheet of light, the flawless blue of the sky, palm trees basking in the breeze. One of those days that is a live advertisement for southern California. For no reason, I turned off the freeway and drove inland towards Ojai, until I was on small, winding deserted back roads. Past orange and lemon groves, ranches—the California that even then was rapidly being eroded. I was driving along a dirt road that bordered a field, when suddenly, in the middle of the field, I noticed a bed. A large brass bed. I pulled over to the side of the road. And before I knew it, I was beginning another story: I saw myself getting out of the car and walking across the field. As I got closer, I realized there was someone seated in the bed, an elderly woman with a shawl around her. It was Colette.

I squinted in the bright light, to rouse myself out of this waking dream, half-believing it was some optical illusion. But I had seen enough photographs of Colette to recognize her even in this surreal context, in southern California, several decades after she had died.

I tried to tabulate how old she would be, but the numbers reeled (I knew Colette had died in 1954 at the age of eighty or eighty-one?). I told myself it must be some kind of bizarre coincidence, an elderly woman who bore an uncanny resemblance to Colette. And the brass bed, and the night table and the few other pieces of furniture—for now I saw there was more than just the bed—maybe what was left of the bedroom of an old house that had burned down in one of the horrible fires that periodically sweeps across the dry desert landscape, in a crazed, ravaged effort to reclaim the land as wilderness. Perhaps the only vestiges from the main house of one of the huge ranches that had once been all that this valley was—not so long ago. And the elderly woman was the spirit of one of the original ranchers materializing in the California sunlight to my once again overactive, susceptible imagination.

But no, it was Colette, and she was looking right at me. With an expression from one of the famous photographs taken at the end of her life. Slightly amused, all-knowing, quizzical.

I saw myself going towards her: it wasn't real and yet it was. And as I came closer the moat of fields around me disappeared and I was in a room, a bedroom. Somehow, I recognized it as Colette's apartment in the Palais-Royal, her last residence. I had spent most of my childhood in Paris, and several times Colette's residence had been pointed out to me, when she was still alive. As a small child, my parents had shown me some of her books; I remember a photograph of her with some cats. And, once, I had even actually seen her on the overnight train one the way down to the south of France with my parents. In the semi-lit, narrow corridor of the Train Bleu, on our way back to our compartment from the dining car: an imposing older woman in a voluminous fox stole—tassels of small, pointy fox heads with startled, beady eyes dancing and bouncing around in weird, unsynchronized rhythm to the motion of the train. And in the midst of all this fur, a languorously beautiful, long-haired white Persian cat with a jeweled collar and leash posed, securely nestled in her arms. We stopped to admire the cat and the woman leaned down slightly so that I could pet him, while her entourage smiled benevolently on—the conductor, who was leading the way, a much younger, middle aged man (this would have been her last husband, Maurice), and several other elegantly dressed people who could also simply have been other passengers.

Now all these years later, I was in her apartment in the Palais-Royal—not exactly there, for I could still make out the southern California landscape all around, beyond this ephemeral room I found myself in. I crossed the room, barely registering, over a pale Oriental rug, towards the bed where she was propped up against many pillows, waiting.

"You wanted to see me," she said in French, using the informal *tu*. And she shrugged questioningly.

"Yes, I guess so," I heard myself saying, also in French—my first language. The language I now barely ever spoke. Except when I was with the few people I knew who spoke French and we didn't want to be understood in some public place. A dubious alternative. French is not exactly Urdu.

"You guess so," she said, looking at me mock-quizzically. Another one of her familiar expressions captured in photographs.

I noticed the shadows around her kohl-rimmed eyes, smudges of eye shadow like bruises: the trademark of her face, all that remained of that face, of her youth. And her eyes, narrowed as if looking through smoke, I thought. Smoke, as if her eyes were tearing. Which gave them the quality of two flames, wicks of light. The register of intelligence, her whole life etc. passing over me in a glance, assessing, and then moving on, to some other object—the china lamp on the Directoire desk across the way.

"I guess I must have wanted to see you, to talk to you, because why else would you be here like this," I said, almost more as a question. (I was using the formal *vous*.)

But she didn't help me out.

"I guess I must feel you'd understand what I'm going through," I went on, still trying to figure out why she was here. I wanted to tell her I'd met her once before, years ago on the train on the way down to the south of France, as a small child; but it didn't seem to be the right moment. Then, I suddenly heard myself blurting out: "I'm so miserable."

But she still didn't say anything, simply continued to regard me in that way of hers that took in everything.

"This makes me think of the anecdote where the young writer came to see you and told you how miserable he was," I said the first thing that came to mind, not knowing what to say, to break the silence.

"Another writer," she commented to herself, nodding, as if she should have known. "Yes, and I said, who told him he should be happy?" she went on by rote, reciting lines—bored, barely tolerant.

"But this is different," I said.

"Everything is always different," she shrugged again. "You young writers are always the same, you believe so exclusively in your own uniqueness. It's a disease." She appraised me for one long moment. "All right, tell me about it," she closed her eyes a moment, the hard edges in her voice softened into an insinuating tenderness.

"I don't know where to begin."

"Try."

"Oh, everything's wrong in my life," I evaded, suddenly seeing it all through her eyes—the relationship that couldn't go on and yet did, and then, the book I kept rewriting. "It's not even all that interesting," and suddenly I realized it wasn't. "What does it all really amount to? It all comes down to such clichés, variations on the same theme," I tried to sound flip. "The details don't really matter, they're not important. You'd probably just say why do people make things so complicated? Or something like that. It's just such a mess."

"A mess," she repeated, considering what that could mean. "Sometimes, life is like that. You see, I'm agreeing with you. One is sometimes reduced to clichés, in the end."

"Even from the vantage point you have now?" I asked. As soon as I had, I realized it was untactful.

She must have sensed my embarrassment, for she shrugged dismissively. "Because of my age?" she moved slightly in the bed, carefully raising her stiffened, arthritic left arm, in obvious pain. "My writing arm is still good, that's what matters. Age is very relative, you know. I shall be eighty-seven next winter."

I thought to myself, if she was born in 1873, over a hundred years ago, how could she possibly be only eighty-seven now? Unless I was also caught in some kind of time warp. But I didn't say anything, instead I went on, "I don't know what to do."

"I think you're referring to something specific," she narrowed her eyes, zeroing in on what was not being said.

"I guess it comes down to the old Freudian concepts," I realized I sounded more flip than I intended. "Love and work."

"What does Freud have to do with it?" she barked. "Haven't enough things been maligned in his name? Why throw in love and work, hmmm? They're not going well, is that it?"

"No," I was levelling as much as I could, my defenses down.

"By work, I assume you're talking about writing?" she said, those narrow eyes of hers focusing on my interior landscape. "You're working on a book," she went on "and you're having problems. And your personal life is, as you put it, a mess?" she summed up.

"Yes. I don't know what to do," I said. "Except just wait for it all to pass, as if it were a force of nature—and drive around like someone out of Joan Didion."

But she wasn't amused. She didn't even smile. "You're very young," she said. "These are all symptoms of youth."

"I'm not that young," I said.

"You say that only the way a very young person can. Oh youth," she smiled wistfully. "Come here," she tilted her head slightly, addressing me the way one might a small child, "you may sit down. No, not too close, you'll disturb the cats. They don't know you yet."

I sat down at the foot of the bed, wondering what cats she was talking about.

"Pauline!" her voice boomed out, the sound echoing into a series of gruff repercussions. This is the way her voice must have sounded when she was young. It was a raw voice, tinged with an allure of mystery, heightened emotions, drama; a quality of burntout hoarseness, of raw passion so unadorned and exposed, so stripped of amenities, it cuts to the quick and holds sway, casting a spell: the stereotype of a smoky-voiced femme fatale. Except this was a great writer, so wisdom was pinned on. She must have sensed something of what I was thinking, for she said, tapping her scarved throat, "It's the cigarettes. I smoked too much. Now in my invalid years, I sound like a caricature of a smoky-voiced femme fatale," she said, clearly reading my mind. "A very theatrical actress. I should be on stage, like Bernhardt, until my last days. You know, I was."

"I know."

"Ah, yes, of course, you young women writers take my life as gospel. Ah, there you are—"

A pale, aging middle-aged woman appeared in the doorway— from behind one of the oak trees.

"Pauline, you see we have a visitor. Will you bring us some tea—you'll stay of course," she turned to me for a second, not waiting for my response. "And some of your tart, if there's any left."

"Oh, madame," Pauline looked worried, "you have been sitting up again. The doctor—"

"I know! I know! Oh," she groaned, "to be old."

Pauline fixed the pillows behind her. "There, isn't that better, madame? Aren't you more comfortable? Less pressure on your back—" She abruptly sat up. "Oh, madame," Pauline gasped, panick-

ing, quickly rearranging the pillows, then moving some books, making a space on the bed.

"Oh it's a wonder they still let me write. See," she picked up a sheaf of papers next to her on the bed. Pauline disappeared behind one of the oak trees. "I tell you, to be old," she patted the immobile trunk of her legs under the covers. "Live when you're young," she sighed. "But it takes so long to learn how." She seemed distracted. "This is my favorite time of day." She was looking at the sky through the trees across the way, "When the light starts to soften like this." But she wasn't distracted: "We were talking about youth," she smiled, an ironic or bitter sort of smile. Or maybe simply wistful, I wasn't sure. A smile, in any case, I interpreted as the wisdom of retrospect.

"I was once so young," she said. "No, you can't imagine. No, I was like a child. When I married Willy, I was no more than a child, and so like a child, for a while I was content. Content with the endless distractions that made up my life at that time. The round of social events, amusing people, amusing things—for we were at the center of what was then the Parisian social life, if you will. The more adventurous aristocrats, writers, painters, intellectuals, and some of the more colorful characters from the demimonde. I was kept busy, amused. And like a spoiled child it all passed before my eyes—an endless show. A series of theatrical events.

"Yes, in a way I was spoiled—superficially spoiled, for I was also deprived. Willy gave me everything I wanted, even before I knew what I wanted. He was attentive to my every whim, so it seemed to me at first. But, gradually, I realized it was all for him. His whims. I was nothing but a plaything for him, a rather unusual object to show off, to gain attention. Exactly how, in what devious ways I was not to learn until much later. By then it was too late. Of course you know all that, I can see that. The plagiarizing. It was taken to court. I supported that man, kept him in style, and later his mistress, whom he married after me—kept them both, when I was almost starving. Travelling around. In road shows. Writing at night... The whole mythical life.

"Yes, I was completely duped by this man. Well, you know the stories, I'm sure. You've heard them. They're part of what passes for literary myth. I disapprove completely, you know, of those popular renditions of the writer's life. Only the work counts.

"So there's no point in going over that melodrama. Locked in a room, my allotted daily output of words, my supervised 'career.' The

titillating, salacious bits of writing he 'advised' me to put in, to 'develop'—he encouraged me along those lines. Well, he encouraged me so well, I took him up on it," she laughed slightly—or rather, grumbled or growled, harmlessly, the way an old bulldog who is losing his voice might; suddenly she looked almost like a bulldog to me. A refined bulldog, wrapped in her shawl, with the drooping smudges of eye shadow, kohl around her eyes, her uncouth mass of gray curls. A deadly intelligent gypsy, with those eyes. The fortune teller reading life, a whole life, in a glance.

"Oh, then it was very scandalous. In those days," she looked amused. "Now," she shrugged, "I can laugh. Nowadays people do whatever they want, as long as you don't hurt anyone. Isn't that the current moral slogan? You're smiling," she seemed surprised. "You see, I've kept in touch, in my way."

"No, I just can't believe you're talking about yourself like this. I heard, I mean I'd read—"I wasn't sure how to phrase it. "I had the impression you were much different."

"That I was a sage," she seemed amused. "A wise old woman who knew the answers to life, and dispensed them in *bons mots* to her visitors, usually terribly solicitous and intimidated young people—writers or would-be disciples looking for the answers to life. Don't you know? There aren't any. That is the answer."

"Yes," I piped in. "Gertrude Stein on her deathbed. She was asked what is the answer, and she replied, her last words, What is the question?"

She frowned. "Oh, you are young, aren't you? You quote me a literary anecdote, as a reflex. The young writer full of literary advertisements."

"It just came out. I was trying to say something clever, I suppose."

"Yes, I know," she said, impatiently. She pursed her lips, the edge of a mischievous smile slipping through, "This is the time when you should be going out and having fun. Don't look so horrified. Believe me, you will wish you had. All right now, tell me," her voice softened again, with its insinuating tenderness. "What can I do to help?"

"I don't know," I shrugged, overcome with emotion, tears welling into my eyes. "Tell me what I should do," I said, in a flip,

defensive tone, trying to turn it into a joke. "A lot of people must have come to you, asking you that."

"Yes," she sighed, to let me know just how she felt about this. "And they still keep coming. And I say to them the same thing. Work. Write, write," she barked. "There we are. Saved from the momentous, once again, by the amenities of life."

Pauline put the silver tea tray down on the bed; a cat jumped out, popping up like a jack-in-the-box, and in a flash was somewhere back under the covers again. Pauline moved some more of the books, moved the piles of magazines, correspondence, the writing table with the fountain pens, the magnifying glass, her tortoise shell glasses, the newspapers, fixing the pillows—disturbing another cat, placing a third one on the ground, all the while talking to herself, inaudibly, muttering, complaining. She brought the tea tray closer, next to the night table overflowing with its potpourri still life: a number of multicolored paperweights, marbles, framed butterflies, a ship's lantern, a vase of fresh flowers....

"This is Pauline's apple tart recipe. It's from Normandy. I hope you saved yourself a little slice?"

"Oh, yes, madame," Pauline stood by the bed.

"What is it," she asked suspiciously.

"Your pills, madame. It's almost five," Pauline smiled apologetically.

"I'm treated like a child. You thought I'd forgotten, hmmm? Well I want you to know I took them over an hour ago."

"Yes, madame," Pauline lowered her eyes in embarrassment, and disappeared once more behind one of the oak trees.

"The invalid's life," she sighed. "How do you like your tea?"

She poured the tea, handed me my cup, the small blue and white matching-pattern china milk pitcher. A white Limoges plate with a slice of apple tart.

She stirred the little silver spoon in her cup so many times and she seemed to be so lost in thought, I was beginning to think she had forgotten what she was doing and that I was there. Then, she suddenly looked up. And again, this time in her smile, I could see the way she must have looked when she was young. Around the mouth, the eyes,

the lower part of her face. The lines, wrinkles smoothed out. A face alive with a transparent clarity, pure emotion, intelligence, a face imbued with light.

"Eat," she said.

And, blushing as she caught me watching her, had again read my thoughts, I did. The morsels of apple tart flaking, dissolving inside my mouth, created an aura of images, of Proustian memories. I could see, and taste and smell Normandy—my childhood summers, spent with the French family who was my second family, in their old chateau that had barely survived the War. I was in Normandy, blissfully absorbing the familiar countryside, endless abstract tapestries of colors and textures, fields and pastures I knew by heart, cultured earth, lush grass; orchards brimming with fruit. I could make out the delicate, tantalizing scent of apple tarts wafting from the oversized old wood stove in the cavernous kitchen of the late 16th century chateau.

"Eat. Drink. It's going to get cold." She watched me as I ate, as I sipped the tea, in such a way I felt she knew what I was thinking. I didn't have to tell her about Normandy, just as I didn't have to tell her about having seen her with her Persian cat on the train all those years ago. She knew.

"There, isn't that better? You see how simple things—an apple tart, some good strong tea—trigger off memories and associations, change the whole framework, invoking an almost mystical quality, and in general, just pick up the spirit? Here, let me warm your tea."

She poured me some tea. "Another slice? It will go to waste otherwise." She carefully slid the slice of tart off the serving knife onto my plate. I noticed she wasn't eating, having any tea. But I didn't question it, maybe sensing on some level I was in another world.

"I don't have too many people visiting me you know anymore. I only have so much time," she placed her hand over the pile of papers at her side. Her hand trembled slightly. Veined, gnarled, arthritic. Peasant's hands I think she had said once, mockingly; I remembered reading that once. Or maybe I'm making it up, thinking of someone else.

"Ah, there you are," she said slowly, insinuatingly, addressing a creature who clearly needed special treatment. An extraordinarily large gray cat cropped up out of nowhere, probably from behind one

of the many pillows. The cat nuzzled up to her, purring motor on full volume.

"This is Le Chat," she bent down so that the cat could rub the top of his head against her chin; with her chin jutting out she had a remarkably feline quality I realized I should have perceived before. "He's been with me for over eighteen years. Maurice gave him to me. Yes, a little kitten, you weren't bigger than this." The cat continued rubbing against his mistress's chin, then his ears suddenly went up, his green eyes fixed on something, and jumping off the bed, he disappeared somewhere, behind a tree, under some bushes I couldn't see.

"And there he goes. Cats," she summed up, and paused, staring at me to convey this was a one word lesson. Her eyes narrowed, studying something in the distance, beyond the shimmering scrim of the sunlit wall, through the trees. "The light is already getting thinner," she pointed. "What is it? Why are you smiling—you want to tell me something?"

"I don't know," I cut the remaining piece of tart on my plate very deliberately, with the side of my fork, trying not to smirk. "Suddenly I feel sort of silly. Embarrassed."

"Embarrassed? By what?"

"I don't know. It all suddenly seems not really so important. I mean my life now—in the context of a whole life."

"You see, the tea helped," she said matter-of-factly. "It's not all that complicated, you'll see. It all works out the way it's supposed to. For instance, shortly after I left Willy, during a terrible time in my life, almost everything seemed to be conspiring against me. I had a small apartment on the ground floor on the rue de Villejust. And there I wrote. Those long, cold nights.

"I can see that room exactly—the room I worked in on the rue de Villejust," she went on in a slow, drawn-out voice, a conjurer's voice. (Until I felt that I too could see it.) "The couch over there, the desk. The windows. I remember the light coming in in the mornings. That pale, anemic blue light of dawn. Those winter mornings. That was Paris at the beginning of the century, hmmm," she grumbled, her mouth cracking slightly into a smile. "Another world, so removed from the present it could be a dream. I remember sitting at that desk, and the light slowly surfacing in the dark windows. Yes, it was like having survived the night. Having been a witness to the night, the long

night of the soul. That was the great battle. This is where the great battles lie," she tapped her forehead with her gnarled forefinger. "In these few inches right here. This is where the great battles are fought.

"Yes," she sighed dramatically. "After Willy, I found out who I was. I found out during those long, cold nights, staying up writing on the rue de Villejust. It was a difficult time. But we have no choice," she looked at me intently, with that hooded glance, the heavy mascara accentuating the effect of her half-closed eyes. "That's all I can tell you. But you mustn't worry about it so much, the way I see you are. We do what we have to. And if you are a writer, you write. I kept writing," she nodded to herself. "The slow, tedious progress. Day to day, of writing. And then, at the end of that passage of time, you have a book. And that is what is left.

"Yes, you see, it's not important how you felt then, how cold it was in that room, how alone you were in the cold, silent night world, even though you were in the middle of Paris, and hundreds of thousands of lives were all around you. No the only thing that is left of all that is words. And these words will be all that is left of now," she touched the sheaf of papers at her side again. "This is what matters, if you are a writer," she held up a page. "Nothing else. That is all I can tell you. Don't smile so sadly. It's true. It's the way it is. Now," she squinted—that hooded glance again, her eyes on the paling stream of light between the trees, "what time is it?"

"Five-thirty," I saw from the small clock on the night table.

"Yes, this is my favorite time of day. My brain absorbs the light like a blotter, soaking up every last morsel. I work well just before the end of day, at dusk. Probably something to do with death. The last songs of the bird before the daily symbolic death that is night. I remember the light at dusk in the last apartment I lived in in the Palais-Royal, the sound of the fountain, the silence in the gardens below. The sad, fading gold light through the windows.

"I remember the autumns there... I remember during the War, it was so quiet, at night I could hear the bells of the Angelus and the early mass, and sometimes, just before dawn, I could hear the sound of a river barge across the silence of the river, the gardens and colonnades. From the Seine, to the Tuileries, the Louvre, the Carrousel, and the Palais-Royal in my sleep," she stopped as if she were listening. Then she looked at me again. "Allons," she smiled. "Enough reminiscing, I'm going to have to get back to work. But you can come

again to see me, if you like. Some other time soon. And we can talk some more. Now, you may go. Leave," she commanded, but she was still smiling.

I stood up, and at that moment one of the cats jumped back up beside her, rubbing against her arm. "Oh yes, Azur," she addressed the cat in a purring voice. "See her eyes. Like the sky down there in the late summer. Now go," she slipped on her tortoise shell glasses.

Still, I waited a moment by one of the trees, a few feet away, reluctant to leave this imaginary place. "Leave," she waved me away, smiling indulgently.

"Be happy," she called out, as I started to walk away. She waved me away again, seeing I was hesitating.

"Thank you," I raised my hand awkwardly, not knowing what else to say.

"Thank you. For what?" she grumbled, I think I clearly heard her—I don't think I'm imagining it, even though I was out of earshot, for it is certainly what she would have said.

And I saw myself walking back across the fields, to the car. It was so quiet, that even the almost completely muffled sound of my steps on the dirt road, the barely perceptible, faint dry shiver of breeze through the leaves, through the fields carried, lingering in echo. The pale, ethereal gold light of dusk had slowly receded like a tide, casting the hills in indigo relief. As I pulled back into the road, the light shone directly in my eyes and I couldn't differentiate between the light-struck trees, and the brass bed and the few other pieces of furniture. By the time the road turned and I was out of the sun, I couldn't see anything but fields. But of course, by then I was too far away.

I know all this can simply be dismissed as a fantasy, some kind of wishful thinking. An imaginary memory. I needed some kind of sign, at that time of my life. Something unmistakable. Therefore I imagined Colette, the great writer, long dead, appearing halfway around the world and telling me all that she did that afternoon; I was really telling myself. But who's to say it wasn't Colette?

Just as it had been all those years before, on the train going down to the south of France, when I had seen her as a small child, before I really even knew who she was. That night in the narrow, dark corridor of the Train Bleu, on our way back from the dining car after dinner, making our way through the carpeted, gleaming wood-paneled

cars in the semi-darkness—the only light from night-lights, at intervals, along the corridors and occasional private compartments whose doors were open; reflections of the dim night countryside flashing past in shuttling motion in the windows; we made our way, stopping sometimes, to let other people pass; standing over to the side, as the conductor escorted a small group, and there she was.

But years later—many years, when I separately remind my parents (who are long-divorced) of the time on the Train Bleu (when we'd been a family) we'd run into Colette, they don't seem to remember at all. (I realize it might not be such a good idea to tell them about seeing her again, all those years later, in southern California.)

"Colette," my father humors me. "That's a writer's imagination for you." After all, as a writer, he understands.

"No, it really was."

"I believe you," he goes along with me. "I believe that you believe it."

"You really don't remember?" I can't believe he has no memory of something that is so vivid to me that there is clearly no doubt it happened.

"Maybe we did see someone," my father improvises another reality, "some older woman with a cat, and you remembered her as Colette."

"No, it was Colette, I say. Since it was in the realm of possibility, after all it was in the early '50s and she still had been alive, why couldn't it have been Colette?"

"What do you suppose the real story was?" my father, always attuned to stories and characters, goes on. "Maybe she was a Russian emigre, or some titled Eastern European, who simply spent her sad, privileged life-in-exile floating around the same resort areas? You say, she had her entourage on the Train Bleu and the conductor seemed to know her."

"No, darling, I really don't remember," my mother maintains. "I'm sorry, but I don't."

"I know we did," I try once again. If only I could make her see what I remember. "You don't remember a beautiful long-haired white Persian cat?"

"Maybe it was someone who actually did look like Colette?" my mother proposes, attempting to be the pragmatist she isn't, confronted by this questionably impaired view of reality.

But I knew it was Colette. After all, if sometimes certain memories seem almost imaginary, then isn't something that appears to be imaginary, sometimes, simply another form of memory?

One afternoon, many years ago, in southern California, I was driving around up in the hills, and there, in a field off a back road, I met Colette.