

THE WIDOW'S TALE

An audio play

CHARACTERS:

- Mario:** A Waiter
Colette: The widow. A lady in her 70s. Wealthy, retired lawyer.
Charlotte: Her friend. 70s. Wealthy. Married/divorced/affairs. A socialite.
Jean-Bernard Aubert: Colette's husband 30s
Johann Bruckner: A German surgeon 30s
Young Colette: Newly qualified lawyer 30s

The action takes place in a Paris street café in 1990, a street café in the Parisian suburb, Foret in 1943, and Colette's cottage in Foret, also 1943.

This is written as an audio play, but to give a feel for the piece, if it were a stage play, extended with most of the 1940s action acted, rather than narrated, 1990 would be set DSR with a single metal table, two chairs and a Cinzano umbrella.

1943 would be similarly set DSL with a wooden table chairs and canvas umbrella.

The cottage kitchen would be set USC on a raised dais, with simply two doors, R and L and a simple table centre. The L door would be functional, but only visible from inside the cottage. The R door would open to on stage, but need have nothing behind it.

Although set in France, no accents are required. The waiter may have an accent if it adds to the piece.

PARIS 1990: Street café. Charlotte sits alone at the table, an expensively dressed woman in her 70s. Well dressed, but possibly slightly too young for her years. She looks agitated and keeps looking down the street expectantly. Mario, the waiter approaches.

- Mario** Café madam?
Charlotte Not until my friend is here!
Mario She's late, I hope nothing's.....
Charlotte Thank you Mario!
She rises following a pause
Colette, Colette!! Are you alright?
Colette *(breathless)* Nice of you to ask! Now can you please help?
Charlotte What on earth is all that for? Are you expecting the army to visit for the weekend?
Colette Just family *(sigh of relief as bags are put down and she sits)*

As you keep reminding me, I have no friends.

Charlotte So it's young Jean-Bernard, Gabrielie and the kids. Judging by those provisions they're staying for the year.

Colette No Charlotte, not this time!

Charlotte (*concerned*) What is it darling? Something's bothering you. We've met at this café every Thursday for the last 40.....

Colette 32!

Charlotte A long time, and I know it when something's wrong. Tell me? What's happening this weekend that's bothering you?

Colette Oh, I'm sorry, it's all a bit too much. Let's just have coffee and chat about your exotic love life as usual. (*calling*) Mario!...Two coffees please and our usual treats.

Charlotte Just today I'd like to hear about you. Every week you want to hear about my 'exotic love life' as you call it, mainly because nothing much ever happens in your life.

Colette Thank you!

Charlotte Well it's true. Now something obviously is happening in your life and it's bothering you, so talk about it.

Colette I'd rather not, it's private, it's embarrassing, it's.....

Charlotte Look Colette, I've poured my heart out to you and it's always helped me. And you know that whatever is said at this table goes no further

Colette What is this, some kind of confessional!

Charlotte Well if that's what you need to enable you to see things clearly. (*pause*) What is it that's bothering you?

Colette Purge my soul before I die. Is that.....

Charlotte If that's what you need, fine.

Colette (*pause*) Perhaps you're right. Perhaps that's exactly what I need.

Charlotte (*pause, then softly with kindness*) So, what is it?

Colette Young Jean-Bernard is coming to stay, alone, and I'm not really sure for how long.

Charlotte When one of my sons comes to visit me alone there is only one of two reasons. One to 'borrow' money, or two, for romantic advice. I should think number one highly unlikely with him being one of the top legal brains in Paris, and I would also think two unlikely as you've been the grieving widow for the past 50 years.....(*Colette reacts*)..Good God, that's it isn't it, he's coming to you for matrimonial advice. Good gracious...Is Gabrielle having an affair?

Colette No, quite the opposite

Charlotte You mean young Jean-Bernards having an affair?

Colette Yes, well, he's considering leaving Gabrielle and he wants to talk it through with me.

Charlotte (*laughing*) Oh for goodness sake Colette, this is a male ego thing! If he fell in love and was really serious about running off with what's-her-name, he'd have done it. He wouldn't come to his widowed mother for advice

He's not going to leave Gabrielle. He just wants people to know that he's still got it at middle age!

Colette He's not middle aged! Anyway, why would he boast to me about his conquests. He has plenty of friends and colleagues.

Charlotte Colleagues Colette! That's the problem. You are the one person he knows who will keep it completely to yourself. His marriage is safe. Don't worry.

Colette Maybe you're right, but it's more than that. This business has brought back so many memories of my past life.

Charlotte Your past! What have you to concern yourself with? The successful female lawyer. The widow of a famous wartime resistance leader. You've grieved for Jean-Bernard senior all your life. Never even looked at another man. What do you know of illicit love affairs?

Colette Perhaps you're right.

Charlotte You know I am. You've.....

Colette No I don't mean about that. It's what you said earlier about purging my soul and confessing my sins before I die.

Charlotte Oh don't darling, but if it helps, you know I'll listen, not judge and help if I can.

Pause

Colette You know my father purchased my cottage in Foret before the war?

Charlotte You told me he planned to move there when he retired to be near his friend Louis.

Colette They were at university together and both attained their law degrees in the same year. After graduation my father joined the family practice in Paris and Louis went back to Foret to start his own local law firm.

Charlotte That much I knew, and they remained firm friends until your father's untimely death.

Colette What I don't think I ever told you about was the letter I received from my father when I graduated in 1938.

Charlotte I know your parents didn't attend your graduation ceremony.

Colette No, well, that was just them. Anyway the letter told me not to go home but to go straight to the cottage in Foret. My father wrote that he had shut everything down in Paris, whatever that meant, and they would join me in a few weeks.

Charlotte But they never made it. The car accident. You told me about that, and your doubts that it really was an 'accident'.

Colette My father had handled a number of very high profile cases. Some involving politicians and business leaders. His decision to suddenly leave Paris and, effectively, lay low in the country, may have been driven by concern about what was happening in Germany, what he knew about his clients or maybe scandals he himself was tied up in. In any case, he thought it was time to go. I believe others had different ideas.

Charlotte You told me how you'd hardly moved in when the police came to you and told you about the tragic car accident and that both your parents had died instantly.

Colette The whole thing just didn't ring true. The local police just seemed so nervous when they told me, "Brake failure, the car just rolled completely off the road".
That was no accident, but to try to prove it would almost certainly have been worse for me.

Charlotte So that's how you got started in Foret. Working for Louis and his son.

Colette Yes, and we were so happy in those early days. This may sound cruel, but I felt that for once I had a real family. The village life was so serene, the people a joy to deal with, and the cases so simple. Wills, the odd land dispute and property transaction.

Charlotte Was it then that Louis suggested that you and his son, Jean-Bernard, take control of the business?

Colette Not quite like that. Jean-Bernard and I, after working together for just over a year, announced our plans to marry. Louis was delighted, decided to retire, and that's how we ended up running the show.
Everything was wonderful. Even Nazi occupation in 1940 didn't really affect our little town. Provided the mayor stuck to local politics and didn't rock the boat, everything carried on much as it was.
Mario delivers coffee, cakes/pastries to the table. The ladies thank him.

Charlotte Until the Nazis took over the Chateau

Colette Even that didn't really change anything. I think the old man was pleased to leave the chateau, and as they were using it as a military hospital it didn't really impact on local life.

Charlotte Until Louis was shot.

Colette Yes. The attraction of the chateau as a military hospital for high ranking German officers was its proximity to Paris, the fact that it was in the forest, making it difficult to spot from the air and the railway passing by. They made some sort of station or halt at the chateau so that they could move the injured with the minimum of fuss.

Charlotte How did Louis get shot?

Colette Wrong place, wrong time. Apparently late one night he was asked to drive the doctor into the forest where a member of the resistance had received a bad gunshot wound. At that time I didn't even know there was a resistance, but it seemed that the railway line was a target. Louis was to drive as close as the road allowed and drop the doctor off. Louis, alone in the car, stepped out for a cigarette and was shot, presumably by Germans after the resistance. When the doctor returned Louis was already dead.

Charlotte Why didn't the doctor use his own car?

Colette Small town, old doctor with bicycle and no car.

Charlotte Oh Collette how awful it must have been to receive such news!

Colette I was obviously in shock and terribly upset, but Jean-Bernard was so angry. I'd never seen him like that. He was so mad with rage he had to be physically restrained. He was all for going down to the chateau with a shotgun and shooting every German in sight. He was told repeatedly that

his father wouldn't have been killed by anyone at the chateau, and in any case if he wanted to get even he needed to get clever, and to march down to a German stronghold holding a loaded rifle was certainly not that. There and then they invited him to join their resistance movement, and from that point our lives changed forever.

Charlotte You poor thing, you've had more than your fair share of tragedy. Then you lost Jean-Bernard, but he did die a hero and leave you with a wonderful son, young Jean-Bernard.

Pause

Colette I'm afraid there's more to tell

Charlotte Please

Colette From that point on Jean-Bernard became totally obsessed with the resistance. I hardly saw him. I was running the business alone. He'd disappear for a week at a time. He would never tell me anything as he said it was too dangerous. We had no married life. I'd see him occasionally for meals or when I left for work I'd find him sleeping on the sofa. I was finding it almost impossible to cope with. The only thing that kept me sane was my work. Apart from that, there was nothing. I avoided talking to anyone as I could say nothing, and neither could they.

I took to taking my lunch at the local café. I needed to get out, but to avoid casual conversation I would take work with me. I'd sit at a table and spread my papers out so no one else could sit with me. If I didn't have the work, I'd just spread out anyway.

One hot July Monday I was sitting at an outside table, papers spread out as usual when I became aware of a tall good looking, bespectacled young man standing next to me with a coffee in one hand and a plate of pastries in the other. All of a sudden I longed to talk to someone who didn't know me and didn't know Jean-Bernard.

FERET 1943: Street café

Johann I'm sorry to bother you madam, but may I just sit? The hot weather has brought everyone out and all other tables are occupied.

Young Colette (*Moving papers*) No please, I'm sorry, do sit. (*a beat*) My name is Colette Aubert, I'm a local lawyer, just taking a short break for lunch.

Johann A lawyer, that sounds exciting.

Colette Not really. More sort of, "Who's pig is that", "That's my hectare you've fenced off".

You look like a businessman. I assume you're down from Paris to see our mayor?

Johann No, my name is Johann Bruckner, I'm a surgeon working at your beautiful chateau.

Colette Oh!

Johann I'm sorry, I should have said. I'll leave (*standing*)

Colette No please, finish your lunch. I was just surprised; your French is perfect with no accent I can detect, and you just look like a very nice.....I didn't....

Johann I spent time as a junior doctor in Paris before the war, but let me please reassure you. I am not a soldier. I don't kill anyone, my job is to save lives. I probably shouldn't say this, but I'm a pacifist. I hate war. Fortunately I don't have to fight and take lives. All I have to do is what I'm very good at; saving lives, no matter what religion or nationality.

Colette Oh. Are you the doctor that saved our young farm boy when he was thrown off his horse?

Johann He didn't need saving. All I did was splint a broken arm.

Colette Do you get in trouble for helping the villagers?

Johann *(smiling)* Not at all. Look I'm sorry to have embarrassed you, but it's just so refreshing to talk to an intelligent lady with local knowledge.

Colette I must go. Will you come here again....I mean...will I see.....I'm sorry.
(packing up her papers and standing)

Johann Yes I will enjoy my lunch here again, if work permits. And I hope we may meet again to talk about pigs, hectares and farm boys, without you thinking of me as the enemy. I am just a doctor.

PARIS 1990: Street café

Charlotte Oh dear! I don't imagine Jean-Bernard would be happy with you chatting to the enemy.

Colette Well that's the first thing that occurred to me. I also suspected that he would already know. You can't hide anything in a small town. So I went straight home. There was a chance he would be there. He sometimes was in the afternoons.

Charlotte And was he?

FERET 1943: Colette's cottage

Young Colette enters her kitchen

Colette You're home for once

JEAN-BERNARD I think you knew that.

Colette Look, I have to tell you some.....

JEAN-BERNARD I know you've been fraternising with a Nazi

Colette Not deliberately

JEAN-BERNARD I know, and it's not a problem. Bruckner is not dangerous, in fact quite the opposite. He's probably more of a risk for them than us.

Colette So you don't mind that I talked to him?

JEAN-BERNARD Not at all. You know nothing of interest you can tell him, but on the contrary, he may know lots that would interest me. So keep talking to him when you can. Make him feel relaxed and feel comfortable, but most importantly, listen!

Colette You want me to be your spy?

JEAN-BERNARD In a word, yes.

Colette He seems an honest, genuine man, who only wants peace. I can't believe he knows anything of interest, and if he does I'm sure he wouldn't share it.

JEAN-BERNARD Nevertheless, keep talking to him. Just chatter, You'd be amazed what slips out.

PARIS 1990: Street café

Charlotte And did you see him again

Colette Oh yes!

FERET 1943: Street café

Johann We meet again

Colette I haven't seen you here for the past few days

Johann No, busy. Lots of sick soldiers.

Colette I'm sorry, I mustn't pry.

Johann Nor must I, but tell me, any interesting pig or land disputes.

They laugh

PARIS 1990: Street café

Colette And we talked, and we laughed, and soon we were meeting almost every lunch hour.

FERET 1943: Street café

Colette You're here a lot these days Johann, not so many sick soldiers?

Johann Alright Colette, I'll be totally honest with you. I've been encouraged to keep meeting you. My superiors believe you may know something of the insurgent movement around here.

Colette I can honestly.....

Johann No please, hear me out. I'm sure your villagers are happy with you talking to me. It's quite funny really; both sides think we can glean information useful to their particular cause. When in reality neither of us know anything of interest and really only want to talk about our simple lives and our peaceful future.

Colette Our future?

Johann I'm sorry that sounded a little.....

Colette Don't apologise. It sounded (*a beat*) beautiful.

PARIS 1990: Street café

Charlotte Well, well, Colette! You were flirting!

Colette Look Charlotte, my life felt empty. Since Louis died everything changed.

Jean-Bernad expected me to run the business, run the home, run his life while he played soldiers in the woods.

Charlotte Oh come on Colette, he was a hero of the resistance, risking his life for his country.

Colette Perhaps I've said enough.

Charlotte No way, you're not getting away with that. *(pause)* I'm sorry, today was to help you, not entertain me.

Colette Maybe both. *(a beat)* Do you have a cigarette?

Charlotte What? You haven't smoked in 10 years....

Colette Twelve.....Oh well!.....I suppose.....

FERET 1943: Street café

Colette We meet here every day now. Where is this world and our lives going. Will this dreadful war ever end.

Johann It's lovely, it's heart-breaking, it's nerve-racking. Oh Colette, I know you're a respectable married businesswoman and I'm the enemy, but if only things were different!

Colette I'm going to say something now Johann, and please don't interrupt. If you stop me now I'll never be able to say it again.
I will be alone this evening. You know my cottage. Come to my home at 8.00 this evening. It will be dark by then. Come to the back through the woods, knock softly on the back door and we can have dinner together, alone and talk without fear of staring or interruption.
There, I've said it!

Johann I'll be there.

PARIS 1990: Street café

Charlotte Oh Colette!

Colette Yes...and I didn't feel guilty. I just felt wonderful for the first time in months. It was as if my real life was just beginning.

FERET 1943: Colette's cottage

Knock at the door

Johann Hello Colette, something smells wonderful, what have.....

Colette Shhh! I want to show you something *(She opens the inner door)*

Johann But this is your bedroom. The candles, the perfume its.....

Colette In this room you can be anyone you want to be, say anything you want to say and do anything you want to do.

PARIS 1990: Street café

Charlotte You said that!!

Colette Johann didn't leave until 6.00 the next morning. The same time as I threw

the burnt dinner away. It was the most beautiful night of my life.

But only an hour later I was awoken by a knock at the door. I was instantly filled with fear and anticipation, before I even knew who it was.

The only thing I knew for sure was that it wouldn't be good *(Pause)*

It was Pierre, one of Jean-Bernard's resistance colleagues. He told me through tears, his and mine, that Jean-Bernard had boarded a German train while being riddled with bullet and knife wounds. Under constant attack he had grappled and killed some high ranking Nazi before dying himself.

Charlotte That was.....

Colette I don't know and I don't care who it was he killed. I only know I felt such, guilt, pain and self-hate that I just fell to the ground. The villagers interpreted my show of mixed emotions as grief, treated me as the wife of a great hero and couldn't do enough for me.

Charlotte Oh Colette I had no idea! Did you ever see Johann again?

Colette I didn't go near the café for days. At the back of my mind I couldn't dismiss the thought that Johann may have let it slip that Jean-Bernard would be out all night and somehow bore some responsibility for Jean-Bernard's death.

After about a week I went back to the office thinking that the distraction would somehow help.

The post was neatly stacked on my desk. Among the condolences, bills, payments and queries was an envelope bearing the single word 'Colette'. I somehow knew it was German, but I also knew it wasn't from Johann. I opened it immediately, a handwritten letter simply said. *(through tears)* "I am a colleague of Johann. I am sorry to say that upon returning to the chateau at 0630 a week ago he was 'mistaken' for an intruder and shot. He died shortly after, he had enough time to beg me to let you know, and I was to tell you that he loved you ---Please destroy this letter"

I don't think I stopped weeping for the next two weeks.

Charlotte Oh, my poor darling!!

Colette I few weeks later it was obvious that I was pregnant. The villagers were delighted: 'Jean-Bernard's legacy; a brave soldier has fathered a brave son, who must be named Jean-Bernard in his honour'.

At that moment I hoped it would be a girl, but no, nine months later the villagers were rewarded with Jean-Bernard's 'legacy' --- A son who had to be named in his father's 'honour'.

(Pause)

Charlotte Does young Jean-Bernard know any of this?

Colette NO, AND HE NEVER WILL!! I will never speak of this or mention it again, and neither will you.

Now I think I need to go. I'll see you here next week as usual. I'll just get the bill, it's my turn to pay.

Charlotte

No Colette, you go if you need to. I'll get the bill.
Today you have paid enough.

LA FIN