

## HOW IT HAPPENED

by Alan Rossett

Cast :

Albert  
Christine  
Dahlia

(ACT 1)

Albert's apartment. Paris, the present.

(Albert's unpretentious little Parisian apartment. A bed on which someone has left an umbrella. Exit toward another room. Through the main door, Christine can be seen waiting on the landing: a young woman, seemingly very capable, holding two giant overstuffed Manila envelopes.)

Zones of shadows for those who listen to the story of the past; at this moment Dahlia, in her late thirties, listens to Albert, 35:)

ALBERT

Let me tell you how it happened. The very first time Christine came to my apartment...

(Christine steps directly in.)

you'd left just five minutes earlier, forgetting your umbrella.

DAHLIA  
(neutral)

As usual.

CHRISTINE

I got through it. Here take them back.

(One of the envelopes is so worn it lets a stream of papers fall out; pages torn from spiral notebooks, shreds of newspapers, squares from cardboard boxes etc...everything covered with handwriting.)

ALBERT

I never stop writing! It's stronger than me! Doesn't matter where I am, words keep popping out from under my nails.

CHRISTINE

(as they pick up the scattered scraps)

In their actual form, I don't see getting them published. I am sorry.

ALBERT

No but...the other night at Fred's, you were so nice, I wanted to know you better. Since you work in publishing, I thought "If I give her my scribbles to read, she'll be forced to drop over and return them!"

CHRISTINE

Your version of "etchings".

ALBERT

Not that having a professional's opinion for a change wouldn't interest me.

CHRISTINE

But it was I who suggested a read. I read everything that comes my way. If I feel I can be useful to a writer...

ALBERT

Like a glass of wine, that's all I have? No no it's OK, I found it unlikely you'd dig my snips and snails. Some of my friends find them amusing. Dahlia's encouraging.

CHRISTINE

She's your wife? Your girl friend?

ALBERT

You could call her my best boy friend, seeing as she's a lesbian and a novelist who's had three whole books published!

(to Dahlia)

See, I ought to be your press agent!

CHRISTINE

All that in one person! What's her name, I might know her?

ALBERT

Dahlia Coe.

CHRISTINE

Doesn't ring a bell.

ALBERT

She's published by Lady-Claws Press.

CHRISTINE

Don't know them either...

ALBERT

They don't have much of a budget for publicity. They were set up by Hulka, Dahlia's friend, to promote Dahlia, you know.

CHRISTINE

I believe I get the picture.

ALBERT

No, they bring out other writers...for example, Hulka's Finnish poems, translated by Dahlia. What else can I tell you about Dahlia..;

CHRISTINE

Why don't we talk about you, about your –

ALBERT

Me...Oh – Dahlia and me! We slept together...fourteen years ago. Twice. But I put a stop to that.

CHRISTINE

Ah? She was frigid?

ALBERT

I don't think so, it was so long ago I don't really rememb...wait...The second time...When I arrived at her place...

(Dahlia seems to be in another  
room, another bed)

she had this big pimple in the left corner of her lips, grey, purple, beige, washed-out, you know, looked like a baby coconut. It wasn't too attractive.

CHRISTINE

Albert, women have other purple-beige spots perhaps more worthy of attention?

ALBERT

Do tell – but egads! I thought – Dahlia sleeps with guys, with dolls, with just about anybody, even me. It's cool to be cool but if she's so unselective, maybe she's picked up something...symbolized by a purple pimple? To be perfectly frank, Christine –

CHRISTINE  
(amused)

More frank? I'm all ears, Albert?

ALBERT

I'd lost my hard-on.

CHRISTINE

You poor dear.

ALBERT

Dahlia was nice about it.

(Dahlia sneers)

No, you were nice!

DAHLIA ("sweetly")

"Well well well..."

ALBERT

"So sorry..."

DAHLIA (as in his story)

"Doesn't matter, look, I suspect we have more to give each other as friends than as lovers, don't protest, let's become real friends."

ALBERT

We never talked about that day again. It's not that we avoid the subject...

DAHLIA (vaguely)

"There are so many more important things going on in the world..."

ALBERT (to Christine)

You won't repeat it?

CHRISTINE

Who could I repeat it to? Albert, let's get back to your writing –

ALBERT

Naw, that was just a ruse to lure you up here, you do excite me, Christine.

(advancing on her)

How do you find me...?

CHRISTINE

Stop that now!

ALBERT

Ah? Then you're a lesbian as well?

CHRISTINE (laughs)

Oh men! Two minutes at their place and if the girl doesn't throw herself into their arms, she's a lesbian as well!

ALBERT

No, no, I didn't say that to provoke you –

CHRISTINE

On top of which this particular male is out for my contacts! Don't deny it, I've read all your stuff, I'm beginning to know your twisted mind! And I forced myself to read everything! By professional conscience! At five in the morning I shrieked "I've had it! this boy's taken me into another time warp!" What are there, eight thousand bits and pieces in this puzzle of yours? nine thousand?

ALBERT

Personally I never counted them.

CHRISTINE

How many centuries did it take you to write it?

ALBERT

Euh...I started when I was...seven. I always liked to tell people about the lives of other people I'd observed. When I have no one around to talk to, I scribble it all down. Don't even notice I'm doing it. Can I kiss the tips of your fingers, Christine? And then lick them? Don't pretend I leave you cold...surely you don't find my body as repulsive as my mind?

CHRISTINE

I think we'd better put our cards on the table.

ALBERT

I'm all ears.

CHRISTINE

Look at my mouth: no pimple there. And you do attract me. A lot. And you know it – a lot!

ALBERT

(trying to take her in his arms)

Then what are we waiting for?

CHRISTINE

But!!

ALBERT

Zounds! A "but"!

CHRISTINE

Without "but", life would be too easy, boring! "therefore", "but" and "before which": your writing –

ALBERT  
(at her)

Undiluted shit, forget it –

CHRISTINE

You're a talented man, Albert.

ALBERT

I want you –

(He embraces her)

CHRISTINE

I took notes.

(without stopping his caresses, she extracts a notebook from her purse and reads to him)

"This confetti of little incidents...which seem blown every which way by some kind of mad wind...lived by people hopelessly mediocre...drifters...against a décor torn from a concrete reality in order to turn it on its head...without destroying it though...sometimes abetted by the dart of an apt little phrase...unexpected...but apt...by the detail one doesn't notice but which is slyly there, right in front of us, and says everything...a new everything..." No, these are brilliant sketches, Albert.

ALBERT

Are you making fun of me?

CHRISTINE

That, never.

ALBERT

Then why did you say "in their actual form, I can't do anything with them."? Why shouldn't I become famous and strut around on television too?

CHRISTINE

To be blunt, I'm a project hunter for big publishers. They're always on the lookout for bestsellers. If I don't come up with some of that, I don't earn a cent and I go out of business. I have to eat like everybody else, Albert.

ALBERT (musing)

Dahlia said –

CHRISTINE

That Dahlia again!

DAHLIA

(to Albert, as in the middle of  
another conversation)

When the publishing industry claims they're blinded by our talent and then don't buy anything, it's just bullshit to maneuver us into bed.

ALBERT

Don't worry, Christine, I'll go to bed with you without a lot of cock and bull...  
You're beautiful...

CHRISTINE

Dahlia's right. Except that's not what we have here. I stated that your writing was unsellable in its present form. But if you restructure it...

ALBERT

Restructure?

CHRISTINE

What comes out very strongly is a kind of devouring curiosity, quite distressing really, toward your fellow man. Who are they, where are they from, what ghastly thing makes them tick-and-sick? It's as if, in telling their stories to someone else, you hope to grab hold of their very existence...and wear it yourself. That way will people find you more interesting than you are? Because, the narrator is strangely fuzzy, always secondary to the action. That's why there's no sense of line.

ALBERT

You mean, no plot?

CHRISTINE

Not exactly. A...path. Nobody progresses. What I'd like to pull out of you is a great iron rod that I can seize between my hands and thrust in front of an editor, proclaiming: "This is the next Norman Mailer! Or Marguerite Duras! Or Günter Grass! This boy's written a novel, a real wow."

ALBERT

A novel...?

CHRISTINE

And even if your first book doesn't completely come off, it'll get the ball rolling...and you'll write another. Any objections?

ALBERT

No but...my chicken scratches...a novel...how...?

CHRISTINE

How should I know? Rearrange them. Tie together things and people that don't go together...or not as yet...and place yourself in the smack center of the action. You're the one that has to do it. Look at me and think of Winston Churchill. I can only promise you blood, sweat and tears. But I will do my best. How about a little sex now...You do attract me, you are right about that...

(He's brought her to the bed where he finds Dahlia's umbrella. He picks it up...looks at it...seems troubled...)

DAHLIA

Don't let me forget my umbrella. It's sunny but my instincts say not for long.

ALBERT

If I asked Dahlia to help...

CHRISTINE

That's not possible. Your style's too personal.

ALBERT

She's a very good writer. I meant to introduce her to you today but...

DAHLIA

Life is so Goddamned short.

ALBERT

It wasn't the moment.

(Change of lighting.

Now it's Christine, sitting in the shadows on the bed, listening:)

ALBERT

(to Dahlia )

I was a little surprised to see you on Thursday at Pierre's funeral. I wasn't sure you'd come?

DAHLIA

And you?

ALBERT

It's true I knew him very superficially.

DAHLIA

Enough to do him a lot of harm.

ALBERT

Me? How can you say that? I've never hurt anybody in my life!

DAHLIA

According to you.

ALBERT

On top of which, I saw Pierre three or four times a year, rarely alone, he was hardly a close friend.

DAHLIA

One day – he must've been desperate – you bumped into him at the Luxembourg Gardens and, on a bench, he confided to you that he had AIDS. To you alone, a vague acquaintance: why?

ALBERT

...Maybe for that reason. Was he determined not to bother the people who really counted for him?

DAHLIA

And you swore you'd say nothing to anybody. And you told everybody.

ALBERT

No –

DAHLIA

Yes: you told me.

ALBERT

Nobody else, Dahlia!

DAHLIA

You knew perfectly well I'd tell Hulka –

ALBERT  
(confused)

...Because she was Pierre's wife?

DAHLIA

No asshole, because there are no secrets between Hulka and I, God made us one! As if you didn't even know that Hulka married Pierre to get her residency permit.

ALBERT

Of course, he married her so she could stay in France with you, his friend.  
Exactly as you married Pedro because he was Pierre's – your friend's – lover.  
No?

DAHLIA

Right! But! Pedro and I...

ALBERT

You and Pedro...??

DAHLIA

Once married, the relationship changes.

ALBERT

Ah...?

DAHLIA

No! What a thought! That brilliantine-coated taco! At first I disliked him even more than Hulka disliked Pierre! But a married woman, must be something in our blood, we become the mother, father and sister of our husband.

ALBERT

Did that happen to Hulka with Pierre?

DAHLIA

I'll say not!! Hulka's mine!! And yes, she's Pedro's as well – since he became a part of my life...and then with all this residency red tape...they did have something in common. So Hulka ended up pampering Pedro as if he were her own son. When she and I told Pedro about what Pierre had told you not tell anyone else, his AIDS –

ALBERT

My God why did you inform Pedro?

DAHLIA

Just in case he and Pierre still slept together...so Pedro would take some precautions, you understand.

ALBERT

But I thought Pierre and Pedro were no longer on speaking terms and for over two years! Pierre spoke of him with utter contempt.

DAHLIA

Sure, but in these cases, sometimes they still do go to bed with each other occasionally.

ALBERT

Really?

DAHLIA

Who knows: Hulka and I were so worried about Pedro! And Pedro – you know how he is – he phoned the entire gay population in Paris to let them know Pierre had AIDS – his pretext being that Pierre was probably still sleeping with them all.

ALBERT

Pierre was doing that? God, I must say I'm disappointed, I always found him so upright.

DAHLIA

No, I'm sure he wasn't. He was very upright.

ALBERT

Then Pedro is a real shit.

DAHLIA

Oh he's what he is...sometimes delightful, sometimes...same as you, love. But, when on the phone, Pedro announced Pierre's illness to Suh-Chang...

CHRISTINE

Suh-Chang...?

ALBERT

A saint! Nursing Pierre with such devotion, right up to the last day.

DAHLIA

Let's say he preferred staying with Pierre rather than having to go back to North Korea. So when our little Pedro had the gall to ring up Suh-Chang and let him in on Pierre's illness – with Pierre sitting right there next to Suh-Chang – it was the last straw! All poor Pierre wanted was to finish his days in peace...it's normal his stress, his outrage, got turned on the person he judged responsible for the situation.

ALBERT

Who's that?

DAHLIA

Me you bloody idiot! His best friend, the one he really needed at that moment to comfort him. And I find myself shoved out of his life.

ALBERT

I knew that you no longer saw each other...but not the reason behind it. Why did you wait till after his death to let me in on the matter?

DAHLIA

I didn't want you broadcasting it over the evening news while he was still alive!

ALBERT

Me?

DAHLIA

Pierre's morale was already low enough without even more of your senseless blabbing! Don't you realise, the last five minutes I've simply been imitating the way you talk about people? It's devastating!

ALBERT

Dahlia!

DAHLIA

The end of Pierre's life was poisoned – uselessly – the day you betrayed his trust by confiding the truth about him to me.

ALBERT

You're making me feel just awful. I saw he was alone, unhappy. I knew how much he meant to you. I thought I was doing him a good turn.

DAHLIA

Bullshit. It all boiled down to your being able to sink your teeth once more into a juicy little story to retell – in which you, the outsider, get to be one of the main characters. Something inside of you must believe no one would find you interesting if you chatted about a dripping faucet.

ALBERT

No it's not that, it's...it upsets me to have to be on my guard with my close friends. You for a start. I trust you.

DAHLIA

Don't know why. I'm no angel, Albert.

ALBERT

No but you're a good person.

DAHLIA

Pah, you think so.

ALBERT

Of course you are. At the beginning, just like me, you thought you were doing the right thing. And perhaps Pierre wanted me to tell you. Especially you. That way the people he cared about would pay him a little attention...be compassionate... without his having to beg for it. So you see –

DAHLIA

Oh shut up, stop justifying yourself! You fucked up! And so did I!

ALBERT

Then why are you rubbing it in at this date?

DAHLIA

For your sake, friend. Because I love you. We ail do! We love listening to the shaggy dog tales you make out of our lives, how can we resent what we're lapping up? But every now and then, you go too far. Stupid as we are, we keep hoping you'll realise it.

ALBERT

Your friends think that they can say anything to me. I must be too nice.

DAHLIA

Not to me – who's known you for over fourteen years.

ALBERT

What's sad about the business is you're right to be angry with me. I'm angry with me. It's true: I talk too much.

DAHLIA

Then dear, once and a while, button your lip. Now let's change the subject, shall we?

ALBERT

No but you see Pierre –

DAHLIA

Talk about yourself, that way you'll only hurt yourself.

ALBERT

Pierre...

DAHLIA

Sssh! Don't push me, Albert! Your friendship is too precious for me to let you spoil it –

ALBERT

No but Pierre –

DAHLIA

I'm leaving –

ALBERT

(following her to the main door)

Your friendship means everything to me! Don't go!

DAHLIA

Oh yes I will! Having said what I came to say, I believe in getting away without one syllable too much.

CHRISTINE

Like a woman in a novel

ALBERT

No, stay, there's a girl coming over.

DAHLIA

A good reason for me to go!

ALBERT

No, let me tell you all about her!

DAHLIA

Next time.

(she crosses the threshold where she remains,  
back to the audience:)

ALBERT

She's a project hunter for Gallimard!

(Change of lighting)

ALBERT

She wants me to write a novel!

(As Dahlia sits in the shadows:)

CHRISTINE

About her, Albert. That woman oozes intrigue!

ALBERT

No, you think so?

CHRISTINE

Yes, and so does Pierre. And Hulka and Pedro and the others.

ALBERT

Suh-Chang? No, Christine, they're Dahlia's friends, I hardly know them.

CHRISTINE

Even better! They'll stir your imagination!

ALBERT

What's more, there's bits about them in my notes as it is.

CHRISTINE

You see! As a writer they've interested you already! Go, get some paper! Any kind! Paper towelling! You're going to start writing immediately!

ALBERT

I'd rather go to bed with you!

CHRISTINE

Formal advice for a fledging novelist: don't dissipate creative energy on a fuck...even a good one!

ALBERT

Into that bed, lady! Did you hear me?

CHRISTINE

(leaves the bed)

It'll be the next time for us as well. Cross my heart! I'm leaving! The odour of an author in rut for his novel is unmistakable. I can sniff the money you're going to make! Wait'll you see how much! And I get ten percent! C'mon, do a good job for me! Breathe deeply, take off and become the real you!

(In the entrance he tries to hold her back:)

Down boy, they're waiting.

ALBERT

Who? Your husband? Your lover? Your...mistress?

CHRISTINE

But no, moron: my son's baby sitter! You see: you've cost me enough tonight! But you're going to make it up to me! Ten percent!

(and she's gone)

ALBERT (radiant)

Chapter One!!

(he faces the huge pile of notes. Intimidated:)

...Chapter One...?

(imploringly looks to Dahlia)

Chapter One??

DAHLIA

(taking the tone of a petulant child)

Mama!

ALBERT

Ah! "Christine's son".

(Dahlia picks up the "notes" and leaves, Albert starts to write. Change of lighting as Christine enters from the other room and puts on Albert a new sweater...one more to her liking...)

CHRISTINE

Doesn't it bother you sometimes...becoming a father in five months rather than nine?

ALBERT

Quite the contrary! A sincere thanks for giving me the joys of fatherhood – without the effort of having had to fecundate you!

CHRISTINE

That is nice!

DAHLIA  
(head reappearing, the CHILD's VOICE)

Papa!

ALBERT

I'll cuddle him.

CHRISTINE

Don't start that, in two minutes he'll be in dreamland.

DAHLIA (CHILD's VOICE)

PAPA!!

(she disappears)

ALBERT

How melodic, how confident, he really believes I'm his father.

CHRISTINE

You are because you watch over him the way Serge never did.

ALBERT

Ah kids, I love them! What's hard for me – Eunice – it's as if she never existed. But my two kids...to have left them with her in the sticks.. That was a big mistake. Did I tell you about that last Christmas Eve at her brother Martin's factory?

CHRISTINE

Ye-

ALBERT

Martin himself strangely absent...till the phone call from his wife – which I took. So it was me that she, Martin's wife, asked to find an excuse for him, Martin – as he was being treated for an attack of that epilepsy he'd always managed to hide from his personnel. And poor Eunice...stepping out of the can –

CHRISTINE

- Gets you over a loudspeaker cheerfully announcing to a hundred or so employees that their boss, your brother-in-law, was having one of his usual violent epileptic fits. I can understand Eunice being a little peeved.

ALBERT

To the point of claiming I did that sort of thing on purpose. So people would find me so offensive, they'd be the ones to make the break. Therefore she and I were through.

CHRISTINE

She must be a very bright lady indeed – to have seen that she wasn't the woman for you. Anyone who tries to shut you up thinks they can change the order of the universe. Like Serge with me: can you imagine me living with the Silent Type who dumps his wife in a big empty house in the suburbs? Comes home from work without telling me anything about his day, his colleagues? Me, a city baby eager to jump into the Parisian literary world? You're my soul mate.

ALBERT

I'm happy, so happy. A father again with a woman who adores me for what I am, no alterations asked.

CHRISTINE

And always with us something more important than us.

ALBERT

Does that exist?

CHRISTINE

Your novel, stupid, your novel, finished, fulfilled. I love you, Albert.

ALBERT

I know it.

CHRISTINE

Let's savour this last peaceful weekend.

ALBERT

Why last??

CHRISTINE

Monday morning at the crack of dawn, Copy Number One, I register at the legal depository, the SDGL. I make photocopies of Copy Number 2. Then the real battle begins, selling it! It'll be thrilling but not exactly restful!

ALBERT

You will let me correct the typing mistakes first, there are quite a few.

CHRISTINE

For the registered copy it doesn't matter.

ALBERT

Think so? Remember when I talk about the Purcell opera?

CHRISTINE

"Dido and Aeneas".

ALBERT

Yes. You typed "Dildo in an Anus".

CHRISTINE

Oh my God! I'm overworked!

ALBERT

It wasn't exactly what I had in mind.

CHRISTINE

OK I'll stay up correcting, all night if need be.

ALBERT

Don't have to, I gave the first copy to Dahlia to correct.

(Dahlia languorously re-enters)

CHRISTINE (ashen)

You what?

ALBERT

Five minutes before you came home, she left with the manuscript tucked under her arm. She promised to do the corrections post haste.

CHRISTINE

You what? You what?

ALBERT

Hey, I'm not your baby, you don't have to keep repeating things to me.

CHRISTINE

Even a two-year-old child would've got the picture! Imbecile!

ALBERT

I still don't get it. What are you talking about?

CHRISTINE

Dahlia! Your book – before it's registered – is not legally protected! Tomorrow morning at the crack of dawn, she'll be the one to make a photocopy. The original she'll register at the SDGL – signing herself as the author! After which languidly she'll rewrite it as she sees fit...convincing herself she's done you a favour by improving it!

ALBERT

Perhaps she will, my chum's a terrific writer.

CHRISTINE

If I don't stop her – immediately –

(prepares to leave)

ALBERT

Where are you going?

CHRISTINE

To Dahlia's! To strangle her!

ALBERT

She's not there. She's whizzed off to visit friends in the country.

CHRISTINE

Where??

ALBERT

At...someone's.

CHRISTINE

Someone who?

ALBERT

Don't you listen: I clearly said Someone's.

CHRISTINE

God Christ Buddha, put me on the track of that stupid cunt!

ALBERT

Hey hey, being cynical has its charm but I'd appreciate your adding a few nuances when you talk about my friends. Dahlia's my best chum! She'd never do such a thing! Even if she were tempted – she'd realise that I – her best chum – would be quite put out. So she'd stop!

CHRISTINE

Ah? Like when a housebreaker shows up in the middle of the night...and you tell him: "Go away, my good man or I'll be quite put out." And he leaves, begging your pardon?

ALBERT

Dahlia Coe is a professional writer! She has more of her own ideas than she needs! She's the one who's had three novels published!

CHRISTINE

Which she paid for.

ALBERT

Without having had to pinch them from anybody.

CHRISTINE

How do you know? You were there when she was pinching them?

ALBERT

Yep yep, all this just 'cause you're jealous of her.

CHRISTINE

Jealous! ?

ALBERT

There's no reason to be.

CHRISTINE

Me, jealous of that pasty-faced bitch? are you kidding?

ALBERT

You're being very conventional, you know. You feel menaced because she's a woman and not a bearded old gent –

CHRISTINE

Watch out, Albert, that woman is a bearded old gent!

ALBERT

Exactly! since we know Dahlia's a man –

CHRISTINE

Dahlia is not a man! it's you that's conventional. Or she's a man with whom you've gone to bed several times!

ALBERT

Twice to be exact and over fourteen years ago! and ever since she's my best friend. You're supposed to believe in your best friend, aren't you? If not who do you believe in?

CHRISTINE

In me! Who loves you!

ALBERT

Right, that's something else! The friend...the friend...the relationship is very deep and...deeply asexual. A man has to have this kind of friendship with at least one woman. If not what are we, just another little sex fiend. I need Dahlia like I need oxygen.

CHRISTINE

How noble. How humane. In Parisian literary circles, it seldom works that way. I know writers better than you! Some are thieves from the gutter! And others gentry who treat the rest of you like their vassals – including your property.

ALBERT

My "property"? And when Dahlia didn't even think my idea was very good.

CHRISTINE

Whoa, Albert, I asked you not to talk about this novel to anyone! So you told her a little about the plot line: when?

ALBERT

Uh well about four...or five...

CHRISTINE (hopefully)

Days ago?

ALBERT

No, months.

CHRISTINE

Aaaaaaah!!

ALBERT

Actually it was that very first evening you came here. Ten minutes after you'd left. She'd forgotten her umbrella.

CHRISTINE

She does that very often!

ALBERT

All the time.

CHRISTINE

And don't we know why!

ALBERT

When I said to her "you just missed barging into a coitus..."

CHRISTINE

You said that? about me? How tactful.

ALBERT

No I explained that you were expecting more from me than one fuck among the multitude, even a good one!

CHRISTINE

Charming. So like you! And her commentary?

DAHLIA

Is she pretty? Must be to convince you that she can sell your little spitballs!

ALBERT

I thought you liked them.

DAHLIA

But I do, dear: quaint are the jottings! But they don't go very far.

ALBERT

(to Christine)

You see!

(to Dahlia)

You see! You two think the same way!

DAHLIA

I'm sure I'm going to get along with...what's her name already?... Christine? Christine. No, your scrawls... your little scrawls...

ALBERT

What's more, you find them original!

DAHLIA

That they are. "On a deserted street, a tree without a leaf, underneath which a man wipes his snot on his sleeve, trying to hide the dribbles from an old lady on her way to the poorhouse. Overhead: a vulture." They're very sweet really, not badly written...for your friends...the indulgent ones. Sunday images from a Sunday author.

ALBERT

You are so right! That's where Christine's terrific. She wants me to glue my "confetti" around one central idea! She's ordered me, I mean suggested, she inspires me to –

DAHLIA

Ordered you?

ALBERT

Yes to transform my notes into – prepare yourself! – a Novel!

DAHLIA

Ah. A novel. How odd.

ALBERT

Yes, yes, she's sniffed the novelist in me.

DAHLIA

Like one of the three little pigs nosing out her swill?

ALBERT

She's an expert.

DAHLIA

Mama mia! When I think...I stand on my head to meet someone, anyone, in publishing. And she breezes along! Casual-like! A cow ordering a novel! It's really too, too...!...!

ALBERT

...?

DAHLIA

Predictable. Let's recapitulate: Where's she salaried, at Gallirnard's?

ALBERT

And in other houses. Not exactly salaried.

DAHLIA

Ah. What are the titles of the books she's sold?

ALBERT

I don't know. She was only here a quarter of an hour and as we jumped into bed right away –

CHRISTINE and DAHLIA

Hurnrn.

ALBERT  
(to DAHLIA )

Interested?

DAHLIA

No, wait, I'm trying to understand. Ah! if she drops over to the apartment of a man she hardly knows...hold on, the fog's clearing...she's not seeking a literary project. Got it! She's out for bed, board and boner!

ALBERT

That's pretty vulgar, Dahlia

DAHLIA

Like her, I imagine?

ALBERT

You're not usually vulgar. "Bed, board and boner..." Mind you, there's a lilt to it. What if I put it into my novel...People do say things like that. Seen from a certain angle, perhaps you're not entirely wrong about Christine...

CHRISTINE

HUM!

ALBERT

But that girl has so many angles! that's why she turns me on.

DAHLIA

Where does she live?

ALBERT

Actually I just rang up Fred to find our more about her child.

DAHLIA

Who's Fred?

ALBERT

I told you all about him, a good person. The one who tried to commit suicide when he was arrested for tax evasion.

DAHLIA

Ah?

ALBERT

I met Christine at his place.

DAHLIA

Ah?

ALBERT

She seems to have run out on her husband, taking her two-year-old child...to set up...somewhere else.

DAHLIA

Let's recapitulate. This girl is not salaried at Gallimard

ALBERT

It's as if she were.

DAHLIA

Not really. And she lives in a sordid furnished room with a two-year-old brat. No, no, I've got to hand it to her, I admire a pushy miss. A novel! Is that what they invent nowadays...these gold diggers...to fleece the farmers? Got to give them credit! A novel! you? That's a good one.

(She laughs, a bit forced)

Laugh with me...so you won't have to weep later.

ALBERT

(stubborn)

I'm going to write a novel. Her novel.

DAHLIA

When? What about your job, man?

ALBERT

I'll write on weekends. In the evening. If they don't give me enough time, I'll take holidays.

DAHLIA

And if your office won't hear of it?

ALBERT

Perhaps I'll quit.

DAHLIA

You'll quit. While waiting for your best-seller to hit the stands, how are you going to feed your two tykes out in the sticks? Or Eunice?

ALBERT

That's the first time you've expressed any concern for them!

DAHLIA

And your Christine perhaps eats three meals a day as well? I'm sure she does! As for you – even reduced to a skeleton – you'll still have to nibble a lettuce leaf from time to time, if only for the energy to hold up your ballpoint pen! Albeeeert, you worry me. You're an innocent lad and you're going to find yourself in a trap you can't get out of and to fool around with what? With speculation! That's what!

ALBERT

I must be dreaming, you were the first to say to me "you've got to do something with your notes!"

DAHLIA

Yes but if after fourteen years you haven't, what's the big rush now? Listen, darling, the ability to write hangs on a combination of passion and aptitude. Alas, you...

ALBERT

Right, me, me, it's true, I've been under such pressure to earn the living of several other people that I've by-passed my own life. But! This novel is going to make so much money I'll be able to fulfil my domestic responsibilities, and still have the time to write...My Second Novel!

DAHLIA

Which'll break all records as well?

ALBERT

Yes! OK, I know that I have to make the first one work and to do that, obviously, accept pulling in my belt for a while. But I've got to do it. Evidently that's a little hard for you to understand.

DAHLIA

What does that mean?

ALBERT

I'm not denigrating you...but all these years that I've had my nose to the grindstone... you...born in a family that could subsidise your fantasies...

DAHLIA

Fantasies! Three published novels! On the mutilation of women in Mali, the tragedy of Kosovo from the eyes of a prostitute and Stalin's camps for women. "Documented with exemplary exactitude" to quote Marie-Hélène Dissoux in Libération! My works are too frivolous for you?

ALBERT

No, I admire them but how were these monuments financed?

DAHLIA

You bastard! You can't deny I sell a bit, that I'm no longer unknown!

ALBERT

Let's say – by now you are a little little-known.

DAHLIA

And I live more modestly than you! I refuse to abuse the generosity of those who love me.

ALBERT

Yes but you've never had to earn your living like I have. And Hulka's not exactly a daughter of the people either. And then – hey, she's a widow now: how much'll she rake in from the inheritance left by Pierre?

DAHLIA

Pierre! Pierre! I've already forbidden you to pronounce his name in front of me! We've got to put Pierre behind us or we'll both go mad! No, no tell me about your novel and I'll listen. I ask no more than to be convinced of its necessity. I'm your friend, I love you like a mother, you know that. Let's make a pact: we'll never talk about Pierre again. I can be as fragile as the next one and our experience with Pierre has traumatised me.

ALBERT

Well me too by God! You're going to see just how much! When you left earlier, I was so disturbed...apropos of Pierre...

DAHLIA

Please!

ALBERT

And Pedro, Suh-Chang, Hulka...that I said to myself: with Dahlia, I must never mention him again.

DAHLIA

Yes, you're right, I know you mean well...

ALBERT

So I told Christine – all about Pierre.

DAHLIA

(Pause. Darkly)

It figures. And what did she say?

CHRISTINE

Maaarvellous! Turn it into a novel.

DAHLIA

Oh the bitch! A novel! She "orders" a novel about our friend, not yet cold in his grave! Ooooh. Ooooooh. Excuse me but ooooh. It's not possible.

ALBERT

It's possible.

DAHLIA

And...your novel...about Pierre!! How are you planning to do it, that really arouses my curiosity.

ALBERT

I don't know, in one evening you don't flesh out "Gone With the Misérables".

DAHLIA

I'm not talking about form but meaning. What do you know about Pierre, nothing but trivialities, you said so yourself. Or about Pedro or Suh-Chang. Or gays in general, nothing.

ALBERT

What did Victor Hugo know about Cosette? It's you who keeps repeating to me that being homo, lesbo or hetero doesn't change a whit of what one is as a human being.

DAHLIA

Yes, if I've had to repeat it – year after year – it's because you're incapable of understanding! In the end what do you know about people in general? About the human race? Zilch. No, you're an adorable boy, I adore you, but you must accept your limitations. Obviously, from the strictly literary point of view, you're going to make a mud pie mess, you can't help yourself, you're not a pro. You're going to sling one more dilettante's novel on a market that's already saturated...waste the time of a lot of professionals...for the sole purpose of writing a book that stinks. Stinks! Accept it. And! If I'm wrong –

ALBERT

You??? Wrong?? Never!!!

DAHLIA

No no, it has happened a few times. If your novel isn't all that bad...

ALBERT

Come off it, it has to be!

DAHLIA

Frankly, even if it's good, the subject matter's a kind of rape. There's no other word. You're raping people who've suffered enough as it is. Poor Suh-Chang!

ALBERT

A saint?

DAHLIA

Maybe, but without Pierre he's a saint without a cent! It's going to be in his interest to play ball with Pedro who, by the way won't be too pleased to find himself depicted as he is – "the dark-skinned villain" in a dime novel! As one, the two of them are going to drag you into court! Defamation suits are going to pour down on you! I don't care if you satirise me, actually I find the idea rather amusing. But poor Hulka – and I know her better than anyone – is not going to put up with your nonsense! Particularly since she's always loathed you! Didn't know that?...Well well well! when you start fooling around with the truth...! I'd advise you to get a good lawyer, I know one if you'd like his address?

(vaguely looking in her purse)

Because Pedro and Hulka –

ALBERT

Have residency permits in France that are on the precarious side, no? Now what if I went straight down to the immigration officials and told them the whole story?

DAHLIA

That's dreadful, you play that card and you won't get out alive!

ALBERT

No – but, up there on my cloud, I'll enjoy the posthumous glory...of my fucking novel!!

(Pause)

DAHLIA

Let's recapitulate. This...uh...

ALBERT and CHRISTINE

CHRISTINE!!

DAHLIA

Who is not, we'd both agree, ugly as sin?

ALBERT

Why do you keep harping on that? Do you want her photo?

DAHLIA

How much money has she asked you for?

ALBERT

What are you talking about?

DAHLIA

The so-called advance that's going to launch your career! For her services, my boy! Ah, these encouraging birds who lay it on! I want to meet this one! With my experience in the field, if she's a phoney, I'll know! Albert, I'll protect you! I'll get rid of her. That is why you invited me up tonight, you wanted me to objectively evaluate her worth...

ALBERT

You came uninvited.

DAHLIA

Perhaps not consciously –

ALBERT

And twice in a row! Dahlia, I'm not an adolescent! I'm up to fighting my own battles with a sexy little thing all alone in my apartment!

(jumps into bed with Christine. Dahlia, troubled by this vision, watches them for a long moment...then goes off into her own thoughts:)

DAHLIA

But if she is authentic – it could be so – let's look at the situation more carefully for all possible ramifications. We don't want to be too unfair and bugger up a good thing.

ALBERT

(all wrapped up with Christine, hardly hears Dahlia)

What?

DAHLIA

If her project serves the only end that counts, you know, art...

ALBERT

Wait a minute...

DAHLIA

She'll surely want a pro to bring it off. Therefore, first, you introduce me to her...

ALBERT

You...

DAHLIA

And I'll take over. The novel, despite my reticence and my disgust – I'll be the one to write that book!

ALBERT (jumping up, to Dahlia)

Oh no! No! I've nothing against you meeting her...once the novel's a bit – a lot – advanced! I've already talked about you –

CHRISTINE and DAHLIA

Too much!

ALBERT

And...and...as for the novel...you were right.

DAHLIA

You admit then that this novel is for me and not for you!

ALBERT

No you were right when you said I talk too much! But what the hell are you doing, ramming yourself into my book? my idea?

DAHLIA

No, my book! My idea!

ALBERT

Dahlia, you're going too far!

DAHLIA

So I'll leave! To write my novel. Your idea belongs to me now! To the whole wide world if I say so!

(She heads for the main door:)

CHRISTINE

The monster! And you! Moron! Why didn't you tell me?

ALBERT

No, no, wait, there's a surprise twist coming:

DAHLIA

(at the door, turns back, bursts into laughter)

I'm just kidding you. Pulling your leg! To test your potential artist's willpower! Bravo, it's there, all right! At the same time, I did want to give you a lesson for your own good: you must start being a little more suspicious of people. Hulka – who doesn't really hate you, you know – but she does find you incredibly naive. I'd say masochistic. You tell me about your idea so that I'll steal it from you? You want to be stolen from? You want to be punished? 'Neath the façade of "Mr. Well-Adjusted Jerk" lurks a raving masochist! And still there's something ambiguous about you: you have to have a bad opinion of the thief, that way you can think of yourself as better than he – in this case me. Therefore: 'Neath the façade of a masochist crouches an arrogant little prick? Let's just say, Albert, you're mad as a hatter, that's what we all love about you! But you do talk too much. You shouldn't. When you have an idea you mustn't mention it to anyone. Even if it's not a very good idea.

ALBERT

Like this one?

DAHLIA

I don't know. It's true that it kind of gives me the creeps, mixing Pierre into your own notations and guilt feelings. I just find it weird. The way you told it...well, my reaction's on the negative side. But if it turns you on, by all means do it. What's important is that you're finally getting excited about something, your novel! Your Christine! I've the impression she's a splendid creature.

CHRISTINE

(crushed like a sandwich  
between the two of them)

Yerk.

DAHLIA

For Christmas, tell her all you want is a padlock for your mouth!

ALBERT

Good old Dahlia. Why don't you stay...

DAHLIA

(decisively)

No, tonight I've got to get with it – my new book, you know.

ALBERT

Ah? What's it about?

DAHLIA

Sssh! State secret! That's the way you answer back! Sssh! I'm off!  
(and she's gone)

CHRISTINE

So am !! To catch that hag! Take care of Tom-Tom!  
(She leaves, running.)  
(Subtle change of lighting; at the same time,  
knocking on the front door.)

ALBERT

Christine? Already?

(It's Dahlia.)

End of Act One

(Act 2)

(Dahlia enters, looking very sombre,  
carrying a large manuscript.)

ALBERT

They announced rain in the country?

(singing between his teeth)

"Singin' in the rain, singin' in the rain."

DAHLIA

No, finally I decided not to go.

(She holds the text out to him as far  
away from herself as possible, as if it  
were a little dirty. The words seem to  
come with difficulty:)

.....I..... You've..... fine..... It's  
that..... And somewhere you know it!..... I warned you.....  
I've nothing more to add.

(Heavy pause.)

All the same, to think you quit your job for "this".

ALBERT

"This" is my affair.

DAHLIA

And poor Christine, forcing her to accept a part-time job to underwrite "this".

ALBERT

"This" is not what's upsetting her tonight.

DAHLIA

And her child? Deprived of his mother?

ALBERT

He's not complaining either!

CHILD's VOICE (off)

MAMAAA!!

DAHLIA

Should I go and cuddle him?

ALBERT

No no, in two minutes he'll be in dreamland.

DAHLIA

Listen, you're a charming boy. And it's not that it's so badly written! Well there are moments when one asks if a foreigner wrote it...Like uh...uh...

(takes her time to sit down)

For example...

(puts on her glasses, browses over the text)

...No no that's not bad but...

(breathes on her glasses and wipes them off on her blouse)

No but...Ok that one's funny...at best...but...Ah. "What did you come for, Marie: bed, board or boner?"

(disapproving)

Frankly, Albert.

ALBERT

But it was you who made up that expression!

DAHLIA

Me? Never.

ALBERT

Oh yes you did, that very first night, about Christine.

DAHLIA

Those words would never come out of my mouth. You must've heard me wrong. Anyway there are others...so many others. I couldn't count the times you said the same thing twice. But Pierre, Albert, Pierre... and Pedro, Suh-Chang, Hulka. I thought you'd etch our ghosts in acid – just to upset me, to make me furious, I would've preferred that, I was prepared for that. These are pale shades indeed, no more substantial than your shreds of paper. The real story – what we went through with Pierre – is eluded to the point of being completely incomprehensible! It all gets reduced to some colourless chap who takes notes on every uninteresting thing he sees and shows them like a retriever dog to two lugubrious ladies. "Geraldine" I suppose is me? That's a good one. And Christine's "Marie". It's normal that she's wheedled her way into your book as into your life. What's worse, these two gals have nothing better to do with their time than wait till the other one's not around to make snide remarks about her to your hero. Remarks that don't go any farther than "Marie has a big behind", is that your idea of good writing?

ALBERT

I never asked myself the question.

DAHLIA

A pity.

ALBERT

Your verdict?

DAHLIA

It doesn't come off, Albert. If ever you show this to anyone, you're slamming a door for all eternity. Just in case you have a relapse some day and try to write another novel. I wouldn't wish that on you, I'm going to be harsh, I have to be. I see, sincerely, that it was something you were compelled to try but...The literary milieu is a jungle, cruel, cruel. Let the real animals romp in it and tear each other to bits. It's not your place and you're taking up space. Albert, have the courage of your convictions.

(helpfully takes a lighter out of her purse)

Burn it. Tonight. I've had my say.

(pause)

ALBERT

There are 438 pages. You left here at 5:30.

(looks at his watch)

It's 7.05. You whipped through over 5 pages a minute? Oh boy, wow, you are a speedy read!

DAHLIA

Don't be stupid. I began it and I got discouraged. I didn't wish to be unfair. I passed it on to Hulka...without saying anything. Twenty minutes later, she handed it back.

ALBERT

And what did she say?

DAHLIA

Nothing. Not a word.

ALBERT

That says everything!

(examines the text)

My God, look at page 1, it's as if a hand had tried to give it a massage. Page...12...words sharply underlined by a...furious fingernail? There are creases everywhere, I'll have to run off another copy. Page...19...half ripped out...Turning the pages must've set your hands a-tremble. Page 34 is torn out...Page 52.

That's where you stopped. I find the virgin voluptuousness of an unread page...right up to the end. My book infuriated you, eh, that it exists! That I exist!

DAHLIA

Right, right, useless to try to tell you anything. Your reaction's very normal, dear.

ALBERT

I'll tell you something!

DAHLIA

What?

ALBERT

"Dildo in an Anus".

DAHLIA

Don't understand.

ALBERT

Didn't think you would. A typing mistake. Find any others, that was the only reason I gave you the copy?

DAHLIA

Not many, it's well typed. Christine helped you?

ALBERT

Yes, why?

DAHLIA

Oh nothing. What's interesting...The central idea in itself resembles one that...I could've done...in bringing out its political connotations.

ALBERT

...Political...

DAHLIA

(smiles "enigmatically"...a long moment)

Actually I'm working on a similar idea at the moment. Isn't that amusing? A ghastry man with a loose tongue lets drop the secrets of his friends. Above all of his sick friends. That way he kids himself into thinking he's healthier than they. But he's the sick one. I have him end up very badly indeed!

ALBERT

You've been working on...this idea...Since when?

DAHLIA

...Oh it's been going rather slowly. There are books like that. The last four or five years I believe. I can't help asking myself if I hadn't spoken to you about it and if – subconsciously of course – you hadn't pinched my idea?

ALBERT

Pinched?? Me??

DAHLIA

Yes. The idea of Pierre. Of a novel to beg pardon for the wrong we both did him.

ALBERT

I see.

DAHLIA

He sees.

ALBERT

Four, five years...

DAHLIA

Yes.

ALBERT

Then – long before Pierre got ill – you predicted it? Did you go to a soothsayer for the reference work?

DAHLIA

Excuse me, I'm not really following you,

ALBERT

I'll try to put it in simpler terms: The idea in question was expressed by me – to you – the very first night Christine came here. It wasn't you, by any chance, that pinched my idea from me? Dahlia, are you nothing more than a common thief?

DAHLIA

It's unbelievable!! It's as if the real Hamlet accused Shakespeare of having stolen from him "Hamlet The Play"!! The novel of Pierre has been ruminating inside of me all my life!

ALBERT

You were born with it?

DAHLIA

Yes! I was born with the presentiment of his suffering! And of how you were going to make it worse! Stolen?! You son of a bitch!!... Let's recapitulate.

ALBERT

Oh yes do let's, starting with Christine: she thinks you left here with my book for the sole purpose of copying it, word for word.

DAHLIA

So young and so wizened already! You can tell Mamzelle Christine for me that – stolen? – Good God, there's nothing in your book that's worth the effort!

ALBERT

Yes I too think she's mistaken and that your contempt for my writing is utterly sincere!

DAHLIA

Thanks for the compliment.

ALBERT

It's only my idea you stole. But stole all the same! And right away, that first night, as it was coming out of my mouth! Since you preferred not to have a novel with the same plot line running nose and nose with yours...first you leafed through mine, quickly, but enough to lend you the authority to advise me to destroy it. That way, there wouldn't be the slightest proof it had ever existed!

DAHLIA

It's sad. With Christine as your tutor, little by little you've lost your radiant generosity. You without generosity, what's left, not much.

ALBERT

Get out.

DAHLIA

Excuse me?

ALBERT

Get out! I'm still generous to those who deserve it! But I can be pushed too far!

DAHLIA

You can't, my dear, that's your problem. Me who knows you better than most people have never ever seen you pushed too –

ALBERT

"Too far" does suggest to me a territory so far off that no one has ever been able to stake their flag on it. I must like people too much. My good woman, tonight you've bloody well stuck your flag in it.

(holding her umbrella out to her)

Now just go away!

DAHLIA

...Lately I can't help asking myself if our delightful relationship hasn't gone a bit...

ALBERT

Sour.

(They stare at each other)

I want you to leave, Dahlia. Definitely. That's the way it is. Goodbye.

DAHLIA

Don't fuck up, Albert! I'm a human being, not a tea pot you can throw against a wall and glue back together in five minutes!

ALBERT

You stupid cunt! No one can reglue a teapot!

DAHLIA

So you see! If I leave it's for good! And once in the street I'll call up all our mutual friends...and let them know how you treated me! They'll make you sorry all right!

ALBERT

Tough teaties: I can pass up your friends, they've never thought of me as anything but your punching bag!

DAHLIA

(malicious smile)

In that case, I risk being the only friend you'll have left!

ALBERT

Thank you very much: but I'm sick to death of playing Cinderella to your wicked dyke-mother, just because you never had the guts to have your own child!

(She rushes at him and delivers a resounding slap...starts pummelling him. He tries to fight back...she retreats...he comes at her...)

DAHLIA

Don't you touch me!! Don't touch me! It comes down to that!! Feeling each other up!! Always that!! The answer to all conflicts!! I refuse!! I don't give a damn that you're a man!! If you were the most beautiful girl in the world I'd kill you before I let you touch me! It's just too facile! We're human beings!! We want to be loved!! I want to be loved!! And that doesn't come from being felt up!! Nobody loves anybody!! Nobody loves me, nobody!! never, I've lost Pierre, you're losing me, I'm unhappy, you don't give a shit, you callous monster!

ALBERT

(after watching her for a long moment)

This breakdown bit is sheer hooley. Hulka loves you. More than anybody's ever loved me! A little respect for Hulka, please. Isn't she enough for you?

DAHLIA

No! She's not enough! She's not disinterested! It's not the same thing!

(She finds herself somehow stretched out in bed, exactly the same position as in the faraway past (p. 3). She raises her head to him... provocatively ...as if she were inviting a kiss?)

I horrify you eh? You've never seen me like this eh?

(He looks at her.)

What're you thinking!

ALBERT

About... (low) a pimple.

DAHLIA

A pimple? ...Tell me its tale, Albert!

(pause)

ALBERT

You wouldn't understand. I'm thinking about Christine. About... how much I love her.

DAHLIA

Because she hasn't pinched anything?

ALBERT

Surely not.

DAHLIA

Keep her on the fire then...your great love. Protect her. Try to disintoxicate her.

ALBERT

Disintoxicate?!

DAHLIA

From her suspicions about the rest of us poor mortals. For a long time now, I've sensed the noxious smoke of her suspicions. You smell bad tonight. You're the non-smoker who lives with a smoker. After a while he stinks of cigarettes without ever having touched one. That's why I lied to you.

ALBERT

Lied...about...

DAHLIA (puts her glasses back in her purse and prepares to go)

I haven't stolen anything from you. There is no novel. Not that novel at all events. But I was so furious that you could've thought that of me – your friend for over fourteen years – that I gave in to the joy of torturing you a little. There are moments, Albert, when I would've laid down my life for you.

ALBERT

But Dahlia you know I'd do the same thing.

DAHLIA

And just look at us. Thanks to Christine.

ALBERT

No!

DAHLIA

Yes. You don't know her as well as you think. She's a misanthrope. I admire her. She's on a high level. But she's a misanthrope.

ALBERT

I love her.

DAHLIA

I know. It's her or me. So it's her, love always wins. She's poisoned our wonderful friendship. She's corrupted you. And she's on a high level.

ALBERT

Dahlia, this is getting too complicated for me.

DAHLIA

Couldn't agree with you more. Friendship, pah. For you now, that's not worth five minutes of clear hard thought. Ciao, Albert.

ALBERT

Dahlia...

DAHLIA

What?

ALBERT

...Don't come back.

DAHLIA

...There's no question of that...my good sir.

(Cross fade to morning lighting as  
Christine briskly enters from the other room.)

DAHLIA (derisive, the CHILD'S VOICE)

Mamy. Mamy.

(Dahlia leaves)

CHRISTINE

Stay with him, I'll be back in an hour.

ALBERT

Where' re you off to?

CHRISTINE

To pick up the photocopies I ordered of your book yesterday.

ALBERT

You never mentioned that.

CHRISTINE

I don't tell you everything, dear. Bound and nicely covered. 40 copies.

ALBERT

Forty? We'll be out on the street!

CHRISTINE

I'll be. Enjoy the gift, might be the last I'll be able to afford!

ALBERT

But 40?

CHRISTINE

Tomorrow, we blitz the roofs of every publisher in Paris!

ALBERT

Christine, you're losing me. What happened to your opinion that one shouldn't submit to more than one publishing house at a time, lest the others find out and get pissed off?

CHRISTINE

Our situation has radically changed, Albert. We've got to sell your book immediately and to the first bidder – before Dahlia finds one for hers. War is war.

ALBERT

But since Dahlia categorically denies ever having written this book of hers –

CHRISTINE

Who do you believe, her or me?

ALBERT

I'm up to my neck in uncertainty, I hardly sleep at night –

CHRISTINE

I know.

ALBERT

Dahlia...our wonderful friendship...

CHRISTINE

Based on mundane chats...a movie, an expo, an occasional party thrown by one of her friends. You're not going to let her destroy you for that?

ALBERT

Destroy me? Because of Pierre?

CHRISTINE

Yes...or because you didn't love her enough...or you loved her too much... or you love a girl who doesn't love her at all? How should I know, with paranoids, one sets out to sea in a leaky rowboat, you patch up one hole and dammit, ten others are there. The only way to deal with paranoids is to get away from them, unless you wish to become paranoid yourself.

ALBERT

Flee Dahlia? I'd like nothing better...but without the least proof of her betrayal, I keep saying to myself, was I monstrously unfair. Sorry but I do.

CHRISTINE

No!

(she goes to get a manuscript.)

There's Dahlia, the way she is.

ALBERT

What is it?

CHRISTINE

Her novel – based on your idea! It's going to upset you, that's why I didn't show it to you before. But I can see you're being paralysed by this ambiguity toward her.

ALBERT

...Where did you get this text?

CHRISTINE

Pinched from the pincher, my dear! Yesterday at Albin-Michel's – the first presentation of your book to a publisher – entering Guy Amiot's office...smiling, self-possessed...Out of the corner of my eyes what do I see sitting atop a pile of manuscripts on a narrow filing cabinet? A text... A cover... "A novel by Dahlia Coe".

ALBERT

Yikes.

CHRISTINE

To look at it more closely, I immediately asked, "Shall I place my text on top of the others?" "No those are the ones that have been rejected already." Seated, I began telling him about you...I sensed Dahlia behind me, sniggering; her manuscript transformed into a poisonous mushroom...I did my charm bit...Finally giving him your book...taking leave, smiling...backing away...

(shows Albert how:)

...backing away in order to prop my behind up against the filing cabinet without his noticing it...I prolonged the bye-byes...which gave my left hand the time to grasp her cursèd text. "Well then, very soon" ...Beaming, I took one step forward... which allowed me to stuff the book into a briefcase I held behind my back...still backing away "geisha" style...toward the exit...backing away...Guy Amiot, with paternal kindness, informed me that the toilets were at the end of the corridor to the right. Locking myself into one of them, I devoured the first thirty pages.

(Pause.)

ALBERT (tense)

And...?

CHRISTINE

And.

ALBERT

And?

(peers at the far-off manuscript)

It's shorter than mine. Much.

CHRISTINE

Surely written on the double to get ahead of yours.

ALBERT

...It's called...?

CHRISTINE

"A Loose Tongue Foaming at the Mouth".

ALBERT

Yikes.

(she holds the text out to him.)

No. You...read me a little.

CHRISTINE

It's going to hurt.

(She opens it.)

Are you sure that –

ALBERT

Yeh yeh. I'm beginning to be immune. Go on. I don't give a damn!

CHRISTINE

"Oyez oyez, listen to my tale. A young man, skin nut-brown, head crowned with ebony curls glistening in the Baghdad sun..." Guinness record for clichés right from the first sentence.

ALBERT

But it's terribly different from her usual style!! My God!! It has nothing to do with my book. Admit it!! Good old Dahlia!!

CHRISTINE

He had only one fault, had Alboul – "

ALBERT

Alboul?

CHRISTINE

"He did not know how to hold his tongue."

ALBERT

Yikes.

CHRISTINE

"Nothing pleased him better than to stroll through the different quarters of Baghdad relating the miseries of his fellow man to anyone who'd listen. For another man's illness was to him the proof of his own good health! One day Pierre-el-Hassan – "

ALBERT

Pierre...

CHRISTINE

" – run into by chance in the suspended gardens – showed Alboul the little bluish spot on the palm of his left hand: mark of the plague-ridden."

ALBERT

Good, how does she end her crap?

CHRISTINE

The ending? ...is not very nice.

ALBERT

I'm not a baby, go on!

CHRISTINE

"Alboul was dragged out of the house by the betrayed woman, Mahlia the Mauve."

ALBERT

Mahl-ia?!

CHRISTINE

"The Mauve. Accompanied by her husband, Pepito, himself castrated by the Grand Vizier because of one of Alboul's indiscreet revelations...and Rugged Hulgalka, Pierre-el-Hassan's weeping widow."

ALBERT

And Suh-Chang? She left out Suh-Chang?

CHRISTINE

"And Ching-Chong, back from the exile in Cathay caused by Alboul's idle chatter – now delighted to participate in Alboul's downfall – "

ALBERT

It's God-awful kitsch! Objectively! go on!

CHRISTINE

"Alboul writhed but sternly Rugged Hulgalka held him in place.

(Albert ironically mimes the story:)

Pepito and Ching-Chong, one on each side, knocked on a cheek of his to make open his mouth.

(Dahlia nonchalantly appears in an Arab robe)

'Neath her rainbow-coloured robes, Mahlia the Mauve drew forth a golden chain, exquisitely wrought, but very very long, ending in an glittering hook in gold. And upsydaisy!"

ALBERT

They say upsydaisy in Baghdad?

CHRISTINE

"She used the hook of the chain to pierce the tip of Alboul's tongue."

ALBERT

(horrified as Dalia turns "nasty")

Oh no no...

CHRISTINE

"Then, their justifiable indignation uniting them as one, in a caterpillar line, the four pulled on the chain."

ALBERT

Oh no no...

CHRISTINE

"Under the pressure, the tongue elongated...unrolled...all the way down the street...a tongue as slimy, humid, viscous, repulsive as the words it had so often enunciated. And plop plop plop, the tongue descended the steps of a slanted street.. then it undulated from lane to lane. With satisfaction, people stopped short to watch it – each, without exception, had suffered the salivation of that tongue. Arriving at the Great Mosque..."Look up!" Mahlia the Mauve pointed to an incredibly frail silhouette, perched on the very tip of the minaret. Alboul squinted his eyes against the sun to make out the grey emaciated phantom of...Pierre-el-Hassan!

(Dahlia plays "Pierre-el-Hassan)

Bent under the weight of an object larger than he! A giant yataghan! with a glittering blade of indescribable finesse. "AAAAh" In times to come the cry of Pierre-el-Hassan jumping off the minaret would be remembered in old Baghdad. "AAAAh" And Schlaf! his feet hit the ground – at the same time the blade of the yataghan cut off Alboul's tongue."

ALBERT

(as Dahlia disappears)

Aaaaaah!

CHRISTINE (neutral)

"There was blood everywhere, thus was born the Red Sea, end."

(Albert sticks out his tongue...touches it...lets it hang, deforming his pronunciation:)

ALBERT

My tongue! Mine! My life! My ideas! My tongue! She's taken everything!

CHRISTINE

Do you still believe in the goodwill of Dahlia Coe?

ALBERT (tongue hanging)

She won't have the satisfaction of cutting off my tongue! I'll do it myself!  
(He crashes around in all directions  
like a chicken without its head:)

A knife – scissors! Your nail scissors!

CHRISTINE (grabbing him)

If you cut into it, you're cutting into me, you are me, I'm you, I love you –  
 (she manages to stretch him out in bed  
 and gets on top of him so he can't move:)  
 Isn't it enough? Aren't I enough?

ALBERT

It isn't enough...

(Upset, she backs away as Dahlia-Mahlia reappears, menacing...holding out like a crystal ball a very large glass salad bowl full of torn papers...which she puts on the table as Christine rushes off. In Albert's hand, Dahlia places a bottle of whiskey.

DAHLIA (the CHILD's VOICE, sardonic)

Papa? Papa? My real Papa.

(Daylight. Christine enters from outside with some mail.)

CHRISTINE

You no longer go down to get your mail?

ALBERT

I know what's in it. Who refuses to buy me today? Up theirs.

CHRISTINE

Drinking already?

ALBERT

Does that bother you?

CHRISTINE

Not in itself. "The Rejected Author began to drink." Such a cliché! You're only doing it to show me you're unhappy.

ALBERT

Since the world eliminates Original Thinkers – I gather we're disturbing – better to wind up as a cliché. Perhaps you'd prefer I put myself into a stupor by dolls or drugs? Well, well, you're giving me ideas.

CHRISTINE

Stop being idiotic.

(Malaise between them... she opens an envelope:)

"The manuscript will be held at your disposition. Despite it's qualities...our reader's committee...

ALBERT

"Are cretins."

(As she opens another envelope, he tears up the letter: )

Wheeee! and there goes another "Despite its qualities" in a flurry of confetti!

(Throwing the pieces in the salad bowl:)

CHRISTINE

"A very likeable experiment. But as we have no opening before 2007... we signalled this to Ms. Morissay..." Not really... "We eagerly look forward to re-reading the book when published.."

ALBERT

"By someone else." And wheeee more confetti! Where's the kid? Still at the nursery?

CHRISTINE

I didn't take him to the nursery today. He's with Serge.

ALBERT

Ah?

CHRISTINE

And Albert...I'm going back to Serge.

ALBERT

I see.

CHRISTINE

I'm terribly sorry. But every day this situation gets more difficult for me and Tom-Tom's beginning to sense it. As Serge wants nothing more than to take us back...And then...it's not good for you either, living with a woman who's a constant reminder that nothing works out that easily.

ALBERT

Don't fret, I've been expecting this. Can't go against the natural order of things! Glad you were able to take advantage of me for a fleeting moment.

CHRISTINE

What do you mean by that?

ALBERT

That you've realised Serge has more to offer in the way of bed board and boner. Why don't you slap me?

CHRISTINE

Because your bullshit helps you lessen your pain.

ALBERT

Oh hearts and flowers! To each his own set of clichés! Here's another: your belief in me and in this book was based on a glossy idea of "Success"...which has had its teeth kicked in. Now you're simply panicked at the thought of being associated with this God-awful book...which you, by the way, masterminded!

CHRISTINE

That's not fair. At every occasion, I'll still try to sell it. But where? To whom? It's my fault. I precipitated and – to get ahead of Dahlia's book – showed it around too quickly. But the simple fact is we've exhausted the market, at least the commercial market as I know it.

ALBERT

If I ever run into Dahlia, I'll kill her. I dream about her death. I know her address, can't think why I haven't killed her already. She's killed me, I kill her, they'll put me into jail and I won't have any more rent to pay. Yippee.

CHRISTINE

Talk sense, Albert. The resemblance between the two books is minimal. Nobody's made the slightest connection. She used your idea to write a vaguely political fable decking her little friends out as Arabs. If her book had to be published by Lady-Claws Press, with herself footing the bill, it's that no one else was interested in it.

ALBERT

Despite its many qualities!

CHRISTINE

It has some but with hers as well, you can sense the author's haste.

ALBERT

"As well". For you then mine is no longer a masterpiece?

CHRISTINE

...I can't help wondering if there's not a lack somewhere...

ALBERT

It's lopsided, like me.

CHRISTINE

I haven't been able to pin it down. I'm too close to it, obviously. Put it aside? In six months or so, with a little perspective, it could become clear...how to improve it...

ALBERT

Like you, after six months, found the way to "improve" Serge.

CHRISTINE

I'm a coward, I know, but I can't spend the rest my life trying to save the man I love.

ALBERT

Isn't that what you're doing with Serge?

CHRISTINE

Perhaps I don't love him, never loved him, and that can be soothing. I'm exhausted, Albert. I risk losing my job. My absence has really bothered Serge and he talks to me about it a little, for him that's a big step. And then there's the house. It is mine for all that. It would've been increasingly difficult to raise Tom-Tom here. It's too small. While out there...he'll have a garden, his father.

ALBERT

I'm his father!! He's my son now!! I was never given anything by anybody in this damned world! The only one who ever loved me was your son! The only one! Even you! Above all you. It's true, this drinking bit is nothing but a joke, it permits me to howl like a hound dog against my dismal fate! (howls like a hound dog) I've got to have something for myself, mine, I have to have me, a me...

CHRISTINE

Calm down, listen, it's hard enough for me as it is without this kind of behaviour.

ALBERT

And that's all you've got to say? Get out. Just go away. And quick. (low) Dirty bitch.

CHRISTINE

What was that?

ALBERT

Why shouldn't I call you dirty bitch – all men call their women dirty bitch especially when they know it isn't true. Dirty-bitch. Dirty-bitch. Aren't you that?

CHRISTINE

If you like.

(Malaise. She opens an envelope.)

A "despite its qualities"

(He tears it up while she opens another.)

"Despite its faults..."

ALBERT

Finally someone honest!

CHRISTINE

Xavier Fouquin... "Despite its faults" ...A pretentious prick... "too numerous to itemise"... anyway, being published by him isn't worth a fart... "one can't help respecting this work: therefore we're considering publishing it."

(He mechanically takes the letter to tear it up; Christine grabs it back.)

ALBERT

It's a joke?

CHRISTINE

Can't be: he has no sense of humour!

(scanning the letter)

He proposes that we contact him to discuss the possibility of bringing it out next fall.

ALBERT

To sneer at us? Burn that letter, quickly. It was sent by the devil.

CHRISTINE

Albert, he's serious. Shitty therefore serious. First thing, he wants you to change the title. God, he's asking for changes all over the place. Albert, he's serious.

ALBERT

I won't change a word! Words are my only possessions, my only loves, my only friends! (peeking at it) Nothing but insults! How can it be? Everybody's rejected me with infinite tenderness and this one humps me with disgust?!

CHRISTINE

That's love at first sight! he hopes that the beloved will be perfect!

ALBERT

So he mutilates it, lops off a leg –

CHRISTINE

Get used to it and pray God it continues! "We all feel – "

ALBERT

Who "we"?

CHRISTINE

Nobody, he makes all decisions but as he's a coward, he invents associates!  
"There are problems in this book. We've studied it for our own clarification. At first we thought it arose with the character of Bertrand: he is The Man."

ALBERT

As if I didn't know, Me What Is The Man!

CHRISTINE

"He only exists in relationship to the two women. He is unclear. But little by little his outline tingles with curious vibrations, nearly pointillistic, though not untouched by existentialism: they reform around the two heroines, tracing the angular accuracy of their singular contours."

ALBERT

Do you understand one bloody word?

CHRISTINE

No but we've got to obey them! It's in our interest! "The two women are well-drawn, strong, sharp. So far so good. But then – on this we all agree! – the superb animosity of one woman toward the other only manifests itself in the moments when she's alone with the Man. When the three of them are together, the women fall off completely. Nothing but platitudes! Not one memorable sentence comes out of their mouths!"

ALBERT

I really should've invited him over one night to fall asleep while you and Dahlia yakked away!

CHRISTINE

"And yet this as well is part of the author's design."

ALBERT

Oh boy! He's going to let me in on it!

CHRISTINE

"When The Man's around, the women hide their hand. But alone with each other? Have we put our finger on the major flaw in this book? Congratulations, it seems almost too easy to fix it up! There's not a single moment when the two women are together without the man. Together to confront each other...tear each other apart..."

ALBERT

"Tear each other"! Ouch ouch, clichés!

(A "sex shop" type Dahlia bursts in,  
with a whip)

The Two Sexpots ! Teats over arse!

(Dahlia and Christine take "obscene" poses)

DAHLIA (to Christine, expressionless)

You. Lousy. Slut.

CHRISTINE (to Dahlia)

You. Stinking. Whore.

ALBERT

They roll over on top of each other on the floor...

DAHLIA and CHRISTINE  
(ecstatically having a go at each other)

Aaaaah! ! Aaaaah!!

ALBERT

Pull each other's hair!

DAHLIA and CHRISTINE (embracing)

Aaaaah! ! Aaaaah!!

(Albert, peeved at being left out, "coughs")

DAHLIA and CHRISTINE (to 'Albert, "servile")

Bertraaaaaand!!

CHRISTINE (the real she as Dahlia  
swishingly disappears)

I might agree with you there but..."In the theatre we'd say the obligatory scene is missing. And very badly. We wish to read that scene before making our final decision."

ALBERT

No but what an asshole. It's "missing" on purpose because it's the truth!  
I can't force that scene. It's not in me.

CHRISTINE

You've got to make an effort, Albert, luck doesn't ride by more than once.

ALBERT

If ever you'd been alone with Dahlia what would you have found to talk about?  
Me, that's what! Only about me!

CHRISTINE

Think so?

ALBERT

I know so! Just look how you and she never saw each other a single time without  
me.

CHRISTINE

But we did. One time. I wanted to keep it for myself, I have a right to my private  
life as well.

ALBERT

And what did you talk about? What?

(Change of lighting:

Albert becomes the listener in the  
shadows; Dahlia knocks at the door...which  
Christine opens.)

DAHLIA (hesitantly)

Didn't think you'd see me here again?!

CHRISTINE

Frankly.

DAHLIA

I was in the neighbourhood. I lost my umbrella three months ago. Suddenly I  
thought, I left it at Albert's!

CHRISTINE

Have you ever considered going to a bargain basement and buying another?

DAHLIA

I know it's a little...but...I need this one. I value it.

CHRISTINE

And don't we know why.

DAHLIA

...So I can come in?

(which she's already done:)

I have a theory: when one loses an object, a part of us does it on purpose: we're placing it with someone as an investment.

CHRISTINE

Here's your umbrella. The handle is very beautiful.

DAHLIA

Isn't it? It's carved in oak. It's Budegonde, the bird that carries you through the air toward the people to whom you're destined. My grandfather bought it several years ago, one Sunday in the flea market at Quimper. My family's from Brittany, did you know?

CHRISTINE

No, yes, I kind of sensed it...

DAHLIA

Gramps was very moved because his first wife, dead for the last sixty years, had had an umbrella with the same handle. For a moment he wondered whether it weren't the same umbrella! Then he said "Perhaps Odette still has that umbrella..." Still has? He'd always spoken of our grandmother as being dead. "Gramps, is she dead or isn't she?" "Her...? Uh...I don't know." He refused to say another word. My parents were as stupefied as I by this story. Gramps died shortly afterwards. Who was my grandmother then? She must've added a drop to my character, don't you think? Which brings us to: who am I? Why do I react the way I do? We know so little about other people, even when the "people" is ourselves. I'm always forgetting my umbrellas, all over the place. But, you do understand, this one is particularly dear to me.

CHRISTINE

I envy you...being able to find a trace of your grandmother in the handle of an umbrella! When mine died, my father – in clearing out her papers – discovered he was adopted in 46.

DAHLIA

No, really?

CHRISTINE

Yes. Very upset, he raced to an old lady in the suburbs who'd long ago run a day nursery...where...as a young child, he'd been left during the week, both his parents worked. This lady, "Madame Line", let him know that one morning, during

the Occupation, a young woman had appeared, baby in her arms, which she asked Line to take care of for the day – she had to look for lodgings in the neighbourhood. She didn't return that evening. After several days, Madame Line's husband went to the address in Paris the woman had given them: it didn't exist.

DAHLIA

She must have been Jewish.

CHRISTINE

Or in the resistance. Or compromised. Or...We'll never know. Anyway, Madame Line was friendly with this neighbour, a young woman who was sterile. The woman took the baby to the country for several months...and came back pretending that it was there in the country she had given birth to the little boy, my father. She waited till the war was over before daring to adopt him legally. At times I feel very lost. Is it because of this story? I don't know anymore. Consciously, I think of it very seldom. I like the handle of the umbrella, really I had noticed it. It's authentic somehow and strange. I didn't think I'd ever get the chance to ask you about it.

DAHLIA (beaming)

But now you have!

CHRISTINE

You risk losing it one day...if you continue to abuse its good will.

DAHLIA

I beg your pardon?

CHRISTINE

(handing it to her)

It's beautiful. If ever I find it here again, I'm going to keep it. I'm going to pinch it from you. I don't ever want to see this umbrella here again.

DAHLIA

Or me either?

CHRISTINE

It's not to be mean. Goodbye Dahlia.

DAHLIA

Goodbye Christine. Kiss-kiss?

CHRISTINE

Of course.

(kisses her on the cheek)

Good luck.

Good luck to you.

DAHLIA

(she leaves Albert's apartment...  
remains in the shadows outside.)

You never told me that.

ALBERT

I don't tell you everything.

CHRISTINE

You're going?

ALBERT

...Yes, to get Tom-Tom...And then...shall I bring him back here?

CHRISTINE

Good idea, it'll give me time to finish my novel. Hand me a scrap of confetti, won't you?

ALBERT

END

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