

# THE LOVER

Translated and adapted for the stage  
from Marguerite Duras' novels  
*L'Amant* and *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord*  
By Colin Duckworth

First performed at  
the Stork Theatre Melbourne  
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Producer:  
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## THE LOVER

*Unless specified in this script or agreed to by the Author of this script no music is to be played while an actor is speaking.*

*The Author's instructions as to the staging of the Work shall be followed in every detail unless he has agreed in writing to changes. The integrity of the Author's work shall be preserved at all times.*

*THE ACTOR's main persona is THE WOMAN telling the story of her unforgettable love affair as a young teenager. She has to be able, in a few scenes, to hold dialogues with several other characters: herself as a young teenager, her 27 year-old Chinese lover, her mother, and her evil young brother, Pierre. The setting moves between action in Saigon, French Indo-China, in 1929. and narration (reminiscences) in Paris many years later.*

### DURASIAN ICONOGRAPHY:

**(THIS QUOTATION IS TO GO IN THE PROGRAMME)**

***“The text of The Lover was originally called The Ultimate Image, or The Full Picture (L’Image absolue). It was to accompany an album of photographs...”***  
***(Marguerite Duras, interview in Le Nouvel Observateur, 1984).***

*So the camera flashes (where indicated) and the following set details are vital and must be adhered to.*

***These set directions must be followed:***

*On the back wall of the stage we see several framed photographs — all very vague and fuzzy. We can just make out they are of a family group of four — sometimes five — people. One of the photos is of nothing at all. Most importantly, suspended or fixed centre back is a large sheet of artist's white cardboard. On it is painted a picture frame surrounding an old black and white group photograph (painted) of the five members of the Child's family. No faces. Father and mother in the middle, flanked by young children: elder brother, Pierre (about eleven) next to mother (she has her arm visibly round his waist), the Woman as Child (about six) next to father, with her arm round shoulders of younger brother, Paul (about eight). The Woman will take us on a family tour in Scene 2.*

*There is a chair centre stage, and a bench stage right.*

ACT ONE  
SCENE 1

*MUSIC: Ravel's "Asie" from his SCHEHERAZADE. 1 min 30 secs.*

*DIM UP LIGHTS: WARM INTERIOR. FADE MUSIC as we see:*

*WOMAN seated centre stage. She picks up a large oval picture frame with nothing in it. She holds it up and stares at it. We can see her face through it.*

WOMAN. This photograph is of very young girl, perhaps still a child, but not for much longer. She's small for her age but tough, slim — no, let's be honest, skinny. Almost flat-chested. Legs of a child. A white child with very long curly auburn hair drawn back tightly, and bright green eyes. She has inherited the eyes from her dead father. Dead eyes with rings round them already, at fifteen and a half. A drinker's face before she drank.

Oddly, this child's face is made up with too much cherry lipstick, and powder to hide the freckles. She is wearing a man's hat, what Americans call a fedora, made of felt the colour of rosewood, with a flat brim and a wide black ribbon round it, which somehow makes her look innocent and child-like. But the dress and shoes belie that: a silk sleeveless dress with a very low neckline. Her mother has worn it for so long it is now almost transparent. As for the shoes, they're gold lamé ball shoes, with high heels, but very scuffed and worn.

The girl doesn't know it yet, but she's about to enter a love story, she can't avoid it. A profound, illicit, shocking, but unforgettable love she always denied to herself — until it was over. (*Pause.*) Another face joins hers.

*She lowers the picture frame and puts it down. There is a flash, as if a snapshot has been taken.*

The Mekong River, French Indo-China, 1929. A tall man with pale gold skin. That means he's from North China. Manchurian. Very elegant and well-dressed in a silk suit and maroon English shoes, like a Saigon banker.

*LIGHTING CHANGE. BRIGHT EXTERIOR.*

*She stands.*

I was going back to boarding school in Saigon, crossing the Mekong River by ferry. As usual I was travelling by the bus, but when we drove on to the ferry I always got off the bus and stood by the rails because I was afraid the ferry's clapped-out engine or the cables might give up the ghost and we'd be swept out to sea.

Nobody could have known that the crossing this time was going to be such an important event in my life, otherwise there would be a photograph of it. That prop to memory doesn't exist; it was omitted, forgotten (unless God took it!) and that is its virtue: because the image was never created, it can itself create and represent an ideal image of my life. The photograph that was not taken that day because no one knew its significance, has become central to my life.

On this particular morning there is large black limousine standing alongside the bus. It's as big as a bedroom. I see the man looking at me through the window of the car. I'm quite used to men looking at me — in the colonies people do look at white women. I already know I'm desirable, and I can be charming, except when I want to kill my elder brother. For the last three years the husbands of my mother's friends have been ever so kindly asking me to tea with them while their wives are at the tennis club. Not that my mother belongs to the club — we're much too poor. A

French white family, living in poverty thanks to my brother. His name is Pierre. We shall make his acquaintance before long, unfortunately.

The man gets out of the black limousine. The tall, pale-skinned Chinese from Manchuria. That's when the child sees the silk suit and English shoes. They look at each other, she smiles but he doesn't, yet. He is smoking an English cigarette, very elegantly, and yet his hand is trembling. She senses fear in that hand as he offers her a cigarette. Because there's a difference of race, he's nervous. She says she doesn't smoke, but doesn't tell him to leave her alone.

He speaks again: "Excuse me... It is surprising to see a pretty white girl like you on the bus with the natives."

She remarks that his French is very good, and he explains that he's been studying in Paris for three years.

"Studying what?"

"Oh, nothing very much. How about you?" he asks.

She says that her mother is headmistress of the Native girls' school in Sadec. "I'm doing my baccalaureate in Saigon, at the high school, but I'm a boarder at Lyautey School hostel because my family live at Sadec."

They are standing close enough together for her to catch a whiff of Eau de Cologne and of opium. She looks at his clothes, the chauffeur-driven car. "What kind of car is that?" she asks.

"A Morris Léon Bollé."

"I've never heard of it," she says.

"Would you permit me to give you a lift to wherever you want to go in Saigon?" Very polite.

Without hesitation she accepts. "All right. Yes." Her little brother Paul will love to hear about her getting a ride in a big car.

He tells his chauffeur — in Chinese — to take the child's suitcase off the bus and put it in the car. She gets in. The door closes. A momentary feeling of panic hits her, like a bout of fatigue. Then she remembers that he was afraid when he approached her, and she realises that *he* is at *her* mercy.

Everywhere over the river, there is a misty heat haze. As they drive off the ramp, she thinks, I'm never going to travel in that old bus again! From now on I'll have a limo to take me between high school and boarding school!

*Pause. Music.*

*LIGHTING CHANGE. WARM INTERIOR.*

## **SCENE 2**

**WOMAN.** The story of this part of my life does not exist. Things happened, but they don't yet have a centre or direction. Hidden things — facts, emotions, events — that I have kept buried deep inside me since I was a young girl. But now I see there are no more barriers, no need for reticence. No one can be hurt now. The story can't find a hiding-place any more.

*(Moves to photos on wall.)*

Let me show you round the family portraits. My hall of mirrors. I must be here somewhere. From time to time my mother announced, "Tomorrow we shall go to the photographer's." She always complained about the bill, but still we had to go. Strange thing about the photos — we looked at *them* but we never looked directly *at each other*.

*(She goes over to the big framed family group.)* Here we are, it's the only one with us all together.

My father: he was a maths teacher, a very good one. But he died of amoebic dysentery when we were still young. He and my mother both came out to the colonies in 1905 to educate the Indo-Chinese, met, married, and had the three of us here.

This is my mother, whom I loved and hated so passionately. She's looking very happy, but not for long. We didn't often see that smile. She always had fits of madness, but poverty and worry and alcohol drove her to despair and insanity by the end. She died in France, in her fake Louis XIV château, lying in her freezing bedroom surrounded by half a dozen sheep for warmth.

Here's me, the wayward daughter, protecting my adorable younger brother Paul. Protecting from whom?

From this charming specimen being cuddled by the mother. Pierre. I was constantly afraid he would kill Paul in one of his mad bullying rages. That's why I was always expecting to have to step in and kill Pierre. Kill Peter to save Paul. I'm the only one Pierre is afraid of. He regularly stole or wheedled large sums of money from my mother to pay his debts to opium dens and casinos. He caught syphilis, and he used to try to rape our maid. But Pierre was always Mother's favourite, Mummy's evil darling even though she also knew he might kill our little Paul.

There we are, my family. Did I ever love them? I can't remember. I've left them. They have all died, in their various ways. As for the photo albums, those spurious monuments to empty ritual, they were looked at once then stuffed in the linen cupboard.

*She has finished with the photographs, and moves to sit on the bench. She might put on the hat the Child is wearing: a man's soft brownish felt flat-brimmed hat (a fedora or trilby), with a wide black ribbon round it.*

*LIGHTING CHANGE: GREY LIGHT FROM EACH SIDE OF THE BENCH, AS IF THROUGH CAR SIDE WINDOWS.*

### **SCENE 3**

*There is another CAMERA FLASH. The Chinese and the Child are in the car.*

WOMAN. In the back of the car. What strikes the Child most about that ride to Saigon in the dim light of the big black car — what was it? A Morris... Léon... Bollé — is the hand of the rich Chinese gentleman sitting close beside her. The hand is lying on the armrest of the back seat. She sees that the third finger sports a heavy gold signet ring with a diamond set in the thickest part.

She asks him, "Who are you?"

He says his family live just outside Sadec, in the big china-blue house by the river with terraces and balustrades. The Child is impressed. "It's the most beautiful house I've ever seen. Your father must be a millionaire," she says.

He laughs. "Chinese children never know how much money their father has."

He turns and looks her straight in the eye.

(CHINESE) People often offer you a lift, do they?

(CHILD *nods*).

(CHINESE) Do you always accept?

(CHILD) Not always.

(CHINESE) The hat... Who bought it for you?

(CHILD) My mother. She goes a bit mad sometimes. But I chose it. And the shoes.

(CHINESE) Do you go to school in those shoes?

(CHILD) *looks at her feet* Yes. *(She laughs.)*

(CHINESE) *(laughing too)* And the hat?

(CHILD) The hat as well. *(She giggles.)*

(CHINESE, *laughter in his voice*) It really suits you, you know. But a pretty girl like you could get away with anything.

(CHILD) What about the shoes?

(CHINESE) I don't have an opinion about the shoes.

WOMAN. Their fit of hysterical laughter is a turning point in this story. When they stop laughing they pretend to look out at the monotonous countryside, the road, the paddy fields as far as the eye can see, the air shimmering with heat.

Looking back on that conversation she realises it was really an interrogation about her motives. Not the last one either.

*(Pause. The following with hushed sensuality.)* The rich Chinese closes his eyes. The Child stares again at his hand. Not at the ring, or his watch, just the hand. Then without thinking she takes his hand and examines it like an unknown object. A thin Chinese hand, fingers bent towards the nails, almost as if broken. She leans over it and breathes it in. Very carefully turns it over, touches the naked silky skin, cool and damp. Not sure if he's really asleep. The hand sleeps. She gently lowers it to its resting place. It is docile, lets her do with it as she pleases.

*LIGHTING CHANGE: WARM INTERIOR. Woman moves to chair, centre.*

#### **SCENE 4**

WOMAN. Was the Chinese really asleep? I'll never know. What I did find out is that he didn't work for a living, had wasted his time in Paris with girls, wanted to study literature in Peking but his father insists on making him train as a financier, like him. He had been engaged since he was seventeen years old to a girl from another wealthy Chinese family who would bring a large dowry with her. "That's the way it in China," he said. He revealed that he was now twenty-seven, so I said, after a slight hesitation, that I was sixteen.

He said, "You are very small for sixteen."

I said I'd always been small for my age.

"Perhaps because you have been brought up in this hot humid place."

"I don't know."

"I was also born and grew up here. We have that in common — foreigners in this intolerable heat."

We looked out at passing villages of rice, children and dogs, rice paddies and wide sky.

Out of the blue he said, "And sometimes you tell lies."

"No I don't!"

"How do you manage not to tell lies?"

"That's easy. I just don't say anything."

He laughed.

Then I said something that surprised him. "But you never tell lies."

He thought about that, then said, "It's true. Very strange. Maybe it's because I've never had anything to lie about?"

At that moment I wanted to kiss him, and he realised that. He smiled. "How old are you really?"

"Sixteen. Fifteen. How about fifteen and a half?"

"You are very beautiful. Men have told you that?"

I shook my head.

“They desire you? Have they said that?”

“Only silly boys, to tease me.”

“Do you mind if I say it?”

I shook my head again.

Silence. Then he asked, no, stated: “You have never made love.”

I wanted to say something, but nothing came out, because it was still forbidden. He reached over and stroked my face, my eyes, my lips. His soft hand left my face and gently, discreetly, touched the length of my body, sometimes hesitating as if frightened. He withdrew his hand and said, “Forgive me.”

I fell asleep. In that Proustian twilight zone between slumber and wakefulness I was vaguely aware that he and the chauffeur was talking for a long time in Chinese. We stopped and he bought me a sweet cake made of corn soaked in coconut milk wrapped in a banana leaf. I wolfed in down without saying thank you.

Back in the car he asked me all of a sudden, “How is your brother?”

Without thinking I say, “Which one?” Then: “How do you know about my brother?”

He replies, “My chauffeur recognises your family from Sadec. Your esteemed mother, the headmistress, has been ruined and you live in poverty. I have seen your elder brother spending money in opium dens, and your younger brother is, how shall I say, a bit backward.”

I correct him. “Different, not backward. I love him more than anything in the world.”

With a shock I realise the link. My mother, letting me wear the saucy hat, the shoes, lipstick and powder. And the only possible escape from poverty — not her sons, they’ll never do anything — only the girl, she’s growing up, she’s pretty, she might bring in some money. Maybe without fully understanding why, this is the reason my mother lets me go out dressed like a child prostitute. But I find I don’t mind. I am fascinated by money, and I already know how to exploit the interest people take in me. But this man, the Chinese from Manchuria, is different.

*Pause.*

We reached the outskirts of Cholen. We were about to part. It was difficult, cruel to even speak. Desire stopped us breaking the silence. Our hands never touched, our eyes never met. That silence was proof that we were in love.

The love story was about to begin.

Unavoidable.

Never to be forgotten.

But always in the future.

I also knew that his father would never allow him to marry a poor white whore. But I didn’t know how far he would go to prevent it.

## **SCENE 5**

*CAMERA FLASH. LIGHTING CHANGE: BRIGHT EXTERIOR.*

*Music: a Spanish paso doble. Fade down slowly over Woman’s voice.*

WOMAN. Lyautey School courtyard. My dearest friend Hélène Lagonelle and I, dancing the paso doble barefoot on the cool shady flagstones at the deserted school hostel. We know we’re beautiful. Half hidden behind a pillar the Indochinese kitchen boy goggles at us in our short cotton dresses, the white girls dancing just for him but don’t know it. I’ve told her about my ride with the Chinese, three days ago now.

She asks me, “Are you going to make love with him?”

“Yes, I think so.”

“When?”

I tell her “Soon”.

“Do you want him?” she asks.

“Very much.”

“Have you arranged to meet?”

“No. But it will happen.” I know that for certain.

The record has finished. The dance is over. The girls kiss.

*The Woman goes to the side of the stage so that she can re-enter with fresh eyes.*

*LIGHTING CHANGE: WARM INTERIOR, BUT SLIGHTLY MORE SOMBRE THAN BEFORE. INTIMATE.*

## **SCENE 6**

*CAMERA FLASH.*

WOMAN (*looks round as if seeing the place for the first time*). This is his studio apartment in Cholon, on the south side of Saigon. It’s the first time the Child has been here. The big black car was waiting for her outside the hostel, and the chauffeur opened the door for her as if she was a grand lady.

His place isn’t what she had expected. It’s modern, small, very ordinary, nothing really.

He excuses the furniture. “I didn’t choose it. It was here, so I kept it.”

She smiles. “But there isn’t any furniture. Look.”

He looks and notices for the first time that it’s true, there’s just the bed, the chair, and the table. He sits down in the chair and mutters, “You’re quite right.”

The studio is dark but she doesn’t ask him to open the shutters. She doesn’t feel anything. She is here, where she had to be. They don’t look at one another. Then she sees in the dim light that he is trembling, he’s afraid.

He whispers, as if it is something he feels he has to say, “I think I may be falling in love with you. I know already you will never love me.”

She says, “I’m not sure about that.”

“Yes, yes,” he insists, “You have come here only because I am rich. From the start you liked me only because of the big car, the big china-blue house, my father’s millions.”

She tells him, certainly that’s how she desires him, because she has never seen him any other way but rich, so she doesn’t know if she’d have felt differently if he hadn’t been in a big car when she first saw him. That reassures him.

He says he feels sorry they have no money or land left because of some corruption at the Land Registry, sorry men from opium dens come and harass her mother for money Pierre owes them. Above all he feels sorry for her, the Child, but she insists, No, she’s not to be pitied, no one is except her mother. Then she adds, “This is something they have in common, our families: an obsession with money. My mother because we haven’t got it, and your father because you’ve got too much.”

He says, “I should like to take you away. But you are so young it scares me. I’m afraid I shan’t be able to... to deal with the emotion. Does that make any sense to you?”

She tells him she couldn’t yet leave her mother, and he says he will give her some money, not to worry.

He is suddenly assailed by timidity. She can see he is suffering here, in this room, alone with her. Perhaps their intimate proximity has made him brutally aware of the almost indecent fact of the child’s age.



The Child tries to reassure him. "I'm scared too, so I understand a bit. But you've had lots of girls. I don't know..."

*She trails off. Pause.*

He helps her. "You don't know how?"

She says with a bluntness that must come from her mother, (*she takes a deep breath, shuts her eyes, and says rapidly all in one go*) "Look, I'd prefer it if you didn't fall in love with me, but if you do I'd like you to do what you usually do with women you bring here."

He looks horrified. "Is that what you want? You know, I am very lonely because of my feelings for you."

"I'm lonely too, but I don't want you to talk. I'm begging you to do as you usually do."

"Very well. If that is what you want, I shall have you. Come over here."

*Pause.*

(*Very matter-of-factly.*) The Child goes pale. She goes to where he is sitting and stands in front of him.

Day is drawing to a close, and the room is quite dark. They are surrounded by the noise of the town outside — clattering clogs, strident Chinese voices. Passers-by are not aware that the lovers exist, and yet they are hardly separated from them at all because the windows have no glass, just blinds and shutters. Shadows flit across the blinds, cut into strips by the slats.

Smells waft over the almost naked body of the child as she stands there: caramel, roasted peanuts, Chinese soups, roast meat, herbs, jasmine, dust, and incense.

He lifts her dress off her by the hem and slides her white cotton panties down.

[*Alternative version from L'Amant:*

He tears off her dress and throws it on the floor, and tears off her little white cotton panties.]

He stands up, gently removes her hands from off her body and looks at it. Looks at her. She keeps her eyes lowered. She waits. With his eyes closed, like a blind man, with feather-light touch he strokes her thin body, her childish breasts, her belly. He opens his eyes. "You are never sixteen. It is not true. It is a bit frightening." He laughs but there are tears in his eyes. "You have the slender wrists and ankles of a native girl. How is that, I wonder?"

"I have no idea." She thinks that she may be going to love him for the rest of her life.

As if she was fragile he carries her over to the bed. Then he turns away, still with tears in his eyes. So she draws him back to face her and slowly, patiently, starts to undress him. (*With closed eyes.*) Button after button, one sleeve then the other. He doesn't help her. They both have their eyes shut.

*CAMERA FLASH.*

On the bed. She is by herself in the picture as she looks at the golden nakedness of his body, finding in it the same unique attraction as the bare hand on her body on the journey to Saigon. The body is thin, hairless, vulnerable, but supple, perfect, of the same sort of miraculous beauty as the hands. Not particularly muscular or even masculine. Except for the sex of course, the sight of which doesn't bother her — she does have older brothers after all, and she has often slept with Paul to make sure Pierre didn't kill him during the night. The Chinese lets her look at him, up and down, over and over, taking him in.

She says in a low voice, "I've never seen anyone so beautiful."

She touches the silkiness of his sex, revelling in the novelty. She puts his hand on her, and they kiss. He says softly, "I'm afraid I'm going to hurt you."

He throws himself on top of her, brutally, desperately, devours her childish breasts, shouts insults, calls her a disgusting whore and his only love. She shuts her eyes, the pleasure she feels is so strong. His hands know just what to do, expert, professional; she realises she's very fortunate, and tells him how desirable he is. He says he knew from the start, on the ferry, that she would fall in love with love-making after her first lover, and will deceive all the men she'll be with in the years to come.

His skin smells now of expensive perfume, English cigarettes, honey, Indian silk and gold. She tells him to do it over and over again, and he does. He does, until she thinks she will really die.

*CAMERA FLASH.*

**SCENE 7**

WOMAN. Dormitory, Lyautey School. H el ene Lagonelle was waiting up for me when I got back to the hostel, eager to hear all about it.

H el ene's body was the most beautiful thing God ever made. She was much more beautiful than me. Sublime. But she was completely unaware of this, and walked naked along corridors innocently sporting those incomparably sculptured breasts of hers as if presenting them to any hand fortunate enough to encounter them. And yet I never touched them, even though I'd have liked to devour their whiteness and their roundness, the way my lover devoured mine every evening when I went to his room to deepen my knowledge of God. In fact, I'd have liked to take her with me and give her to the man who did things to me so that I could watch him doing the same to her, just as I desired. So the most exquisite pleasure would pass from him to me through H el ene's body.

To die for.

"Well?" she whispered. "What was it like?"

"It was wonderful."

I paused, humming to myself, just to tease her. Finally she couldn't contain her impatience. "Yes, but what was wonderful? Did you do it?"

"Oh yes, I asked him to do it several times."

"Did you have a ... you know."

She meant an orgasm, which we'd been instructed was a rude word that we were not to pronounce.

"Yes, lots," I answered truthfully.

She was impressed. "Heavens! Was it what you expected?"

"Much better. Except for the blood and pain."

H el ene blanched. "You're joking."

I admitted that they had been a surprise to me as well. Unbearable and unpleasant, but soon over and slowly transformed into the most exquisite pleasure. Simply beyond compare. Like death. "And anyway," I said to a very pensive H el ene, "we girls have to put up with it only once in a lifetime."

Then I asked her, "Has my face changed?"

H el ene looked at me closely in the dim light. "No, I don't think so. Why?"

"Oh, nothing." I didn't tell her that after making love we'd gone to a restaurant, and in the entrance was a long mirror. I saw myself, the rosewood-coloured felt hat with the wide black ribbon, the worn shoes, and the mouth with too much cherry

lipstick, just like on the ferry. But when I got closer, I didn't quite recognise myself. I didn't understand what had happened. It was only years later that I understood I already had the ruinous face that I was to have in later years.

I became a woman that day. A barrier between my mother and me had been dismantled. But I doubt if she'd had any pleasure — nothing like mine anyway. *She smiles and goes off.*

**ACT TWO**

*Set (not centre) a small table with a typewriter on it and a pile of already typed pages. A 1980s dial telephone as well.*

**SCENE 8**

*Lights up — Bright interior. No one on stage. The Child's mother enters, already screaming and speaking loudly, angrily, lashing out at life uncontrollably. A real operatic performance with all the stops out.*

MOTHER. I should have learned by now. I shouldn't expect anything but bad things from anyone, from my children, or the government or God. From my slut of a daughter above all! I am being murdered by them all, I've had too much love for everyone and they hate me for it, they're punishing me, torturing me. I'm being drowned, drowned by the sea, it ate up my land. Life wasn't like this. It wasn't meant to be like this, I used to give parties and receptions. Did I? Was that me?

People say that my sons are layabouts. My Pierre, my darling child, he's just weak that's all, easily led. But the girl! She's strong, she should know better. So, I don't know how to bring up a daughter. *(At the top of her voice.)* **MY DAUGHTER IS A WHORE!** Everybody is talking, they say she goes every day, every night, to the bed of a filthy Chinese millionaire, prostituting herself. The girls at school have been told not to speak to her, but I see what's going on, they're jealous, yes, all the men teachers lust after her, I see it in their eyes, and they say *she's* disgraced. Disgraced! How can innocence be disgraced?

*(She begins to laugh and puts on the charm.)* But it doesn't matter. She needs to be free, you see, otherwise she'd run away, there's nothing I can do about it. If I want her to stay I have to give her her freedom, surely you understand that? She's doing well at school and working hard, and that's what matters. Her education, it's my only hope. As for that hat and those little old dresses and the gold shoes you complain about, I bought them for her I think, haven't you noticed how they suit her? They don't mean anything. *(Angry again.)* And that diamond ring she's suddenly showing off, the little slut got that from her Chinese moneybags, for selling her body to him. *(Switching to quiet calmness.)* When I first saw it, it reminded me of my little solitaire engagement ring. It's time we went to the photographer's again. We had photographs at our wedding. *(Rounding on the girl sitting on the bench, as though she were there — maybe she is, in her mind.)* You little tart! I can smell his Chinese scent, your underwear stinks of your own lust like a bitch on heat! *(She sniffs at imaginary underwear in her hand then throws it down.)* Pouah! You sit there naked as the day you were born, looking so innocent and little-girlish, but you don't take me in! Don't worry, I'm not going to hit you again. Pierre thinks I should beat you harder but you're not worth the effort. *(She turns round.)* Pierre! Get away from there, stop that peeping! *(To the Child.)* You thought you were fooling me but I've known about it from the start. You know what it means don't you? You will never get married, no decent man will want the whore of Chinese scum out here in the colonies. I'm terrified, you are in such danger! Oh, you can shrug your shoulders and smile and deny it. Men might find you attractive but only as a mistress, never as a wife. You say it's only for the money he gives you, but I don't believe it. I think you've fallen in love with him, but what's he ever likely to do for you except give you trinkets? Our only hope is to send you to France, but how are we going to do that? With debts up to my ears how can I afford the fare? Tell me that! Eh?

*Mother storms out of light.*

*Woman re-enters light.*

That was my mother. Just in case you were wondering! I didn't pay much attention, I was used to her. I knew she probably wouldn't even remember next day, when the alcohol and the blue devils had worn off.

### **ALTERNATIVE SCENE 8**

*Lights up — Bright interior. Woman sitting on bench.*

*Throughout the scene the WOMAN (as good story-tellers do) gradually gets emotionally worked up and "becomes" her mother.*

WOMAN. Sometimes my mother went into a rage of operatic proportions. One afternoon I was in my room. I had just bathed and was relaxing naked on my bed when she stormed in. I thought she was going to hit me again, but this time it was all words, lashing out at life uncontrollably. "I should have learned by now," she began. "I shouldn't expect anything but bad things from anyone, from my children, or the government, or God. I'm being murdered by them all, I've had too much love for everyone and they hate me for it, they're punishing me, torturing me."

I could smell the rice wine on her breath. This was going to be a major explosion from her, there was nothing I could do about it, but I was puzzled about what had caused it. So I asked her. She told me she'd been called in to see my school principal, who accused her of not knowing how to bring up a daughter.

"Everybody is talking," she shouted, "they all know you go every day, every night, to the bed of a filthy Chinese millionaire, prostituting yourself. **MY DAUGHTER IS A WHORE!** The girls at school have been told not to speak to you, but I see what's going on, they're jealous, yes, all the men teachers lust after you, I see it in their eyes, and they say *you* are disgraced. Disgraced! I asked the principal, 'How can innocence be disgraced?'"

*(She begins to laugh and puts on the wheedling charm.)* 'She needs to be free, you see, otherwise she'd run away, there's nothing I can do about it. If I want her to stay I have to give her her freedom, surely you understand that? She's doing well at school and working hard, and that's what matters. Her education, it's my only hope. As for that hat and those little old dresses and the gold shoes you complain about, I bought them for her I think, haven't you noticed how they suit her? They don't mean anything.'

Then mother saw I was playing with the ring on my finger as she spoke, and that set her off again. *(Angry again.)*

"And that diamond ring you're suddenly showing off, you little slut, you got that from your Chinese moneybags, for selling your body to him. You thought you were fooling me but I've known about it from the start. You know what it means don't you? You will never get married, no decent man will want the whore of Chinese scum out here in the colonies. I'm terrified, you are in such danger! Oh, you can shrug your shoulders and smile and deny it. Men might find you attractive but only as a mistress, never as a wife. You can say it's only for the money he gives you, but I don't believe it. I think you've fallen in love with him, but what's he ever likely to do for you except give you trinkets? Our only hope is to send you to France, but how are we going to do that? With debts up to my ears how can I afford the fare? Tell me that my girl! Eh?"

I didn't pay much attention to her that hot steamy afternoon, I was used to her. I knew she probably wouldn't even remember next day, when the alcohol and the blue devils had worn off.

**SCENE 9**

*WOMAN sits in chair, centre.*

WOMAN (*as Child*). Sometimes I don't go back to the hostel after school. The Léon Bollé picks me up and I come straight to his place. It's a haven of peace after the shambles of my home, with my mother and elder brother going more and more often into those terrible fits of black anger. But I prefer my mother's outbursts. Pierre's anger is cold, malevolent. Hers is because she cares about me.

She gets angry when I tell her all I want to do is to become a writer. She's not interested when I come top in French. "And what about mathematics?" she cries. "You must do well in maths and science, and get a proper job!"

I like the warm comfort of my lover's bed. We don't always make love. He washes me under the shower, dresses me, makes me up, and takes me out to dinner. He adores me and is terrified I'll take up with another man, but I know I shan't do that. He's also afraid he'll be thrown into prison because I'm so young, if my mother sued him. I laugh and tell him that's very unlikely because she's lost so many lawsuits against the Land Registrar she couldn't afford another one.

Then one day he wasn't there. Just the chauffeur. He said the young master's father was very ill and he'd run me to school and back again. A few days later he came back, devastated, weeping. His father was going to live. The end of hope.

He told me, "I implored him to let me marry you, or at least to let me love you for a while longer before sending you away to France, a year perhaps. My father said he would rather see me dead."

**SCENE 10**

*CAMERA FLASH. LIGHTING CHANGE: WARM INTERIOR.*

WOMAN. Our house, the one on stilts. Pierre is sitting at the dining room table, half asleep. Paul is lying on the floor by the wall. The Chinese is standing by the door.

(*CHINESE to Pierre*) How much do you owe the opium den?

(*PIERRE*) Ask them. They're scum anyway. Why are you here?

WOMAN. The mother comes in. She has just had a shower. Barefoot, wet uncombed hair, loose dress made of local cloth. She smiles and the Chinese recognises her daughter's smile.

(*CHINESE to mother*). You must understand, Madame, they will not give way, the opium dealers. They will get the money your son owes somehow. Until then none of you will be permitted to leave.

(*MOTHER*) But who are you, Monsieur?

(*CHINESE*) I am having an affair with your daughter. Did you not know?

(*MOTHER*) Yes and no. I've had so much on my mind, you see.

(*CHINESE*) You wrote a letter to my father saying you wanted to see me.

(*MOTHER*) No I didn't!

(*PIERRE*) I wrote it. It said clearly what we want. Didn't your father tell you?

(*CHINESE ignoring Pierre*) Madame, my father is prepared to settle your debts. To try and repair the hurt I have caused to your family.

(MOTHER) Why don't you marry her, if she means so much to you? I can see in your eyes that you love her. That you are very unhappy at the prospect of losing her.

(CHINESE) My father would disinherit me, Madame. She would then be married to a poor Chinese, and you would not like that.

(MOTHER *laughing*) True. That's life, full of contradictions.

(PIERRE) Ask him how much, mother, since he's not talking to me.

(MOTHER) Oh, I couldn't possibly calculate... just like that... I have the debts of a head of state! (*Pushing the trolley.*) One simply cannot put a price on a thing like dishonour.

(CHINESE) Just state the sum you would like to settle the debts and pay your children's passage to France.

(MOTHER) You speak French very well, Monsieur.

(CHINESE) Thank you, Madame. And permit me to say ... you are being charming to me.

(PIERRE) Christ almighty! That's enough! Cut the crap! We'll let you know through my slut of a sister how much we want. (*Under his breath.*) Dirty Chink!

(MOTHER) Does she know you have come here, Monsieur?

(CHINESE) Not yet.

(MOTHER) What do you think she would say?

(CHINESE *smiling*) At first she would be angry... perhaps... then provided you got the money, she wouldn't care a fig. She has regal qualities, your daughter.

(MOTHER *smiling*) What you say is very true, Monsieur.

### **SCENE 10A**

WOMAN. I have always been sad. My Chinese lover thought it was because we made love during the day and it would pass as soon as night came, but I told him he was wrong, the sadness comes from inside me. It's so much a part of me that I could give it my name. And yet it's also comforting because I know where it comes from. My mother. It tells me I share the same misfortune that she has always railed against in the desert of her life. Mother was reduced to despair, vanquished and finally murdered by society. And because of what was done to this lovable, confident person, so full of good will, we — her children — hated life, hated other people. Why? Because they degraded us and showed up our poverty.

I was ten years old when Mother abandoned hope. Yes, she gave up struggling against the ocean that was drowning her. Even now, years after, I can still experience the fear I had as a child that a certain mental state of my mother's would get so bad she would be separated from her children.

She never foresaw what would become of the three of us as a result of witnessing her descent into despair. Anyway what could she have done? Hide our circumstances from us? Make her face, her expression, her voice, or her love for us, tell lies? She could have died, killed herself, or isolated us from all those intolerable people. She certainly could have made sure the elder brother was kept separate from us two younger ones. But she didn't. She was careless, scatter-brained, irresponsible, yes, she was all of that. But she went on living, and we loved her beyond the bounds of love, just as she loved us.

### **SCENE 11**

*CAMERA FLASH. LIGHTING: SOMBRE, BECOMING SLOWLY LIGHTER.*

WOMAN. In his studio flat in the Chinese quarter. The Child is lying awake in bed. The Chinese comes in, staggers slightly, sits in the chair.

“I’ve been drinking choum. I’m pissed.”

She knows the effects of that rice alcohol, she’s had some. She undresses him, showers him with rainwater, pats him dry, strokes and kisses him. “It would be better to leave you damp, then you’d cool down.” She enjoys his passivity.

Through the shutters, dawn is breaking. She leads him to the bed. He mumbles, “You little white slut, I didn’t know about suffering till I met you. I thought I did, but I knew nothing about it. You don’t even have any breasts.”

She laughs. They both laugh. She slips her body under his, covers herself with him, and lies there without moving, happy.

Then he says, “I can’t make love to you any more. I thought I could, but... Perhaps I shall never make love again.”

She wants him very much. “Would you like that? Never make love again?”

“At the moment, yes. To keep all the love I have for you inside me, for ever.”

He takes the Child’s hand and puts it on her sex. “Do it to yourself. Just for me. So I see what you are thinking.”

As she does it, they look into each other’s eyes. She calls out his name in Chinese.

He says, “Nothing else will ever happen in my life apart from the love I have for you. Everything is in the past now.”

## **SCENE 12**

*CAMERA FLASH. LIGHT CHANGE: WARM INTERIOR. DISCREET CHINESE MUSIC.*

WOMAN. A Chinese restaurant in Saigon. That’s where the Child has persuaded her lover to invite her family to dinner. It’s the most expensive restaurant in Saigon. She already feels it is going to be a disaster. The mother, terribly polite and talking too much: “Bonsoir Monsieur, how are you?”. Paul, the younger brother, beaming with delight but really not taking anything in. Pierre, sullen as usual, doesn’t even greet the Chinese. Ignores him.

The Chinese whispers to the Child, “It is moving to see you and your mother together, but when they are here you don’t love me any more.” She says she wants him to see them all together just once in his life, even though their presence stops her seeing him clearly. Drinks are ordered, three brandies and Perrier, and a bottle of rice wine. Pierre sets the tone of the evening by downing his brandy and immediately ordering a second one. The mother doesn’t drink hers, gives it to her elder son. Motherly love at its best. My brothers stuff themselves, so my lover and I begin to help ourselves to lichee nuts too. No one talks. The Chinese orders more grilled prawns. The mother breaks the silence.

(MOTHER) This is a lovely restaurant, very authentic, we should take the address.

(PIERRE) Why? We couldn’t afford a glass of water here.

*Pause.*

(MOTHER) So, Monsieur, you have studied in Paris?”

(CHINESE) Yes — or to be precise, Madame, No, I *didn’t* study in Paris!

(PIERRE) That’s just like us then.

(CHINESE) So you don’t do anything either, Pierre?

(PIERRE) Oh but I do! I’m ruining my family, that’s very demanding.

(CHINESE) What does it demand?

(PIERRE) Pure malice. Pure as a diamond.



(CHINESE) Madame, you have a talented son there — he can stand up for himself.  
 WOMAN. The Child leans over and whispers to the Chinese, “That’s why Pierre’s so lovable — he doesn’t realise he has a criminal mind.”  
 We all gorge ourselves, Pierre drinks whiskies, the mother quaffs the rice wine and says “I love this stuff” before dropping off to sleep in mid-laugh. The Chinese asks for the bill, and counts out eight ten-piastre notes into the saucer. Silence. The family look at each other. The mother hiccups and says, “Eighty piastres! Oh là là!” and they all collapse in hysterical laughter.

Nobody thanks him. The girl thinks, We are a family of guttersnipes.

### **SCENE 13**

*CAMERA FLASH. LIGHTING CHANGE: WARM INTERIOR.*

WOMAN. A few days later, in his flat. I finally heard he had been making enquiries about my family. He admitted, “Yes, I have been to see your mother. My father instructed me to visit her, to find out how he can help her. He had heard she was robbed by the French officials at the Land Registry and by her bad son. He said I must be polite and treat her with respect.”

Then I told him, “You are not to have any regrets. I agree with your father.”

My lover, who is so infatuated with my body, begins to understand. “Perhaps I do have to give you up, return you to your own race, to the whites. I don’t think you are made for marriage.”

I knew what was coming next. “My fiancée will soon be here, when she is eighteen. Her family has agreed because my father is the most terrible, the richest of all the Chinese immigrants.”

I asked him when he last saw her. “When I was twenty and she was ten. I have never spoken to her.” He smiled. “She is covered with gold, jade and diamonds, like my mother.”

I wanted to know, was there no reason for that little girl being chosen, other than her wealth?

“Yes, there was. Her family’s high moral standards.”

We looked and smiled at each other, united by our powerlessness.

I decided to tell him. “I have been lying to you. Ten days ago I had my fifteenth birthday.”

After a hesitation, he said that he knew already because his father had told him!

I said, “He knew? Your father really is the pits.”

“That is true,” he said, “but the Chinese like little girls.”

We kissed, we wept, he entered the black night of my body but this time the pleasure gave us no consolation.

### **SCENE 14**

*FULL LIGHTING.*

WOMAN. His father paid all our debts — my mother’s debts — no, Pierre’s debts! — and paid our fares back to France, on one condition: that we get out of the country as soon as possible, before the wedding. My elder brother went first, before he could run up any more debts, then my mother, Paul, and I soon after. I saw the big black car was there, parked discreetly on the quayside as the gangway was hauled up and the ship bade its mournful farewell. The town, the harbour, the car, became smaller and smaller and disappeared. I didn’t weep. One did not weep in our family for a Chinese lover.

**SCENE 15**

*Camera flash. Evening light.*

WOMAN. Dusk one evening on board ship, crossing the Indian Ocean under the luminous sky. Suddenly the sound of a Chopin waltz came bursting out from the main lounge. I had tried to play it for months without success. That's why I gave up the piano. There wasn't a breath of wind and the music pervaded the whole ship. I stood up as if to go and throw myself into the sea. Then I did weep because I had thought of my Chinese lover, and I was suddenly not sure that I hadn't been in love with him after all, with a love I hadn't been able to see because it had become lost in the tide of events, like water seeping through sand. Thanks to that music, spreading over the sea and filling the calmest night I have ever known, I could see my love for him for the first time.

**SCENE 16**

*Music: a 1980s French chanson— Aznavour, Brel, or Jacques Douai. The Woman moves to table and starts typing. Pages of typescript on the table. Telephone rings. The Woman answers it.*

WOMAN. Hello... Yes... *[Pause.]* I know it's you. I recognised your voice right away. I really did! Your North China accent... after all these years, yes. [...] You're in Paris? [...] Oh, with your wife. Did she ever..., no I won't ask that. [...] Ah, you heard about Paul. [...] Yes, very sad. [...] 1942. I died when he died, his body was part of mine. [...] Pierre? He did well during the German occupation, but afterwards, well... [...] My mother? [...] Oh, you met her in Saigon when she went back? She returned to France to die. [...] Yes, lots of books. [...] *(She puts a hand on the typescript. Pause. Listening. Then more softly.)* Yes... yes... What do you mean, you still feel the same? [...] Until you die?

*She does not replace the receiver. Tears are coursing down her cheeks and she is audibly crying as she goes off.*

*LIGHTS FADE TO BLACK.*

**THE END**

**ALTERNATIVE SCENE 16**

*Music: a 1980s French chanson — Aznavour, Brel, or Jacques Douai. The WOMAN sits centre in the same position as at the beginning.*

WOMAN. Years passed. War, marriages, children, divorces. One day as I was sitting in my Paris apartment typing yet another book the telephone rang. A man said, "It's me". I'd recognised his voice right away. He said he was in Paris with his wife and that he was just wanting to hear my voice. I said, "It is me, hello." He was very nervous — his voice had the same old tremor in it. His North China accent... after all those years. *(Emotional pause.)* He said my mother had told him when she went back to Saigon that I'd written lots of books. And that Paul had died. I said, "It was very sad... 1942... I died when he died, his body was part of mine." He asked about Pierre. I told him he did well during the German occupation, but afterwards, well... *(Pause.)* We didn't know what to say next. Then he said it. He still felt the same and he still loved me, he couldn't ever stop loving me, he would love me until he died. I just sat there with the phone in my hand, with tears running down my cheeks.

*LIGHTS FADE TO BLACK.*

**THE END**