

Burning Louise

A devised work of music theater in two acts

Collaborators

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CHARACTERS

BERN Male, 40s-50s, Black, a photographer from New Orleans

LOUISE Female, 40s-50s, White, a gallery owner in the San Francisco area

SETTING

TIME The late 1990s

PLACE LOUISE's elegantly modern home in Sausalito, CA
Flashbacks to New Orleans

Prologue. Like a Dream.

SCREENS display classified ad: "Professional woman seeks a roommate." SCREENS fade.
NIGHT. LOUISE is seen in her loft-like Sausalito, California home. It is 1998. In a cold fury, she packs boxes with men's clothing, talking to herself.
BERN is seen in a cheap San Francisco hotel room. He unpacks his bags, singing to himself.

BERN
(Sings)

THAT'S THE PART
 THAT WENT SO FAST.
 IN THE DARK
 ALL THAT'S PAST
 WENT SO FAST.
 CAN'T GET IT BACK.

LOUISE

Your precious Armani suits. Your extortionary Wilkes-Bashford ties. Your molding Nikes – How many fucking running shoes does one man need? I swear to God I'm going to take all this junk out back, stuff it into the Weber, and fire it up. Why not? I paid for it all. What would my lawyer say about that? Who cares? It's all going up in flames, even the goddamned Walking Buddha!

She picks up the small statue and starts to hurl it into the box. She stops herself. Holds the Buddha close to herself, frozen in an icy rage.)

You've got to do something, Louise. You've got to do something.

LOUISE, struggling to control her rage, begins her meditation ritual, sitting in the lotus position, with her black lacquer box beside her.

LOUISE
(Sings)

RELAX, ONE, TWO, THREE...
 STARTING WITH THE FIRST CHAKRA.
 MOVING TO THE SECOND CHAKRA.
 A SMALL WHITE LIGHT...
 A SMALL WHITE—
 SHIT!

Breaking from her meditation she grabs the box. Crossfade to BERN as he removes a tape player from his luggage. He turns it on and listens the voices of BERN and a young man are heard singing "Ocean and River". After a moment, he almost violently turns off the tape player.

BERN

I HAD TO GO
BUDDY,
AWAY FROM YOU.
I HAD TO GO.

BERN puts tape recorder in suitcase, and locks it with a key. LOUISE sits with her lacquer box before her. She wraps her arms with long bandages, then locks the box with a key.)

LOUISE

THERE NOW, FOCUS NOW,
THE SEARING PAIN, THE PANIC,
GONE AGAIN, FOR NOW.

LIGHTS down. SCREENS fill with a glass revealing on one side, BERN's image, and on the other, LOUISE's face, contained within a frame. From either side of the glass, BERN and LOUISE peer at the image of the other. After a moment, the glass shatters, and falls, in slow motion, as a hundred shards. The images of BERN and LOUISE remain, same as before, except now, each is viewing his or her own face. SCREENS slowly flicker to black.

BLACKOUT.

Act I. Scene 1. Room for Let.

LIGHTS up on BERN in his hotel room. He sits on the edge of the bed, pen in hand, and carefully reads a newspaper. LIGHTS up on LOUISE in her home. She writes on a notepad.

Art and Trees

BERN

(Sings)

APARTMENT, STUDIOS...

OH, MY GOD. THEY WANT HOW MUCH?

LOUISE

(Sings)

SINGLE WOMAN – SEPARATED? DIVORCED?

PROFESSIONAL WOMAN SEEKS...

BERN

ROOMS FOR LET.

ROOMMATES...

LOUISE

COMPANION? ROOMMATE.

I'M THIRTY-EIGHT YEARS OLD

AND I'M LOOKING FOR A ROOMMATE!

BERN

WANTED: ROOMMATE.

LOUISE

PROFESSIONAL WOMAN

BERN

SEEKS COMPATIBLE, MATURE ADULT

BERN / LOUISE

A COMFORTABLE, SECLUDED

HOME IN SAUSALITO,

PRIVATE BED AND BATH

ART AND TREES.

BERN

COMFORTABLE, SECLUDED,

LOUISE
COMPATIBLE, MATURE,

BERN / LOUISE
ART AND TREES.

BERN
COMFORTABLE,

LOUISE
COMPATIBLE,

BERN
SECLUDED,

LOUISE
MATURE.

BERN / LOUISE
PROFESSIONAL WOMAN
SEEKS A ROOMMATE.

BERN now stands outside LOUISE's front door. He straightens his appearance and rings the doorbell.

Roommate!

LOUISE
(Sings)
ROOMMATE!

BERN
(Sings)
MY GOD, THIS IS GIGANTIC!

LOUISE
I'M TOO OLD TO HAVE A ROOMMATE!

BERN
AND LOOK AT ALL THESE TREES.

LOUISE

I DON'T NEED A ROOMMATE.
I DON'T NEED THE MONEY.
I HAVE PLENTY OF MONEY.

BERN

IT'S EXACTLY WHAT I NEED NOW.

LOUISE

I REALLY DON'T NEED THE
DISTRACTION

BERN

WHAT I REALLY NEED'S THE
ISOLATION

LOUISE

I DON'T KNOW WHAT I NEED!

BERN

SOMEWHERE THAT I – CAN FORGET.

LOUISE

WITH DAVE... I'VE FELT SUCH PAIN. I FELT I'D DIED INSIDE.

BERN

NO. I'LL NEVER FORGET YOU...

LOUISE

DAVE...
DAVE HAS NOTHING TO DO WITH
THIS.

BERN

BUDDY...
HAS NOTHING TO DO WITH
THIS.

LOUISE / BERN

WHAT I NEED NOW IS CHANGE.
I'VE GOT TO FIND
A WAY TO START AGAIN.

LOUISE

I'M ALL ALONE.
IN THIS ENORMOUS HOUSE.
I'VE GOT TO FILL IT. FILL IT
WITH A VOICE OTHER THAN
MY OWN.

BERN

AND I CAN DO NO HARM.
IN THIS ENORMOUS HOUSE.
IF I CAN CLEAR IT, CLEAR IT
FROM MY MIND, ALL THE THINGS
WE'VE DONE.

LOUISE

ROOMMATE...
OPEN
THE DOOR NOW,

LOUISE
AND WHO KNOWS?

LOUISE
TAKE A CHANCE!

A ROOMMATE.

LOUISE

ROOMMATE!

BERN
SO FAR FROM HOME.

BERN

WHERE I'LL JUST BE
A ROOMMATE.

Act 1, Scene 2. The Interview.

Scene continues from previous. BERN rings the bell again. LOUISE opens the front door and encounters BERN outside.

Louise Miller?	BERN
You must be—	LOUISE
Bern.	BERN
Bernard Freeman.	LOUISE
Bern. Am I early?	BERN
Three minutes late, in fact. Come in.	LOUISE
It's quite a walk up that hill.	BERN
Take off your shoes, please.	LOUISE
My shoes?	BERN
Take them off. The carpets. You can use these slippers.	LOUISE
	<i>She offers a pair.</i>
Right.	BERN
	<i>(Trying to squeeze into the slippers)</i>
Ow. Jeez. I'm sorry, they're not the right size.	

LOUISE

Don't ruin them! I bought them in Japan for-- Never mind. Stocking feet should be fine.

She eyes his socks skeptically. Looks up to his face, and pauses.

LOUISE

Have we met?

BERN

(Not certain)

I don't think so. I just moved here.

LOUISE

I thought you looked familiar. Hmn. Well, come on in.

BERN enters LOUISE's living room. It is spacious, luxurious with modern furnishings, filled with expensive Asian art carefully displayed. The effect is ordered, elegant but aloof, like a gallery.

BERN

Wow. What a beautiful house.

LOUISE

Thank you.

BERN

All this art. My God. It's like a museum.

LOUISE

My business. I deal in Asian art.

BERN

This bowl... Chang dynasty?

LOUISE

Very late. As I was saying, I have a few questions I'd like to— You're familiar with Chinese art?

BERN

That's your question?

LOUISE

I don't mean... It's just – Not everyone can distinguish the periods accurately.

BERN

I've done some reading.

LOUISE

An art major?

BERN

Uh – extracurricular.

LOUISE

I see. As I mentioned, I have some questions.

BERN

Oh, wow, this piece. A Walking Buddha.
(He mimics the statue's gesture.)
 “Dispelling fear,” right?

LOUISE

You really have done your reading. Actually, it's not an important piece. I keep it for – personal reasons.

BERN

Oh, yes? Burmese?

LOUISE

Thai.

BERN

It's charming. More than that. It's—

LOUISE

It was a gift from my – I got it while I was studying in Bangkok. You completed the questionnaire I sent you?

BERN

Oh. Uh, yes. On the ferry. I just got it this morning.

LOUISE

May I see it? And then we can discuss your potential.

BERN

(Looks for the form in his bag.)

Where did you get all those questions? The FBI?

Excuse me? LOUISE

Just – joking. A little levity. BERN

Your questionnaire, please. LOUISE

Right. Here it is. BERN

BERN hands her the pages.

Is this...? LOUISE

Crayon. It was all I had. My pen ran out of ink. The pencil. I had to ask around on the ferry and I all got was this. BERN

Holds up the crayon.

Orange? LOUISE

“Tangerine,” actually. BERN

Mr. Freeman, several of these responses are completely illegible. LOUISE

The crayon! There wasn’t enough room to fill in some of those little blanks. It kept getting all squished up... BERN

Fine. I’ll just read you the questions. LOUISE

BERN crosses to the piano.

A Steinway! Do you play? BERN

LOUISE

I haven't touched it in years. Dave used to—It was my grandmother's.

BERN

Really? Mine had one too.

(BERN plays a few notes.)

You've kept it in tune.

LOUISE

Basic maintenance. Or you'll ruin the instrument.

BERN plays, getting loud.

LOUISE

Mr. Freeman, answer the question! NAME!

BERN

Bernard Freeman.

LOUISE

Age?

BERN

Bigger than a breadbox.

BERN

Uh, 42.

LOUISE

Place of birth?

BERN

Natchez. Mississippi.

LOUISE

I'm familiar. Last place of residence?

BERN

New Orleans.

LOUISE

References?

BERN

Uh – they're, uh, they're difficult to reach at the moment.

LOUISE

NO references... Occupation?

BERN

Uh...

LOUISE

NO occupation?

BERN

Photographer. I used to be. Weddings mainly. Babies. Cotillions. That sort of thing. Couldn't deal with one more pierced-nose whiny little debutante. Do you have any idea what an afternoon of post-post-modern Southern belles can do to you? Anyway, I've given it up, photography. I'm going into computers. That's why I moved out here.

LOUISE

Computers? In this economy? You might need to reconsider your photography. Weddings, I understand, are continuing unabated.

BERN

I've saved some money. I need a change. Came about as far as I possibly could.

LOUISE

Yes, I suppose you have.
Let's see, where were we... Dietary preferences?

BERN

Blackened catfish with red beans and rice.

LOUISE

I mean, are you vegetarian, vegan—

BERN

I'll eat anything as long as it's blackened.

LOUISE

Omnivore. Let's see... Your methods of spiritual alignment.

BERN

My methods of spiritual alignment?

LOUISE

We'll skip that. All right, if you'll give me a couple moments, I'll have this all tabulated.

BERN
Tabulated?

LOUISE
I've devised a chart.

She brandishes it.

BERN
Ah.

*Using a specially crafted grid, LOUISE
calculates the questionnaire.*

LOUISE
Mr. Freeman!

BERN
Was that too loud?

LOUISE
I'm trying to concentrate! What is that?

BERN
What's what?

LOUISE
The piece you're playing.

BERN
I have no idea. I'm making it up.

LOUISE
You're— ?

BERN
Improvising. I *am* from New Orleans.

LOUISE
Yes, so you say. It's just that—that doesn't sound like jazz.

BERN
No?

LOUISE

I thought you were a photographer.

BERN

Used to be.

LOUISE

And the piano?

BERN

My mother.

LOUISE

You've kept it up.

BERN

Basic maintenance.

LOUISE

Mr. Freeman—

BERN

Bern.

LOUISE

Bern. I'm afraid I have to say you're not exactly—

BERN

Yes?

LOUISE

Well, not exactly what I'm looking for.

BERN

According to the chart?

LOUISE

Well – that, and...

BERN

What are you looking for? Exactly.

LOUISE

I don't know. I *do* actually. Or, rather, I'll know it when I see them. Her. Or him.

BERN

So, you don't mind living with a man.

LOUISE

Depends on the man.

BERN

I mean as a single woman. You are single?

LOUISE

Uh – separated.

BERN

I'm gay if that helps.

LOUISE

It neither helps nor hurts. I— I— What were you asking?

BERN

What are you looking for, exactly?

LOUISE

Mr. Freeman – Bern – it's nothing personal I just—

BERN

I'm very quiet. Really. Pay my bills... I *can* be a little flippant, but that's—

LOUISE

You see, I devised this chart to help me find someone who would be a little more, well— I'm looking more for a – companion.

BERN

A companion.

LOUISE

You understand.

BERN plays "Ocean and River."

LOUISE

Are you making that up?

BERN

Not right now.

LOUISE
Did you write it?

BERN
A while back.

BERN hums while he plays.

LOUISE
It's – haunting. Are there lyrics?

BERN
Lyrics?

LOUISE
Well – words.

BERN
Uh – yeah.

(Sings)

OCEAN AND RIVER,
RAIN AND HOLY WATER, FALL
ON FIRE AND EMBER.

LOUISE
Did you – write the words as well?

BERN
No, a – a friend. My roommate. Before. It's a haiku.

LOUISE
Sing it again? Please.

BERN

(Sings)

OCEAN AND RIVER,
RAIN AND HOLY WATER, FALL
ON FIRE AND EMBER.

LOUISE
It *is* a haiku.

BERN
He used to play around with different forms. We'd write songs together. Silly things mostly.

LOUISIE

Haiku isn't silly.

BERN

It can be.

LOUISIE

Yes, I suppose it can. You and your friend, you're still – writing together? Or – maybe since you've moved....

BERN

No. He, uh, he stopped writing.

LOUISIE

Stopped?

BERN

He, uh – can't. There was an accident.

LOUISIE

I see.

BERN continues to play, sadly.

LOUISIE

Uh... Bern...?

BERN

I'm sorry.

LOUISIE

Would you...?

BERN

Yes, yes.

LOUISIE

Would you like to see the space?

BERN

The space?

LOUISE

The room for let. It's not large, but it does have a private bath, and a view on the garden. It's right this way.

The two start to exit.

LIGHTS down.

Act I. Scene 3. Critical Condition.

BERN and LOUISE rise from their beds, he in his, she in hers. They are still asleep. Together they sit, as if in a waiting room, before a scrim where their images appear in a projection. On the screen, BERN is dressed in a dark business suit, LOUISE in a white lab coat.

BERN

(As lawyer in the dream; he sings)

IT IS IMPERATIVE,
ALL ASSETS AND LIABILITIES,
REAL ESTATE AND DEBT INSTRUMENTS,
FINANCIAL ACCOUNTS AND INSURANCE,
BUSINESS PORTFOLIOS,
ALL ASSETS AND LIABILITIES.
YOUR LIABILITIES.
PROTECT YOUR ASSETS.
HE'LL BLEED YOU DRY.

LOUISE

(As doctor in the dream; she sings)

CRITICAL CONDITION.
THIRD DEGREE BURNS
OVER MOST OF HIS BODY.
IT'S A MIRACLE.
IT'S A MIRACLE
HE SURVIVED.
CHANCES LOOK GOOD
HE'LL PULL THROUGH.
BUT HE WILL NEVER—
I'M SORRY—
HE WILL NEVER
BE THE SAME.

SCREENS fade.

LIGHTS down.

Act II, Scene 2. Cupboard & Dreams

BERN searches through the kitchen. He flings open cabinet doors, slams some shut, leaves others open, rummages through the contents of the cabinets. LOUISE enters, stops, and observes BERN for a moment.

LOUISE
My God! Can I help you?

BERN
Not really, I was just...

LOUISE
What are you doing?

BERN
Just looking around.

BERN begins searching again LOUISE reorders the contents of the cupboards and closes open cabinet doors.

LOUISE
Looking around? For *what*?

BERN
Oh, I'll know it when I see it.

LOUISE
Mr. Freeman, everything in this house is completely—

BERN
Organized. I noticed.

LOUISE
I have a place for everything, and I put everything in its place.

LOUISE begins to unload. Takes off her coat. Drops her bag. Places her keys on table. BERN continues rifling through the cupboards. He discovers a key.

BERN
Hello, a key. Let's see...

BERN opens a locked cabinet.

LOUISE

Mr. Freeman!

BERN

Don't trust the help?

(He pulls out a bottle of bourbon.)

Here we go! Bourbon. Very expensive bourbon! No wonder you keep it under lock and key...

LOUISE

In this house things that are locked are to remain locked.

BERN pours himself a large glass of bourbon and drinks it thirstily.

LOUISE

For heaven's sakes, it's not meant to be guzzled.

BERN

A little nightcap, geez. I'll pay you back.

LOUISE

Mr. Freeman.

BERN

Bern.

LOUISE

Mr. Freeman, perhaps in New Orleans one has a different set of assumptions...

BERN

Honey, in New Orleans we ain't got no assumptions.

LOUISE

I can only imagine. What I'm saying is that if we are to be roommates, you and I...

BERN

Yes?

LOUISE

Surely I don't have to explain this. Boundaries. Limitations. With your former housemate, you must have had some curtain of privacy.

BERN

Pretty gauzy. You could see right through.

LOUISE

Never mind then.

BERN

(Remembering. Moody.)

Or I thought I could. Now, I have no idea what was going on.

LOUISE

Let me be precise. If we're to be roommates, there are certain personal items we should purchase for ourselves. Like liquor.

BERN

(Directly.)

I just need a drink, Louise.

His candor catches her off guard.

LOUISE

I think I'll have some tea.

LOUISE goes to get tea. BERN crosses to piano in living room. His playing is moody, troubled.

LOUISE

(From the kitchen)

Bern. It's a little late.

BERN

(Perhaps ironically)

Back in New Orleans we'd just be getting ourselves gussied up to go out on the town right about now.

LOUISE

(Still from kitchen)

I need some quiet. I have a meeting in the morning. Investors.

BERN

Investors?

LOUISE joins BERN in the living room.

LOUISE

For the business.

BERN

You're selling your business?

LOUISE

I'm not selling my business, I'm expanding my business. We're wrapping up negotiations.

(Beat.)

I should do my yoga. Would you mind...?

BERN

Nothing rambunctious, I promise.

LOUISE

Just—quietly. Please.

LOUISE exits. BERN plays a bit more, then begins to sing to himself.

Dark and Light

BERN

DARK AND LIGHT,
ANGLES, FIGURES.
LEFT TO RIGHT,
FORM THE PICTURES.
PICTURES...

THIS CURTAIN OF LIGHT AND AIR
THAT FELL BETWEEN YOU AND ME,
WAS ONCE AS IF NOTHING THERE,
NOW SEEMS AS BLACK AND THICK
AS SMOKE WOULD BE.

THAT'S THE PART
THAT GOES SO FAST.
IN THE DARK
ALL THAT'S PAST
GOES TOO FAST
TO GET IT BACK.

IN THESE PICTURES,
THE FORM, THE FIGURES,
ARE YOU THERE, INSIDE
THE SHADOWS? OR OUTSIDE
THE FRAME? SOMEWHERE
BEHIND THE FLAME?

DARK AND LIGHT,
ANGLES, FIGURES.
LEFT TO RIGHT,
HOLD THE PICTURE.
HOLD A PICTURE
HOW I'VE TRIED TO HOLD A PICTURE
OF YOU.

BERN rises. LOUISE exits. BERN goes to his bedroom, where he unlocks his suitcase, removes his camera and finds a particular photo.

LIGHTS down.

Act I. Scene 5. Relax.

LIGHTS crossfade to LOUISE in her bedroom. LOUISE sits on the floor, with her lacquer box nearby. She begins her meditation routine.

LOUISE
(Sings)

RELAX, ONE, TWO, THREE...
SHIT!
RELAX, ONE, TWO, THREE...
STARTING WITH THE FIRST CHAKRA.
MOVING TO THE SECOND CHAKRA.
A SMALL WHITE LIGHT...
A SMALL WHITE LIGHT...
I SEE A SMALL WHITE... – SUIT.
MY BRAND-NEW WHITE SUIT!
I’LL WEAR THE WHITE SUIT AND TAKE CONTROL.
IS MY PROPOSAL GOOD?
OR SHOULD I HOLD OUT FOR MORE?
SHUT UP! JUST CONCENTRATE!
CONCENTRATE. JUST... CONCENTRATE...
WHITE BALL, THIRD CHAKRA.
LIGHT MOVING, FOURTH CHAKRA.
LIGHT MOVING, FIFTH SH...SH... SHEETS.
GOTTA GET NEW SHEETS.
FLANNEL SHEETS. NO, TOO HOT.
DAVE WOULD NEVER. DAVE—
NEVER.
CONCENTRATE!
WHITE BALL... WHITE LIGHT... WHITE SHEETS
ON OUR BED. MY BED
NOW.
FOCUS! JUST—
LIGHT... MOVING.
DAVE... LEAVING.
RELAX!

LOUISE takes out a key and unlocks her lacquer box. She removes an Exacto knife and describes a careful cut on her arm. She watches the blood flow and begins to relax.

LOUISE
THERE NOW, FOCUS NOW,

THE SEARING PAIN, THE PANIC,
GONE, AGAIN, FOR NOW.

She wraps her arm and goes to her bed.

LIGHTS down.

Act I. Scene 6. Key Dream.

NIGHT. LOUISE'S HOME. LOUISE and BERN rise simultaneously from their beds, he in his bedroom, she in hers. They are still asleep. Just as each reaches the door, an expression of horror crosses their faces.

LOUISE
(Sings)
NO!
IT'S GONE!

I HAD IT.

RIGHT HERE...

I HAD IT.

WHERE?
WHERE?
THINK.

CONCENTRATE.

WHERE WAS I?
HOW...

YOU HAD IT LAST.

BACK AT NINE.

CONCENTRATE.
ON THE COUNTER?

NO, THE KITCHEN.

ON OUR KITCHEN
ON OUR KITCHEN
TABLE.
IT'S ON OUR KITCHEN TABLE!
MY KEY.
OUR KEY.

BERN
(Sings)
NO!

IT'S GONE!

IT'S GONE!
RIGHT HERE...
IN MY HAND

WHERE?

WHERE?

SEE.

REMEMBER.
WHERE IT WAS.

WHEN...
YOU HAD IT LAST.

NO, TEN O'CLOCK.
REMEMBER.

BY THE DESK?

IN YOUR KITCHEN.

ON OUR KITCHEN
TABLE.
IT'S ON OUR KITCHEN TABLE!
YOUR KEY.
OUR KEY.

*Delighted, then expressionless, they turn and
return to their beds.*

LIGHTS down.

“It’s Gotta Be For You”

Music begins during spoken dialogue.

LOUISE

Damn. Could you get it, I—

BERN

It’s gotta be for you.

LOUISE

I’m already late.

BERN

No one I know has this number.

LOUISE

I don’t have time to—

PHONE rings.

LOUISE

I don’t want to talk.

BERN

(Answers phone)

Hello. Bernard Freeman. Who is this? Just a moment.
It’s your husband.

LOUISE

(Sings)

DAVE? TELL HIM I’M NOT HERE.

BERN

(Signs)

HE SAYS HE KNOWS YOU’RE HERE
‘CAUSE HE HEARD YOU.

LOUISE

WHY IS HE CALLING ME?
HE HASN’T CALLED IN—

BERN

HE’S GOT TO SEE YOU.
HE WANTS TO TALK.

LOUISE
HE DOES? HE WANTS TO TALK?

BERN
HE WANTS TO COME BY TODAY.

LOUISE
HE WANTS TO COME HERE? HE WANTS TO COME HOME?

BERN
HE'LL BE HERE AT FIVE.

LOUISE
WHAT DOES HE WANT TO SAY?
IS HE COMING BACK TO STAY?
ASK HIM THAT!

BERN
SHE WONDERS IF YOU'RE—

LOUISE
NO! I'LL ASK HIM MYSELF!

BERN
YES, I TELL HER. HE SAYS,
HE NEEDS YOU NOW MORE THAN EVER.
REMEMBER BANGKOK, HE SAYS.

LOUISE
BANGKOK. BANGKOK? BANGKOK!
GIVE ME THE PHONE!

(She grabs the phone. Speaks.)

Dave! "Remember Bangkok," you jerk! How can you tell me that!

BERN
He hung up.

LOUISE
Dave! Dave?

BERN
Louise, he hung up!

LOUISE
GODDAMN IT!
WHY DO I HOPE AT ALL?

LOUISE (cont'd)
 OR CARE THAT HE'S CALLING ME?
 I DON'T WANT TO BE THE ONE ALWAYS
 PLAYING THE FOOL
 BECAUSE OF DAVE!

BERN takes the phone from her.

LOUISE
 Sixteen years of his schemes and plans and money down the drain, and more
 schemes and more money, and still... I want him back.

BERN
 But you're filing for divorce.

LOUISE
He's filing for divorce. His latest girlfriend, she... wants to marry him. Why do
 I care? Why am I telling you these things? I hardly know you. *(Beat.)* I've got
 the investors. I've got to get to work. If this goes through... What in the world
 could he want? Do you think he wants to come back? Or does he just need more
 money? Every single time one of his half-baked, lame-brained, under-capitalized
 deals goes belly up, he comes running to me to bail him out. And every time it's a
 bigger mess, and every time I pay the bill. Every time. Then he goes out and
 runs around. Every time. And still—

BERN
 How could a savvy lady like you get hooked up with a loser like—

LOUISE
 You never fell for the wrong fucking person?

*LOUISE strides out of the kitchen, then
 pauses. BERN remains in the kitchen.*

BERN
 He didn't feel like the wrong person.

LOUISE
 Every time. Every time. And still—I want him back. We weren't always like
 this.

BERN
 Not at the time.

By the River

LOUISE

(Sings)

IN BANGKOK, BY THE RIVER,
HE WAS SO... I DON'T KNOW...
DIFFERENT THEN.
SO WAS I, I SUPPOSE.

BERN

(Sings)

IN NEW ORLEANS, BY THE RIVER,
I WAS SO... I DON'T KNOW...
DIFFERENT THEN.
SO WAS HE, I SUPPOSE.

LOUISE

IN BANGKOK, BY THE RIVER,

WITH THE TEMPLE SPIRES,
AND PALM TREES, SO HOT,
AGAINST THE SUNSET.

IN BANGKOK, BY THE RIVER,

LOUISE, HE'D WHISPER,
AND PULL ME CLOSE.
AND WE WERE ALL WE HAD.

BERN

IN NEW ORLEANS, BY THE
RIVER

WITH THE CHURCH SPIRES,
AND OAK TREES, SO HOT,
AGAINST THE SUNSET.

IN NEW ORLEANS, BY THE
RIVER,

BUDDY, I'D WHISPER,
AND PULL HIM CLOSE.
AND WE WERE ALL WE HAD.

BERN

NEW ORLEANS – WE HAD NOTHING,
BUT EACH OTHER.
AND SOMETHING ELSE...
OUR LONGING FOR SOMETHING.
WE WERE ALL WE HAD.

LOUISE

IN BANGKOK, WE HAD NOTHING,
BUT THE BUDDHA
HE GAVE ME THERE.
AND OUR LONGING FOR SOMETHING.
WE WERE ALL WE HAD.

LOUISE

IN BANGKOK, BY THE RIVER,
WITH THE TEMPLE SPIRES,

BERN

NEW ORLEANS, BY THE RIVER,
WITH THE CHURCH SPIRES,

LOUISE
AND PALM TREES, SO HOT,
AGAINST THE SUNSET.

IN BANGKOK, I THOUGHT
I THOUGHT HE LOVED ME THEN,
ONE HOT AFTERNOON, BY THE
RIVER,
BY THE HOT RIVER,
RIVER IN BANGKOK.

BERN
AND OAK TREES, SO HOT,
AGAINST THE SUNSET.

NEW ORLEANS, I THOUGHT
I THOUGHT I LOVED HIM THEN,
ONE HOT AFTERNOON, BY THE
RIVER,
BY THE HOT RIVER,
RIVER, NEW ORLEANS.

*MUSIC ends. SCREENS and
memories fade. LOUISE enters the
kitchen.*

LOUISE
Forgot my keys.

BERN
They're on the kitchen table.

LOUISE
(*She notices his stare.*)
What are you looking at?

BERN
I had a dream last night. Something about a key. And you were in it, I remember.

LOUISE
A dream?

BERN
Yes.

LOUISE
About a key.

BERN
Yes.

LOUISE
So did I. And you were in mine, too, as I recall.

BERN
Weird.

LOUISE
Odd.

LOUISE

The investors! I've got to get to work!

BERN

Could I get a lift down the hill? I need to pick up some—

LOUISE

Bourbon!

LIGHTS down.

Act I. Scene 8. Cut and Shoot.

That afternoon. LOUISE, very still, sits in the living room. She stares at the Walking Buddha. Her lacquer box is beside her. She tries to control herself from shaking with rage and grief.

LOUISE
(Sings)

SIXTEEN YEARS, SIXTEEN YEARS SINCE DAVE AND I...
AND STILL EVERY TIME, EVERY TIME
HE BREAKS MY HEART, IT SHATTERS.
LIKE THE FIRST TIME, LIKE THE SECOND TIME,
AFTER ALL THESE YEARS,
WHEN HE BREAKS MY HEART, I ACHE.

EVERY TIME, EVERY TIME
MY HEART ACHES. MY ARMS
ACHE. MY ARMS THEY ACHE.
EVERY TIME HE BREAKS MY HEART,
MY ARMS, MY HEART, THEY ACHE.

LOUISE unlocks the box and extracts an Exacto knife. At this moment BERN appears in the doorway, he notices LOUISE, who slowly and deliberately lifts the knife to her forearm. BERN is visibly disturbed. He takes his camera from his bag, and regains composure as he shoots frame after frame. LOUISE carefully describes a several cuts on her arm. Blood seeps from her arm onto a towel. LOUISE's face registers both pain and something like relief. BERN lowers his camera and returns it to his bag. He calls out from the doorway.

BERN

Louise?

LOUISE reacts with a start, quickly wrapping her arm and hiding the cuts beneath the loose sleeve of her baggy sweater.

LOUISE

In here.

BERN enters the living room.

BERN

There you are. What a workout! I swear I will never get used to that climb. We just don't have hills like that in New Orleans. Hell, we don't have *hills* in New Orleans. Oh, I got the bourbon. How was your day?

LOUISE reaches for a tumbler on the bar and holds it out to BERN.

BERN

That bad, huh?

He pours some bourbon. She wants more; he pours more.

LOUISE

I don't want to talk about him.

BERN

Dave? Right.
How about I play you something?

LOUISE

I'm not in the mood.

BERN crosses to the piano, plays.

BERN

Something soothing? Like... Chopin,
or Satie...
Gershwin!

THE WAY YOU HOLD YOUR KNIFE,
THE WAY YOU SIP YOUR TEA,
THE WAY YOU HAUNT MY DREAMS—

LOUISE

Bern!

BERN

I'm just trying to cheer you up. You want to talk...?

LOUISE

I don't want to talk about Dave.

BERN

Right. So, your meeting, with the investors. How'd your meeting go?

LOUISE

He lost it.

BERN

Lost what?

LOUISE

It's gone.

BERN

What's gone?

LOUISE

Everything. It's all gone. The business. All this art. Gone.

BERN

What do you mean, it's gone?

LOUISE

Collateral. The auditors for the investors, they found it. Dave – He used my business as collateral for one of his – deals.

BERN

How can that be legal?

LOUISE

We're still married. Communal property law. In this state—Even the Buddha. Like it was worth anything! The one thing. The one thing I thought still meant something to both of us. The one thing I could look at and think, okay, once, once there was a time when we, when we both...
After college, Dave and I spent a year backpacking, backpacking around Southeast Asia.

BERN

You backpacked around Asia?

LOUISE

Yes, why? I was only going to stay a few weeks, but Dave – he was making a trek from Bali to Bombay. He'd made a bet – naturally – with some fraternity brothers. Connect the Bs: Bali, Bangkok, Burma, Bombay.

BERN

Brother.

LOUISE

Bern!

We met in Bangkok. I had just arrived, and Dave had been traveling for I don't know how many months already. He seemed so savvy and worldly-wise. And we were both so young and broke. But we were in love with the place. The temples, the river. It was all so exotic, and hot. That was when he bought me the Walking Buddha. We found it in a little shop on this klong – a little canal – you could only get to the place by water. And we saw this Buddha. It seemed so serene. I loved the way it was walking, traveling, like we were. So Dave – bought it for me. He spent everything he had on it. Every penny. He had to take a part-time job and move into my room. And that's when we...

(Beat.)

And now... And now that he's lost everything I own – including the Buddha – *now* he wants me to sign the goddamn divorce papers.

BERN

Oh, honey.

Do you want some more bourbon?

BERN pours more bourbon for LOUISE and a glass for himself.

LOUISE

I should have known. I should have seen it coming. All the times I've saved his – ass—and... How could he? My *business*. All the art. Gone. Like it never happened, like it was never there.

BERN

Like melted snow.

LOUISE

Exactly. Like nothing at all.

SILENCE. BERN is reminded of his own loss.

BERN

Let me play you something.

LOUISE

Bern...

BERN

Something I wrote – a long time ago.

Christmas in Biloxi

BERN

(Sings)

GRANDMA'S HOUSE ON CHRISTMAS EVE,
TWINKLING LIGHTS AND STEAMING TEA.
THEN THE SNOW STARTS, THICK AND FAST,
IN BILOXI, IT CAN'T LAST.

THROUGH THE OAK TREES STILL IT FALLS.
AZALEAS, LAWN, IT COVERS ALL.
SNOW ON CHRISTMAS, NEVER SEEN,
IN BILOXI, IT'S LIKE A DREAM.

OUT WE RUN, AND THROUGH THE NIGHT,
PAST THE MANSIONS, COVERED WHITE,
AND THE SEASHORE'S WHITER STILL
THAN THE SEA'S SANDS EVER WILL.

CHRISTMAS ANGELS IN THE SNOW,
PURE WHITE SNOWBALLS, OURS TO THROW,
THEN TO BED THAT SNOWY EVE,
THE BEST-YET CHRISTMAS WE'D RECEIVED.

IN THE MORNING ALL WAS BRIGHT,
THE SNOW WAS LIGHTER THAN ANY WHITE.
BUT THE GIFT OF CHRISTMAS DISAPPEARED
BENEATH THE SUN, AS WE HAD FEARED.

THEN OUR ANGELS QUICKLY VANISHED.
AND THE SNOWMEN SHRIVELED, FAMISHED.
THE SEA'S SANDS NOW SEEMED GRAY
IN THE STEAMING LIGHT OF DAY.

OUR PRESENTS HELD SO LITTLE JOY.
SNOW WE WANTED, NOT A TOY.
THE GIFT OF CHRISTMAS EVE WAS GONE.
JUST BARELY PAST THAT WINTER'S DAWN.

BUT IN OUR MINDS THE MEMORY LASTS
OF THAT CHRISTMAS NOW LONG PAST,
WHEN BILOXI ONCE HAD SNOW

EVERY CHILD MIGHT DREAM TO KNOW.

LOUISE

Bern, could I – could I ask you a favor?

BERN

Whatever you need.

LOUISE

Do you think you could – would you photograph the art? Before it's gone.

BERN

Louise, really, I'm not doing photography any more.

LOUISE

I know, but, maybe just this once? I'd like a record.

BERN

It's just – I promised myself, I wasn't going to get back into it again.

LOUISE

I'll pay you.

BERN

It's not that.

LOUISE

I – I'd like – proof – I guess. That it was all really here, once.

BERN

Louise. I wish I could – really – but... We could hire someone.

LOUISE

There's no time, they're – they're taking it all in the morning.

BERN

I – I'll get my camera.

LOUISE

Thanks.

LOUISE rises to exit.

LOUISE

At least I've still got the house. *(Beat.)* Bern? This roommate thing? It's going to be okay.

LOUISE exits. BERN removes the camera from his bag. As he does, LOUISE re-enters to get her lacquer box. She picks it up. BERN notices. LOUISE notices. She leaves the box where it is.

LOUISE

Night.

BERN

Night.

LOUISE exits. BERN watches her go. He swigs some bourbon. He stands and looks about the room. His eyes light on the lacquer box. He arranges a composition with the box and a ceremonial knife. BERN raises the camera to his face. Strains of music, from "Come to the Old House." BERN lowers the camera, and the music stops. He raises the camera again. He waits. No music. BERN composes a shot. FLASH. LIGHTS down.

END OF ACT I

Act II.

Prologue to the Act, Dream of Doors.

BERN and LOUISE rise from their beds, he in his, she in hers. They are still asleep. Together they pass behind scrims where their figures overlap with projected images. They stop first at a door. BERN opens the door with a key. Objects fly out, art pieces, Buddhas, kitchen gadgets. LOUISE quickly shuts the door. They step to a second door which LOUISE opens with her key. Flames shoot up behind the door. The flash of emergency vehicles is seen. BERN slams the door shut. LIGHTS down.

Act II, Scene 1. Gone.

Late the next afternoon. LOUISE stands in the living room, which is now completely stripped of the art.

LOUISE
(Sings)

GONE. IT'S GONE. MY ART IS GONE.
ALL THE THINGS I LOVED, MY WORK, WERE HERE.
NOW THEY'RE GONE.
WHY? WHY DID I LET THIS HAPPEN?
EXPOSED AND BARE NOW,
EMPTY AS A MORNING
ON A GLACIER.
EMPTY, AND YET CLEAR, PERHAPS,
TO START ANEW.

BERN is seen. A red light bathes him as he develops photographs.

BERN
(Sings)

HERE. THEY'RE HERE. THE MEMORIES,
I TRIED TO HOLD THEM BACK,
NOW THEY'RE HERE.
WHY? WHY DID I TAKE THOSE PICTURES?
IT'S ALL FLOODING BACK NOW,
RUSHING LIKE WHITEWATER
ON A RIVER,
THE TERRIBLE MEMORIES
OF ALL I'VE DONE.

BLACKOUT

Act II, Scene 2. A Change.

Later that day, in the kitchen, BERN again rifles through the cupboards. LOUISE calls from offstage.

LOUISE
Bern? Bern! Where are you? Bern?

BERN
Where's the Irish Breakfast?

LOUISE
I need you to do something.

She enters kitchen and notices his frantic searching.

LOUISE
Can I help you?

BERN
Where's the Irish Breakfast?!

LOUISE
Pardon?

BERN
Tea! Where's the goddamned Irish Breakfast? It's all in order: Darjeeling, Earl Grey, BLANK! Jasmine, Orange Spice. Where's the Irish Breakfast?

LOUISE
We might be out. How about coffee?

BERN
Coffee?

LOUISE
Italian roast. Extra dark.

BERN
Whatever! I just need some caffeine! I've been up all night developing your damn pictures.

LOUISE
Yourself?

BERN
Of course, myself. I'm a photographer, remember?

LOUISE
Where?

BERN
At the community college, they rent out dark rooms. Where's the coffee?

LOUISE
Right here. I bought you some.

She produces a bag of coffee.

LOUISE
Or, what the hell. Let's have some bourbon.

BERN
What's gotten into you?

LOUISE
I've made my decision. I need you to be my witness. I'm going to sign the papers.

BERN
What papers?

LOUISE
The divorce documents. My Emancipation Proclamation. By signing these, I promise to myself I will never let anyone excoriate my life in this way ever again. With this pen, Dave will be gone.

She takes a pen and ceremoniously signs the papers.

BERN
Brava!

LOUISE
Now, you. I need a witness.

BERN looks for something to sign with, grabs orange crayon. Signs.

LOUISE

There! Away he goes! Out of the picture. Gone forever. Of course, everything else is gone, too – like melted snow, as you said. But... Now I can start over. Now I can try to make it all different.

BERN

I've gotten to like things how they are. Everything in its place. Ordered. Secure.

LOUISE

Oh, that was the old Louise. We can start to change all that right now!

LOUISE begins to rearrange cupboards.

BERN

What are you doing?

LOUISE

Come on, let's shake things up a little. How often do you get a chance to start everything all over again? Why not turn things upside down? Why not – go wild?

BERN

I think you're losing your mind.

LOUISE

Out with the old, uptight, obsessive-compulsive Louise, and in with the new... Wild Louise!

LOUISE resumes her efforts to rearrange the cupboards.

Come on, help me!

Go Wild!

LOUISE

(Sings)

SHAKE UP THE CUPBOARDS!
MIX UP THE CABINETS!
FREE UP THE SPICE RACK – HEY!
JUST LET THE WHOLE THING GO WILD!

PUT THE FRUIT IN THE VEG'TABLE BIN!
THE BUTTER IN THE MEAT DRAWER!
THE MILK IN THE MICROWAVE – HEY!
JUST LET THE WHOLE THING GO WILD!

BERN

(Sings)

HOW ABOUT THE FRYING PAN IN THE FREEZER?
THE TEAPOT IN THE TRASH CAN!

LOUISE

THE TELEPHONE... IN THE DISHWASHER!

BERN / LOUISE

HEY!
JUST LET THE WHOLE THING GO WILD!

SHAKE UP THE CUPBOARDS!
MIX UP THE CABINETS!
FREE UP THE SPICE RACK – HEY!
JUST LET THE WHOLE THING GO WILD!

BERN

I'VE GOT THE FLOUR IN THE BLENDER!

LOUISE

THE SUGAR IN THE CUISINART!

BERN

THE ICE CREAM?

LOUISE

IN THE OVEN!

BERN / LOUISE

HEY!
JUST LET THE WHOLE THING GO WILD!

Dance break.

LOUISE

I THINK I'LL WAKE UP AT DUSK.

BERN

GO TO BED AT NOON.

LOUISE

DRINK COFFEE.

BERN
DRINK BOURBON.

LOUISE
SKIP YOGA!

BERN / LOUISE

HEY!

JUST LET THE WHOLE THING GO WILD!

SHAKE UP THE CUPBOARDS!
MIX UP THE CABINETS!
FREE UP THE SPICE RACK – HEY!
JUST LET THE WHOLE THING GO WILD!

LOUISE

I'LL EVEN....
DUMP OUT MY DESK DRAWERS!

BERN

UNROLL YOUR ROLODEX!

LOUISE

TEAR UP MY CALENDAR!

BERN / LOUISE

HEY!

JUST LET THE WHOLE THING GO WILD!

HEY!

JUST LET THE WHOLE THING GO WILD!

LOUISE and BERN and the kitchen are now covered with flour, spices, and food. The place is a shambles.

BERN

What a disaster!

LOUISE

Oh, my God. I never do this. I never make a mess.

BERN

My Lord. Looks just like Buddy's place after Sunday brunch. Pancake mix everywhere. Beignets smeared across the counter. Bloody Mary's dripping on the floor... "Ooooh, ooooh. We're getting sloppy."

LOUISE

Oooh, oooh, oooh!

BERN

We'd go out, get in around noon, up all night and famished. And Buddy'd start cooking. Actually, he was a fantastic cook. Cajuns just are. He could do this rice thing with whatever happened to be in the cupboard, add some filey, and... "Voila, mon cher!" The secret, I found out, was his mother's pear relish, kind of a chutney. He'd smuggle it out of her pantry in Lafayette. He was a great cook, but what a frigging mess.

LOUISE

You never talk about him. He sounds like – he sounds like fun.

BERN

Fun? He was, oh, he was... He was wild. The first time I saw him – I was in a cemetery, doing a photo study of the mausoleums. And Buddy comes racing through the frame in a wedding gown, long white train blowing behind him. I can't remember what the hell he was doing, some dare I guess. He had friends waiting outside. Anyway, I stopped what I was doing and started shooting him. At first he didn't notice, and then, when he did – well, we got some very interesting shots.

LOUISE

Sounds like you were up to more than babies and cotillions to me.

BERN

You have no idea.

LOUISE

I'm not sure I want to have an idea. Hey! Let's look at the pictures.

What pictures?
BERN

Of my art.
LOUISE
(Duh.)

Here. I've seen them. Enjoy.
BERN
(BERN hands her envelope.)

BERN exits.

Are you all right?
LOUISE
Holding the envelope of photos, she follows after BERN into the living room.

Bern?
LOUISE opens the envelope, and pulls out the photographs. BERN in his bedroom packs his things.

BERN
(Sings)
WHY DO I TAKE THESE PICTURES?
WHY DO I TAKE PICTURES
LIKE THIS? CAN'T HELP MYSELF.
WHY DO I TAKE THESE PICTURES?
WHY DO I TAKE THEM
LIKE THIS?

LIGHTS down.

Act II, Scene 3. Danger and beauty.

LOUISE still in the living room pours over the photographs. She examines them in ecstatic wonder.

Danger and Beauty

LOUISE
(Sings)

OH, MY.... OH, MY....
MY VASE, MY URN, MY INK-BRUSHED SCROLL.
ALL MY PRECIOUS THINGS,
THEY'RE HERE, YET CHANGED
SOMEHOW. NOT WHAT THEY WERE BEFORE.
OR THAT, AND MORE.

OH, MY... OH, MY...
HERE IS MY FAVORITE CHINESE BOWL
AND THERE HE'S SET A KNIFE,
READY TO SLASH
THE PORCELAIN.
DANGER AND BEAUTY.

OH, MY... OH, MY...
THE KNIFE AGAIN, AND HERE MY LACQUER BOX!
THE TWO TOGETHER.
DID HE SEE? DOES HE KNOW?

LOUISE

The box.

LOUISE glances about and finds the lacquer box resting on the piano. She tries to open it, checking if it is still locked. It is. She fingers the key around her neck. BERN enters.

BERN

I've been thinking. You were right. About you and me as roommates. This isn't working.

LOUISE

Bern—

How'd you like the pictures?

BERN

The pictures.

LOUISE

What did you think?

BERN

They're... They're not what I expected...

LOUISE

In what way?

BERN

Well, they're – they're very interesting. You certainly documented everything. Every piece. Even one or two that aren't really part of the collection.

LOUISE

Oh, you mean this.

BERN

(Picks up the box on the piano.)

I don't know, I thought it was special to you.

LOUISE takes it from him.

It is.

LOUISE

And it's such a beautiful piece. I thought I'd try something out. Make a provocative juxtaposition.

BERN

Provocative.

LOUISE

The knife blade, the fragile lacquer veneer. When you put them together, what's the relationship?

BERN

Artistically?

LOUISE

(Uncertain if he is referring to her)

BERN
(Hesitates)

Artistically. Sure.

LOUISE

What I see is danger—in the knife—and beauty—in the veneer. One poised against the other. Bern. These pictures... They're amazing. All I wanted was some sort of documentation, but—

BERN

You like them.

LOUISE

They're— You've manipulated each composition so that all of my pieces are—you've caught the essence of each one—but you've added this other element. Of threat. The imminence of loss.

BERN

Pain.

LOUISE

And mortality.

BERN

When I look at something beautiful, I can't help thinking of its loss.

LOUISE

Exactly. The Walking Buddha, for instance—this delicate wooden statue—is right against a candle flame. Almost as if he were being engulfed by fire—about to be consumed, but so serene. Bern. These photos should be published.

BERN laughs.

LOUISE

I know you said you were through with photography. But that was when you were doing weddings and babies. Bern, your photos are extraordinary. We could start a whole new career for you.

BERN

Yeah, right!

LOUISE

I'm being very serious.

BERN

I don't want a new career.

LOUISE

We could get these pictures shown. Believe me.

BERN

I don't want my photos in a gallery.

LOUISE

Why wouldn't you want to be shown? Anyone would.

BERN

I just don't.

LOUISE

I don't understand.

BERN

All right. I'll tell you the truth. I did have a gallery show once. In New Orleans. I invited a lot of people. The press came. It was a big deal. And... And it was a complete disaster. Utterly humiliating. And I just – I can't go through that again. I can't do it.

LOUISE

Well, I don't know about that show, but these photos are truly exceptional. I've got a friend who has a gallery in the city, specializes in photography.

BERN

Louise, really.

LOUISE

Bern, these pictures are some of the most innovative—

BERN

I'm not interested. Give them to me.

LOUISE

If he doesn't like them, he doesn't like them.

BERN

Give me the pictures!

LOUISE

Bern.

BERN
(Shouts)
GIVE ME THE GODDAMNED PICTURES!

Beat.

BERN
Oh, God. I've gotta get out of here.

BERN exits.

LOUISE
Bern? Bern! What is going on?

LIGHTS crossfade.

Act II, Scene 4. Relief and Regret.

BERN is outside the house. LOUISE, still carrying her lacquer box, goes to BERN's room.

Does She Know?

LOUISE
(Sings)

WHO IS THIS BERN Freeman?
WHO IS THIS MAN IN MY HOME?
THE ONE I THOUGHT I KNEW, OR SOMEONE NEW?
WHAT IS HE HIDING?
WHAT IS HE RUNNING FROM?
WHO IS THIS BERN Freeman?
WHO IS THIS MAN IN MY HOME?

BERN
(Sings)

WHY DID I AGREE TO TAKE
THOSE PICTURES? WHY DID I TAKE
THEM LIKE THAT? A POLAROID
WOULD HAVE DONE THE TRICK. A SHOT.
WHY DID I AGREE TO TAKE
THOSE PICTURES? WHY DID I TAKE THEM?
WHY DID I EVER TAKE THEM LIKE THAT?

DOES SHE KNOW NOW?
WILL SHE KNOW NOW?
HAVE I REVEALED TOO MUCH?
COULDN'T HELP MYSELF.
WHY DID I AGREE TO TAKE
THOSE PICTURES? WHY DID I TAKE THEM?
WHY DID I EVER TAKE THEM LIKE THAT?

Once in his bedroom, LOUISE notices a key, sets down her box, and opens BERN's luggage. Inside she finds BERN's photographs and books of photographs.

LOUISE
My God. These books. They're all just his photographs. One gallery show? All of this is his work!

LOUISE

(Sings)

WHO IS THIS BERN Freeman?
WHO IS THIS MAN IN MY HOME?
THE ONE I THOUGHT I KNEW, OR SOMEONE NEW?
WHAT IS HE HIDING?
WHAT IS HE RUNNING FROM?
WHO IS THIS BERN FREEMAN?
WHO IS THIS MAN IN MY HOME?

BERN

(Sings)

MY GOD, THESE PICTURES,
THESE PHOTOS, MY LIFE.
I CAN'T GET AWAY.
TERRIBLE MEMORIES,
CEASELESS REGRET.

LOUISE pores through the photographs in a combination of fascination and horror. BERN goes back to his room, stops in the door, and sees LOUISE with the photos. SCREENS begin to fill with images – a beautiful but decaying Southern mansion, trees with Spanish moss, mausoleums, a young man dressed in a wedding gown, and flames.

Act II, Scene 5. Come to the Old House.

Come to the Old House

BERN / LOUISE

(Sing)

COME TO THE OLD HOUSE BY THE
GRAVEYARD, YOU SAID, WHERE WE—
WHERE WE WE'D BEEN SO MANY TIMES,
THE OLD, THE ABANDONED HOUSE
WE'D PASSED SO MANY TIMES.
COME TO THE OLD HOUSE, YOU SAID.

COME GET THE PICTURE, YOU SAID.
COME SEE THE SMOKE, FLAMES, THE FIRE,
THE GORGEOUS BRIGHT CONSUMPTION
LIKE WE'D SAID. LIKE WE HAD DREAMED.
YOU DID NOT SAY... YOU DIDN'T SAY,
BUD, THEY WERE CONSUMING YOU.

IT'S BURNING NOW, YOU CALLED TO
SAY. BURNING, JUST LIKE WE DREAMED
SO MANY TIMES. SO MANY
TIMES WE'D SEEN THE FLAMES, THE FIRE,
THE BURNING CONSUMPTION, IN
OUR MIND'S EYE, FOR MY PICTURES.

FOR MY PICTURES, WE SAID, FOR
MY PICTURES. LIKE THE GRAVEYARD,
THE GRAVES THERE, THE MONUMENTS,
THE MAUSOLEUMS, THE TREE
LIMBS HEAVY WITH MOSS, FOR MY
PICTURES. LIKE THOSE BOYS, BUDDY?

LIKE THOSE BOYS THERE ON THE ROAD?
ON THE ROAD TO BILOXI?
IN THEIR CAR, TRAPPED BUT ALIVE.
AND WHEN THE FLAMES STARTED WE
TOOK PICTURES. IT WAS EASIER

NEXT TIME. IT WAS EASIER
THE NEXT TIME, AND THE NEXT TIME.
IT WAS EASIER TO SEE BLOOD
FLOW, FLAMES GLOW, THE SMOKE GROW THICK,
HEAR SIRENS MOAN WHEN WE'D GONE

WITH THE PICTURES. IT GOT EASIER.

YOU WERE RIGHT, BUD, THE PHOTOS
WERE EXQUISITE. YOU KNEW THAT.
THE ANGLES, COMPOSITION,
THE LIGHT, THE SHADOW. THE BLOOD.
THEY SHOWED. THEY SOLD. ATLANTA.
NEW YORK. WE WERE HOT, BUDDY.

NOW
WHAT HAVE YOU
DONE?
PLUNGING IN
FLAMES.
BURIED IN

FIRE.
WHAT HAVE YOU
DONE
BUD?
WE COULD HAVE
STOPPED.

WE DID NOT
TRY.
IN TIME.

YOU LEAPT.
A MOTH SUCKED
TO THE FLAME,
THE FIRE
IT YEARNNS
TO BE.

AND I
WITH MY
CAMERA
SHOOT YOU.
HOLD YOU.
FOREVER.
FOREVER.

OCEAN AND RIVER,
RAIN AND HOLY WATER, FALL
ON FIRE AND EMBER.

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RAIN AND HOLY WATER, FALL
ON FIRE AND EMBER.

Act II, Scene 6. Climax.

SCREENS fade slowly throughout the scene. BERN and LOUISE are found in BERN's bedroom. BERN notices the photos and begins to gather them up.

Bern? LOUISE

My God, the photos... BERN

What is going on? LOUISE

The photos...! BERN

Bern. Bern. What was that? LOUISE

BERN continues gathering the photos.

My pictures... BERN

Bern. What was that? Bern. Whatever—whatever the hell that was. Just now. What was that? LOUISE

You...? No. BERN

I was there with you. Like our dreams, or a vision, or – I don't know. But I saw it. Whatever that was, it just came over me. LOUISE

My—my memories... BERN

All that really happened. The fire... Buddy... You with the camera... All that actually happened? LOUISE

BERN

How—how could you see my memories?

LOUISE

I don't know.

BERN

My God.

LOUISE

Buddy... Is he still...?

BERN

Yes. When I left New Orleans he was—alive, still—yes. Goddamn it! I didn't want you to know. I didn't want anyone to know. All I wanted was a place where I could forget what I've done.

LOUISE

What do you mean what you've done?

BERN

THE MOTHERFUCKER! He WANTED me take fucking pictures!

LOUISE

Of the fire.

BERN

Of HIM.

LOUISE

Of him?

BERN

That's why he called. As soon as I get there, I see him in the house. It's on fire. And he's trailing the fucking wedding gown again, in one window, out of another. He sees me watching him. He sees me taking pictures. And then, he looks at me. He looks at me, and he – and then he – he jumps.

LOUISE

Into the fire.

BERN

And I – I see him jump in and I – I just keep taking pictures. I keep taking pictures! He knew I would. And I did. While the flames leap from his body. He was literally on fire, and I was taking pictures. I didn't jump in to save him. I didn't run for help. I took

BERN (cont'd)

fucking pictures – of him – like that. He knew I would. That's why he called. Because I'm fucking monster.

LOUISE

When Buddy called, you didn't know what he was going to do.

BERN

No. But Buddy knew what I would do. You still don't know what I am. Do you know how we got this picture? Or this? Every day, Buddy and I would listen to the police scanner, every morning, every rush hour, and wait for a report – an accident, a fire, it always comes – and we'd race down the highway, praying for something, something. Broken glass, blood on the pavement, flames. Praying they're still there. So we can get it. That look in the eye. Just before they go. It's not easy. We can't get too close. Not unless we get there first. It takes a really good lens. To nail it. To get inside it. That look in their terrified eyes. And we're there – Buddy and I – stealing it. Their last fucking seconds. We're there taking pictures. These pictures, right here! Look at these pictures! What kind of person could take pictures like these?

LOUISE

You're not the same person.

BERN

I AM the same.

LOUISE

You left New Orleans. You came out here. You gave up photography. You were trying to change something.

BERN

I haven't changed. Not at all. I've taken pictures of you. Here. Take a look.

BERN pulls out a photo and hands it to LOUISE. She is stunned.

LOUISE

When—when did you...?

BERN

Yesterday. When you were in the living room, just before I walked in, I stood and I watched you.

LOUISE

Watched.

BERN

I stood in the door, and I watched you – cutting yourself. And I enjoyed it. I'm sick, Louise. I'm telling you I'm a fucking monster.

LOUISE looks at the photo for some time.

BERN

It's like—it's like I feed on other people's pain. It nourishes me. I can't help myself from watching.

LOUISE

You didn't watch me.

BERN

My heart was pounding, I was so excited.

LOUISE

You didn't watch me. You photographed me. I'll bet you can't do it without your camera. I'll bet you can't even look while I make a little cut on my arm. Some monster!

BERN

Go get it. Get your box.

LOUISE

It's right here, monster. Let's do it. No film. No camera. You stand right there and watch.

(She takes out her lacquer box. She removes Exacto knife.)

Here's how it goes. All very precise. Very controlled.

(She rolls up her sleeve, ready to inscribe a cut on her arm.)

Kind of fun. Having someone watch me. I didn't realize that you were there before. Here we go.

LOUISE raises the knife to her arm in a challenge. BERN picks up the camera.

LOUISE

No camera!

BERN

Go ahead.

LOUISE

Put it down!

BERN hesitates. LOUISE pauses the knife.

No filter. Put it down.

LOUISE

She glares at BERN, he slowly drops the camera.

Go ahead.

BERN

LOUISE poises the knife just above her arm.

Go on. Do it.

BERN

LOUISE pauses. BERN slowly turns away.

Go ahead.

BERN

LOUISE stares intently at the knife. BERN has now turned completely away. The camera is at his side.

Go ahead. Go ahead!

BERN

She tries to make the cut. Stops herself.

DO IT!

BERN
(Shouts)

I—I—

LOUISE

Louise.

BERN
(Still turned away, quietly)

I can't.

LOUISE
(Quietly, to herself)

Don't.

BERN

I can't. LOUISE

Please. BERN

LOUISE
(Sings)
 I CAN'T... I CAN'T... I CAN'T...
 I CAN'T DO IT.

BERN
(Sings)
 DON'T... DON'T... DON'T...
 DON'T DO IT.

*They are turned away from each other, deep
 in their own thoughts. MUSIC begins.*

Am I?

BERN
(Sings)
 AM I SOME MONSTER
 DELIGHTING IN PAIN?
 SEEING AGONY,
 FEELING ECSTASY?
 THEN WHY, WHY
 WOULD I TURN AWAY?

NO CAMERA'S LENS,
 JUST NOW,
 BUT LIGHT AND AIR
 THAT'S ALL,
 AND FEAR WE SHARED.
 (NO CURTAIN THERE)

HER FEAR, I FELT, AND MINE.
 NO MONSTER'S HEART.
 NO CAMERA'S EYE,
 BUT MY OWN, MY HEART,
 TO FEEL, TO FEAR. MY OWN.

LOUISE
(Sings)
 AM I THAT WOMAN
 IN THE PHOTO?
 WITH SHADOWED FACE
 AND WEEPING ARMS.
 AM I THAT POOR WOMAN
 IN THE PHOTO?

WHO CANNOT WEEP,
 OR RAGE, OR SPEAK,
 BUT ONLY BLEED.

I AM, YES, THAT WOMAN
 IN THE PHOTO.
 I'M THAT POOR WOMAN.
 I COULD NOT BLEED AGAIN,
 AGAIN FOR HER.

*SILENCE. The two are emotionally
 exhausted.*

How did you know? I couldn't watch. BERN

LOUISE

I didn't. I gambled. Like Dave. And I was right. I think you use the camera – as a filter, an abstraction. To protect yourself.

BERN

And you? You couldn't do it.

LOUISE

Your—photo. I kept seeing myself in your picture. That poor woman in the photo.

BERN

So now, what? We're cured?

LOUISE

Cured? We're fucked up!

BERN

Excuse me!

LOUISE

We're fucked, sweetie! Your pyrophilia?

BERN

(Feigns offense)

My what?

LOUISE

Your perverse penchant for death and dying. Your completely disturbed relationship with Buddy Boy? Your infuriating habit of leaving every single cabinet door wide open?

BERN

What about you?

LOUISE

What about me?

BERN

Alphabetizing the spice rack?

LOUISE

Orderly. So?

BERN

Your victim routine with Deadbeat Dave?

LOUISE

Patience. It's a virtue.

BERN

Your inordinate love of cutlery?

LOUISE

All right, all right. Let's face it sweetie. You and me, we're two twisted pretzels.

BERN

We're sick.

LOUISE

We're a mess!

BERN / LOUISE

We're twisted!

BERN

So tell me. What else have you got in that lacquer box of yours?

LOUISE

In here? Oh, every emotion I've never expressed.

BERN

All in that little box? Impressive. *(Beat.)*

Why do you do it?

LOUISE

Why do I cut? As I said, every emotion I've never expressed. Instead of ripping Dave's head off—like I should have—I cut myself. How fucked up is that? But it works. It sounds crazy, but the pain makes me feel focused. In control.

BERN

Control? Give me a break. You haven't been in control of nothing round here lately.

LOUISE

What about you? Why did you take those fucked up pictures?

BERN

Art.

LOUISE

Uh, huh.

BERN

You were the one who said I was trying to say something.

LOUISE

That doesn't explain why you stopped saying things about old houses and mausoleums and started talking about people dying on the side of the road.

BERN

It's twisted, the reason.

LOUISE

No kidding.

BERN

Why deal with metaphors when you can get the real thing? With those boys in Biloxi. That's what I realized. Buddy and I, we'd gone down there to shoot some cemeteries, old mansions, and suddenly here's this terrifying but absolutely electric moment. They're trapped there, these two boys, in the car. It's on fire. And there's nothing we can do. We can't help the guys. We can't get them out. There's no phone. We're miles from anywhere. There's nothing. Except to watch. And Buddy says, get the camera. And I did. It was horrifying. Revolting. But also thrilling. The rush. The sense of control. That I could take it all in – everything we saw, the agony, death and life at odds – and control it. Keep it at bay. Enjoy it even. By taking pictures. I felt so fucking powerful. There's this moment. This incredible, vivid moment, in the horror, and the pain, when everything is ecstatically alive, every molecule ignites, and you're so focused on the beauty and the throbbing life in every tiny thing that nothing else matters. After the accident, we couldn't stop thinking about it. We had to feel it again and again. That power. The most extreme situations. Life and death. I could control it, with the camera.

LOUISE

You couldn't control anything, any more than I could. You could control the image, maybe, but you couldn't control what was happening. You couldn't control the fire. You couldn't stop Buddy.

*She has gone too far. There is a painful
silence.*

LOUISE

Why don't we call him? Why don't we call Buddy?

BERN

Buddy? I'm the last person he wants to hear from.

LOUISE

I doubt that's true.

BERN

I don't know. What if he's—

LOUISE

You need to know. It's killing you. (Beat.)
I could place the call for you.

BERN

Francis Xavier Hospital. New Orleans.

LIGHTS down.

Act II, Scene 7. Dream of Sleep.

SCREENS fill with a wash of hazy blue. LOUISE and BERN are now sleeping peacefully in their beds. On the SCREENS the wash is seen to be water flowing by. A river. River traffic comes into view. Heavy industrial traffic of the lower Mississippi, and the bright water craft of Bangkok. Image dissolves to an enormous enigmatic smile. Long view reveals the great figure of Bangkok's Reclining Buddha. The figure's posture resembles both sleep and death. SCREENS fade.

Epilogue. A Way to Go.

The next day. Lights up on LOUISE in her bedroom. She is packing a suitcase. As she packs she sings. Lights up on BERN in the living room. He is playing the piano, with his luggage beside him. His camera can be seen lying on the piano. After a bit, LOUISE enters with her bag, and joins him at the piano.

“Bright Fire”

LOUISE / BERN

I CAN'T FORGET, I CAN'T GO ON,
I KNOW I MUST, BUT I'M AFRAID
OF WHAT I'VE DONE, OF WHAT I'LL DO.
I'M CAUGHT BETWEEN MY MEMORIES AND TODAY.
I'M NOT THE SAME.
I'VE COME TO SEE ANOTHER WAY.

LOUISE / BERN

THE SMOKE OF MEMORY. THE FLAME
OF NOW, THIS SPARK TRAILS ITS ASHES ON,
COOLING AS EACH DAY BURNS INEVITABLY AWAY,
A SPARK FOR NOW, AND THEN A SHROUD,
A CLOUD THAT HANGS, OR PLAYS, UPON TODAY.

BERN

WHO AM I NOW?

LOUISE

I'M NOT THE SAME.

BERN / LOUISE

I WON'T FORGET, I MUST GO ON.
I KNOW I CAN, BUT I'M AFRAID
OF WHAT I'VE DONE, OF WHAT I'LL DO.
I'M POISED BETWEEN MY MEMORIES AND TODAY.

BERN

THIS SMOKE THAT LINGERS

LIGHTS DOWN.

END OF PLAY