

CANDLES ON THE WATER

By Dennis Bush

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CANDLES ON THE WATER

A Dramatic One Act Play

By Dennis Bush

SYNOPSIS: At a birthday party for a college friend, a group of twenty-somethings are faced with unraveling emotional health, the reality of their life choices, and major changes in their relationships. The compelling, sometimes laugh-out-loud funny, and sometimes heartbreaking stories of the nine characters are woven into a captivating narrative journey for the actors and their audiences.

DURATION: 40 minutes.

TIME: Modern day. Past.

SETTING: A party. Now. And then.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

(3 females, 2 males, 4 either)

(All the characters are in their mid-20s)

- TORI (f) Knows the importance of having a story to tell; in a relationship with Jake. *(37 lines)*
- JAKE (m) Struggles to articulate his feelings; in a relationship with Tori. *(31 lines)*
- SHAWN (m/f) Struggles not to be defined by the version of himself he was in college. *(12 lines)*
- BRIDGET (f) Isn't where she'd like to be in her life, but isn't sure of where she'd like to be; in a relationship with Kolten. *(32 lines)*
- NOREEN (f) Preoccupied with being memorable and, as a result, misses a lot of the most interesting and potentially important moments in her life. *(24 lines)*
- KARA (m/f) Has created ways to give herself some space in social situations; is drawn into interactions that take her out of her comfort zone. *(23 lines)*

- TEZ (m/f).....Doesn't know anyone at the party; gets caught up in an overwhelming situation. (9 lines)
- LANE (m/f).....Has watched all her college and hometown friends move on to what she perceives to be exciting lives while she struggles with depression and anxiety; unravels emotionally at the party. (15 lines)
- KOLTEN (m).....Struggling with possibilities and what those possibilities mean for him and his relationship with Bridget. (35 lines)

SET: *Candles on the Water* can be presented with a very simple set. There are many staging options that would work effectively. The original production was staged with the actors surrounding the audience in a Black Box space. In proscenium or thrust stagings, directors are encouraged to create separate spaces for each actor (which can be done with pools or light or other simple staging techniques), so that the actors can have individual spaces, then move to shared spaces when characters have scenes together. Making the audience feel as if they're at the party enhances the experience for them. Directors are encouraged to be creative with staging.

COSTUMING: Modern day, casual young adult attire

DIRECTOR'S NOTES: The unison lines take on a Greek chorus feel. The unison lines can be spoken to specific audience members (if the actors are close enough to the audience to do that) or as general, audience-address lines. Directors are encouraged to be creative!

PRODUCTION HISTORY

Candles on the Water had a reading in December 2023 in New York City. It had its world premiere in Phoenix, AZ in January 2024.

The world premiere cast and crew included:

TORI.....	Alyvia Kurth
JAKE	Joseph Sandoval
SHAWN	Spencer Wilson
BRIDGET.....	Alexa Peralta
NOREEN.....	Sarah Tankersley
KARA.....	Erika Miller
TEZ.....	Kimberly Quezada
LANE	Amylia McKelvey
KOLTEN.....	Derek Sanchez

The world premiere production was directed by the playwright.

The playwright offers special thanks to Karen Brown, Dylan Suehiro, Kyle Varble, Kenyan Cole-Suggs, Blake Karnes, Marija Petovic, Monica Ramirez, Melissa Teitel, Titus Ritter, Tiffanee Hokenson, Annabella Galvan, and Emily O'Brien for their kind assistance and inspiration, during the creation of *Candles on the Water*.

SETTING: *A party. Now. And then.*

AT START: *Lights up on a playing space with nine actors scattered around with enough distance between each of them to clarify that they are not speaking to each other. After a beat, the following nine lines are spoken simultaneously, directed toward the audience.*

TORI: I was already at the party.

JAKE: I didn't know she was there.

SHAWN: By the time I got to the party...

BRIDGET: Decaf iced coffee. (*A beat.*) Decaf.

NOREEN: She acted like she didn't know me.

KARA: I could see everyone's pores.

TEZ: I don't know anyone at the party.

LANE: I wasn't even gonna come to the party

KOLTEN: I went to college with the host.

A beat.

TORI: (*An announcement, to the audience.*) You have to have a story.

The following eight lines are spoken simultaneously, directed toward the audience.

JAKE: I didn't know she was there.

SHAWN: By the time I got to the party...

BRIDGET: Decaf iced coffee. (*A beat.*) Decaf.

NOREEN: She acted like she didn't know me.

KARA: I could see everyone's pores.

TEZ: I don't know anyone at the party.

LANE: I wasn't even gonna come to the party

KOLTEN: I went to college with the host.

TORI: (*Returning to a single speaker.*) A story to tell.

A beat. Unless otherwise indicated, the dialogue is directed to the audience.

TORI: You have to have a story to tell at a party. Going to a party without having a story to tell is like going on a hike in flip-flops. You can *do* it, but I wouldn't recommend it. Without having a story to tell, you end up talking about *life*—your own or somebody else's. And your story has to be something you can tell over and over—in shorter and longer versions, as you talk to different people—one-on-one or in a group—during the party. And it has to be something that can be stopped and restarted without losing too much of the flow of the story. Because people won't pay attention to whether or not you're in the middle of a story, when they spot you from across the room. They just yell. (*Simultaneously with ALL.*) "Hey! How are you?!"

ALL: (*Simultaneously with TORI.*) Hey! How are you?

A beat, as the other side of the conversation.

TORI: (*Simultaneously with ALL.*) "You look great! How long has it been?"

ALL: (*Simultaneously with TORI.*) You look great! How long has it been?

A beat, as the other side of the conversation.

TORI: (*Simultaneously with ALL.*) "Thank you! So do you!"

ALL: (*Simultaneously with TORI.*) Thank you! So do you!

A beat.

TORI: (*Simultaneously with ALL.*) "Really!"

ALL: (*Simultaneously with TORI.*) Really!

A beat.

TORI: (*Simultaneously with ALL. Insincerely.*) "Really great!"

ALL: (*Simultaneously with TORI. With varying sincerity.*) Really great!

KARA: (*Insistent.*) And I could see everyone's pores.

TORI: You have to be prepared for that.

KARA: (*Clarifying.*) Not everyone was *poor*—everyone's *pores*. (*Clarifying further.*) On their *faces*. On the *skin* on their *faces*. And they were huge. So big that I could've fallen into the oily abyss of their pores.

TORI: You have to be prepared for *all* of that.

KARA: I wasn't hallucinating. At least, I don't think I was hallucinating. But if a person is hallucinating, are they aware that they're hallucinating?

TORI: I was already at the party. I'd been there for an hour.

JAKE: I didn't know she was there.

TORI: *At least* an hour. It was probably closer to an hour and a half. And he acted like he didn't know I was there.

NOREEN: The woman from the nail salon acted like she didn't know me. Like we didn't just have pedicures in massage chairs that were right next to each other a week ago. And she acted like she doesn't know. Like she'd never even seen me before.

JAKE: How was I supposed to know she was there? It was a big party—in like twenty different rooms and out in the backyard, too. I was outside. Apparently, *she* was *inside*. If there's an option to be outside—at a party or whatever—I'm gonna be outside. She knows that. *Everybody* knows that.

SHAWN: By the time I got to the party, it was already pretty lively.

BRIDGET: Decaf iced coffee.

SHAWN: You've heard the expression, "the life of the party," right? (*A beat.*) That's me. *I'm* the life of the party.

BRIDGET: Some people just deserve to be messed with. They walk around like everybody should do everything the way they want it done. Like we're just characters in a story they're the main character of. And they say stuff like, "Could you hurry up? I'm running late, so I'm gonna need you to hurry up." (*A beat.*) Just because you're running late, it's not my job to make up the time you lost because of choices you made. You pushed snooze on your alarm one too many times and, now, I'm supposed to hurry up? I don't think so. And I don't think you're gonna get a regular iced coffee, bruh. I think you're gonna get a *decaf* version.

LANE: I wasn't even gonna come to the party. Three hours ago, I was at home, laying on the couch, watching TV in the sweatpants and T-shirt I'd been wearing for two days. I don't even remember what I was watching. I think half the time people are watching TV, they're not really paying attention to what's on. Maybe even more than half the time. I'm not one of those people who stays in bed for days at a time. I stay on the *couch*. And I don't just eat ice cream. I take better care of myself than that. I eat *frozen yogurt*. And gluten free pretzels. And I drink Vitamin Water. So, don't you worry about me. Not for a minute. Because I'm not at home on the couch, *now*, am I? No. I'm at a party.

KOLTEN: I went to college with the host. The party's at his parents' house, because his apartment complex's community room was booked tonight. He was never good at planning ahead. So, he got his parents to host the party at their house. They went away for the weekend—at least that's what he said. They could be at a hotel in town for all I know. It's a beautiful house—with a game room and a big yard with a pool and a fire pit.

TEZ: I don't know anyone at the party. I mean, I guess I kinda know you, but only because you told me that *you* didn't know anybody at the party. And that doesn't mean we *know* each other, just because you said like two things to me, right? But here we are. (*A beat.*) I heard somebody talking about the party—some woman at the gym. She talks on her phone while she's on the treadmill. I was like halfway across the room from her and I could still hear everything she was saying, as if she was standing right next to me. And she was talking about this big party that she was going to, hosted by some guy she went to college with—and how most of the people there were gonna be people she went to college with, but she didn't know what she'd talk to any of them about because it had been like three years since she'd seen any of them. And I thought, "If you spent less time talking on the phone, while you're on the treadmill, you wouldn't feel like you didn't have anything to say. You've used up all the things to talk about by talking about them to whoever was on the other end of the phone who probably wasn't listening to Ms. Treadmill Talker anyway." (*A beat.*) But the party sounded great. She said the host was bringing in chefs to create a series of appetizers and small entrees that would keep changing through the

course of the evening, and how some of the chefs had Michelin stars or something like that that she seemed really impressed by. So I decided to go.

LANE: And people who go to parties aren't people you have to worry about. (*A beat.*) The carrot soufflé was good. I wasn't expecting it to be good. I've never heard of a soufflé made out of carrots, but it was good. *All* the food is good. Some people say it's not a good party if the food's not good. And when you have famous chefs making the food, you're pretty much guaranteed good food. I'd bet money that the guy who's hosting the party isn't the one who hired the famous chefs. His parents did. I'd bet money on that. This is their house, not his. I know his parents. They went away for the weekend, so people wouldn't think it was their house and not his. But I know.

KOLTEN: It's too cold for swimming—even in a heated pool—so they've got flowers and candles floating in the pool. (*Considering.*) Or is it *on* the pool. Either way, there's a pool with flowers and candles. I think it's his 24th birthday. Maybe 25th. Definitely mid-20s... *Twenty-something*. We're all around the same age, but he could be a little older if he started college later than usual. Not everybody starts college right after high school. I had classes with some people in their 30s and 40s. But he's not that old. (*Clarifying.*) My friend—the guy who's hosting the party, I mean. His birthday's on Tuesday, but he wanted to have the party on a weekend—and who wouldn't? Weekend parties are the way to go. The invitation said, "Your Boy Is Almost Twenty-something." Literally that. It's on the cake, too. The cake is in the game room—which I think is a mistake, but it's not my cake or my game room. (*A beat.*) My girlfriend was talking about the kind of flowers that were floating in the pool. *On* the pool. Whichever. Either way. And she was really excited about the information. So, I was paying attention, because pretending to be interested in what the person you love is telling you is an important part of being in a healthy relationship. (*A beat.*) And I wasn't *uninterested*. If somebody *else* was telling me, I wouldn't have cared or pretended to care. But I was happy to listen to her because she was so excited. And because I love her. So there's that.

TEZ: I've done it before. (*Clarifying.*) Gone to parties that I wasn't invited to. (*Quick beat.*) It's easy if you know where the party is and a little bit about who'll be there. I've met a lot of really nice people that way. You just gotta keep your head down and make non-specific kinda small talk, eat and drink whatever they're serving, and steer clear of the host. I've done it a bunch of times. But tonight—like an hour ago, I went to the bathroom—the one down the long hall near the guest room with the lavender-colored walls. And, as I walked into the bathroom, I stepped on the rug and it kind of squished. And then, it slid a little under my foot. A squishy, slippery rug is a dangerous thing to have in a bathroom. (*A beat.*) I lifted up the rug, and... (*Simply, clearly.*) Somebody had thrown up... and covered it with the rug.

BRIDGET: Some people just deserve to be messed with.

NOREEN: We were sitting next to each other. I commented on how much I admired her ability to not look odd in the massage chair. I always feel like I'm on a boat. (*Imitating the massage-chair experience.*) Rocking left and right as the nubby massage things move around on my back, and I try not to look grotesque as it undulates. As I was telling her how much I admired her massage-chair poise, the percussive, karate-chopping massage kicked in on my chair and it made me sound like a lunatic. So, I laughed. She laughed. I was amusing. I was memorable. I make a point of being memorable and, still, she had the audacity to hand me a plate of smoked trout and pickled quail eggs, and act like she didn't know me.

SHAWN: It's not easy being the life of the party. It's a lot of pressure. There are expectations.

LANE: While pretty much everybody else moved away after high school and college, I stayed here. Not in *this* house. In the town. I live in the house that I grew up in. My parents moved to Key West and gave me the house. Key West is the southernmost point in the United States. Nothing is farther south. So, why didn't they call it Key South, instead of Key West? Anyway, that's where they are. They're in Key West and I'm living in the same house I grew up in, and I'm watching all my friends live exciting lives.

TEZ: As I was trying not to throw up *on* the throw up, all I could think was, "Who does that? Who does the vomit equivalent of a hit-and-run?" And, then, because my mind obsesses about useless things, I started trying to figure out what such an action would be called, since hit-and-run is pretty car-accident specific. It couldn't be a puke-and-dip, because not everybody would know that "dip" can mean "leave" and nobody wants to do something that involves dipping stuff into puke like it was hummus or salsa. Just thinking about that made me almost puke.

JAKE: I was *outside*. If there's an option to be outside—at a party or whatever—I'm gonna be outside. She knows that. Everybody knows that.

TEZ: And, as I was, literally, on my hands and knees pondering what my next move should be, somebody knocked on the bathroom door. There are like eight bathrooms in the house and two portable ones out in the yard, but whoever was knocking had to pick the bathroom I was in? I almost yelled that, but, instead—in some kind of indistinguishable European accent, I yelled... (*In the accent.*) "I'm going to be a while. A long while." I heard footsteps walking away, so I figured I was in the clear, and, then, it occurred to me that somebody would think I was the one who puked and dipped. (*Quick beat.*) Sorry, I still haven't come up with a better alternative. (*A beat.*) So, I cleaned up the mess—like a good-vomit-Samaritan, which may be the most heroic, altruistic thing I've ever done or will do in my entire life.

KARA: I didn't tell anyone in particular that I could see their pores. Nobody wants to hear that. And I'm a good person. Good people don't tell other people things they don't wanna hear. But, if you say something in a general way—like a breeze wafting through a room, it can have a very positive effect.

LANE: I'm not watching them like I'm following them around and watching, like some kind of stalker. I follow them on social media. I see all the things they post, and, if *they* follow *me*, you know what they see? Nothing. Maybe a picture of a nice sunset or something, but I'm not posting pictures of me laying on the couch, if that's what you were thinking. (*A beat.*) If that's what you were thinking, you can stop thinking that, right now. (*A beat.*) Not enough people have original thoughts. They rely on somebody else to tell them what to

think. Like when people say... (*Simultaneously with ALL. Enthusiastically.*) "Stay in touch!"

ALL: (*Simultaneously with LANE. Enthusiastically.*) Stay in touch!

LANE: At the end of high school. Like, literally, at graduation. And after college, too. (*Simultaneously with ALL. With desperation.*) "Stay in touch!"

ALL: (*Simultaneously with LANE. With a variety of meanings.*) Stay in touch!

LANE: But they don't mean it. A year or two later, they act like they don't know you—like they *never* knew you. Like you were never friends. It'd be fine if I stopped talking to *them*. But *they* moved on... and *I* got left behind. You only stay in touch with people you still have things in common with. It's not about whether or not you still like them or care about them. It's whether you have anything to say to them—if you can connect with anything in their life—except some increasingly distant memories.

Transition to NOREEN and KARA, speaking to each other.

NOREEN: (*Indignant.*) It was a week ago. Seven days!

KARA: (*Interjecting, more than a little flippant.*) That's a week. Seven days is a week.

NOREEN: And a person shouldn't act like they don't know another person that they sat next to a week ago.

KARA: Maybe you're not as memorable as you think.

NOREEN: I'm memorable. I make a point of being memorable.

KARA: Except when you don't, and you're not.

NOREEN: (*After a beat.*) Do I know you?

KARA: Enough to remember you a week from now.

NOREEN: Thank you!

KARA: Being memorable isn't always a good thing.

NOREEN: If you're not memorable, you might as well not exist.

KARA: I'd rather be ignored, so I can watch everybody else. If you're trying so hard to be memorable, you miss all the little things that people do and say when they're having a real, unguarded moment. Those are the best moments.

NOREEN: Some people are the *show* and some people are the *audience*.

KARA: I'm fine with that. But I don't want to see the show. I want to see how people behave when they think no one's watching them—when they think the show is over.

NOREEN looks at KARA suspiciously.

KARA: So I say things to make people back away. To back off.

NOREEN: Like what?

KARA: (*Quoting herself.*) "I can see your pores."

NOREEN: (*Drawing back.*) That's disgusting.

KARA: But it works. And it gives me space to breathe. Everybody needs that—every now and then.

NOREEN: I can't argue with that.

KARA: You should try it.

NOREEN: I wouldn't know what to say.

KARA: (*After a beat.*) I can smell your desperation.

A beat, as NOREEN looks at KARA.

KARA: (*Explaining.*) It's one of the things I say.

A beat.

KARA: But, if we're being honest, I can. (*Clarifying.*) Smell your desperation. And I don't think I'm the only one who can.

The focus shifts to JAKE and KOLTEN.

JAKE: (*To KOLTEN.*) Do you smell that? Whatever they just sprinkled on the fire pit smells like... (*Assessing the smell.*) flowers... or candy. Fire pits should smell like fire, not like—

KOLTEN: (*Interjecting.*) Flowers. Or candy.

JAKE: Right. Why can't people be satisfied with the way smells smell? Why do we have to have "scent beads" for laundry, and air fresheners that plug into electrical outlets in the living room and squirt out some kinda mist that smells like cinnamon buns every fifteen minutes?

KOLTEN: I think they're going for an elevated level of ambience.

JAKE: Save it for the bathroom. Or some old lady's bedroom. (*Clarifying.*) The flowers and candy smell. Save *that* for some old lady's bedroom. Nobody wants their bedroom smelling like cinnamon buns.

KOLTEN: Donuts, yeah, but not cinnamon buns.

JAKE: And only glazed and jelly-filled donuts. No crazy flavors. Nothing "artisanal."

KOLTEN: Never. And no eclairs. Maybe a bear claw. The donut kind, not the claw of an actual bear.

JAKE: That goes without saying. A guy could get his day off to a good start in a room that smelled like coffee and a freshly baked bear claw.

KOLTEN bursts out laughing.

JAKE: What?

KOLTEN: (*Pulling himself together.*) I thought you were joking. I thought the whole coffee-and-donut-scented bedroom thing was just you being funny. But you were serious.

JAKE: (*Trying to regain his dignity.*) Only because I got thrown off by the stuff they sprinkled on the fire pit. I like to be outside at parties, because it smells like... outside. You know, fire pits and stuff on the grill.

The focus shifts to BRIDGET and TORI.

BRIDGET: (*To TORI.*) And a very nice server offered me a plate of grilled scallops with honeydew-avocado salsa, and I didn't have the heart to tell her that I'm allergic to scallops. So, I just stood there holding the plate and, I guess, staring at her in a kind of desperate way. She smiled in that "I see you're having a hard time" kind of way, and she took the plate of scallops back and asked if I wanted smoked trout with pickled quail eggs instead.

TORI: The food is really elegant. But I'd be happy with a burger and fries.

BRIDGET: Me, too. But it's definitely not a burger-and-fries kind of party. (*A beat.*) The flowers they have floating on the pool are so beautiful. I did a semester abroad at the Royal Botanic Gardens, just outside London—or *in* London, but like suburban London—so I geek out pretty intensely about flowers and plants. I was out by the pool with my boyfriend, earlier, but he was acting a little weird. He had that look in his eyes that usually means he's pretending to pay attention but isn't, or that he's plotting something—like, "Hey, we should join a dart league."

TORI: Somebody said my boyfriend was outside, but I haven't been out there. And I don't act on rumors. I'm not gonna go hunt him down just because somebody said they thought he was out there.

BRIDGET: There were a lot of guys out there. Standing around the fire pit with their hands in their pockets not talking to each other.

TORI: My boyfriend is a talker.

BRIDGET: Mine, too, when he's with people he knows. And he knows a bunch of the people here. They went to college together. So, there've been lots of, "Hey, I want you to meet my girlfriend" introductions, followed by the awkward questions about why I have a degree in horticulture but I'm working as a barista. I don't tell 'em about the degree in horticulture. I just say, "I'm a barista," when people ask what I do—and they *always* ask what I do. Kolten is the one who says, "Yeah, but she's got a degree in horticulture." And he says "horticulture" like it's something that can change the world. I know he means well. But people don't care who you are or what your life has been like. They just want their coffee and they wanna feel superior to you in the process.

The focus shifts to SHAWN, speaking directly to the audience.

SHAWN: When you're the life of the party, the party is your life. That's not some kind of mantra. It's the truth, and it's all anybody wants you to be. The guy who does the stupid things, tells the jokes that he should've kept to himself. They want you to be *that* guy. And it's not their fault—at least, not at first. I *was* that guy. I did all that stuff and way more stupid things that I wish I hadn't done. I wish that now, but part of me wished it at the time I was doing all the stuff. It was like, "Why are you doing that? Just for a laugh? Just to get

attention?" Yes and yes. I figured that people would want me around if I made 'em laugh or took their mind off of whatever they were worried about. But that gets old. It gets real old. (*A beat.*) I've been working at a pretty prestigious lab for a few years. I'm part of a team that's made some important medical discoveries, but none of my friends—none of the people I went to college with—care about any of that. They talk about all the stuff I did back in college and how funny I was four years ago. They only wanna know that version of me. So that's who I am around them. *For* them. And how crazy is that? It's like when I slip into being the seventeen-year-old version of myself when I visit my parents. I'm a guy with a job and an apartment, but for a weekend, I'm crashing in my old room, sleeping in my old bed, and letting my parents treat me like a kid. Because they *like* to. Because it seems like they kinda *need* to. I guess the same is true for my friends.

NOREEN: (*To SHAWN.*) You look familiar.

SHAWN: (*To NOREEN.*) I'm not.

NOREEN: Not what?

SHAWN: Not familiar.

NOREEN: I said you *look* familiar, not that you *are* familiar.

SHAWN: Nobody approaches another person with, "You look familiar" unless they think they know the person or, at least, recognize them from somewhere, or it's some kinda pick-up line, like, "Don't I know you from somewhere?"

NOREEN: *Do* I know you from somewhere?

SHAWN: Are you trying to pick me up?

NOREEN: No. (*A quick beat.*) I don't think so.

SHAWN: Wouldn't you know if you were trying to flirt with me?

NOREEN: I don't flirt. I get flirted *with*. I heard somebody say that once at a party. (*Clarifying.*) Not *this* party. But I heard it and I liked it. I've just never had an occasion to use it before.

The focus shifts to LANE.

LANE: Before I came to the party, I thought about never leaving my house again. Or calling my parents in Key West and telling them I wanted to live in their house down there and they could move back to the house here. Because I don't know anybody there. I know my parents, but if they're here and I'm there, I wouldn't know anyone. There's something incredibly freeing not to know anybody—not to have anybody know you. To be able to go to the store in polar bear pajamas and kangaroo slippers, without somebody commenting that kangaroos and polar bears don't go together and that I should reflect on the statement I'm making about my life by wearing mismatched loungewear. To be able to walk out to my mailbox without washing or even brushing my hair only to have one of the neighbors point at me and ask... (*Simultaneously with ALL.*) "Is everything okay?"

ALL: (*Simultaneously with LANE.*) Is everything okay?

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