

LIKE A BOLT OF LIGHTNING

by Dennis Bush

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LIKE A BOLT OF LIGHTNING

A Dramatic One Act

by Dennis Bush

SYNOPSIS: A compelling story of survival and true resilience, as Kai, now in her mid-20s, confronts the memories of abusive childhood and teen years, a traumatic brain injury from a car accident, and a seemingly insurmountable new hurdle. Two younger versions of Kai (Kat, 19, and Katrina, 14) help tell the story, along with her brother, boyfriend, and others. With brutal honesty, Kai moves through the moments of her past and present to find the possibility of a happy ending.

DURATION: 35 minutes.

TIME: Kai in present day, in her 20's/ Kat at 19/ Katrina at 14.

SETTING: Now. And then.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

(3 females, 3 males, 2 either)

KAI (f)(rhymes with "bye") 24, suffering the effects of a traumatic brain injury and the impact of a childhood filled with abuse. *(34 lines)*

KAT (f)Kai at 19. *(18 lines)*

KATRINA (f).....Kai at 14. *(18 lines)*

GABE (m).....26, Kai's brother. *(5 lines)*

NILE (m/f).....25, a friend from Kai's childhood and teen years. *(13 lines)*

DOCTOR LUCA (m).....Late 20s, neuro-oncologist, struggles with personal issues. *(13 lines)*

TATE (m).....24, Kai's boyfriend. *(14 lines)*

LOTUS (m/f)Mid- to late 20s, a therapist. *(8 lines)*

NOTE: Directors are encouraged to be creative with casting.

SET: *Like a Bolt of Lightning* can be presented with a very simple set.

COSTUMING: Modern Attire.

DIRECTOR'S NOTES: *Like a Bolt of Lightning* can be performed by physically distanced actors or virtually, if need be. The original production used an ensemble approach with all actors visible, with movement/focus shifts. Kai, Kat, and Katrina were in the primary light for most of the play with other characters moving in and out of that light, as indicated in the stage directions.

PREMIERE PRODUCTION

Like a Bolt of Lightning premiered January 2025 in Phoenix, AZ. The world premiere cast and crew included:

KAI.....	Kimberly Quezada
KAT.....	Roxana Salgueiro
KATRINA.....	Amylia McKelvey
GABE.....	Ethan Hinton
NILE.....	Kiko Ruggiero
DR. LUCA.....	Spencer Wilson
TATE.....	Tommy Allen
LOTOS.....	Yesenia Salazar

The world premiere production was directed by the playwright.

DEDICATION

The playwright offers special thanks to Karen Brown, Dylan Suehiro, Kyle Varble, and Blake Karnes for their kind assistance and inspiration, during the creation of *Like a Bolt of Lightning*.

AT START: *Eight actors are scattered around on either side of a nearly dark playing area. A single spotlight cuts through the center of the space.*

KAI, KAT, and KATRINA step into the light, at the same time, with KAI downstage, KAT behind her, and KATRINA behind KAT.

KAI: There's something wrong with my brain. (*A beat.*) It doesn't work right anymore. (*A beat.*) Something happened. About seven years ago. I was in a car accident and had a TBI. (*Explaining.*) A traumatic brain injury. Doctors call it a TBI because it sounds less traumatic, I guess. I didn't think it was very traumatic at the time. But I was unconscious, so that might have something to do with my perception of the level of T with my B-I. (*A beat.*) About two years after the accident, I started getting incredibly sharp pain in my head—without any warning or build up. Just like a bolt of lightning that was slicing my brain in half—or, at least, how I imagine that would feel. (*A beat.*) And it's still happening. (*Clarifying.*) Not right now. Obviously. But as recently as this morning.

GABE: (*Stepping into the light.*) I bought a shirt in London. I've done it before. I've bought lots of shirts in lots of places. I buy them, pack them, and take them home like souvenirs. They *are* souvenirs, and they're better than postcards or a refrigerator magnet. It wasn't till I put the shirt on to go to a party—an *event*—that I noticed what was embroidered on the inside of the cuffs. (*Clarifying.*) The cuffs on both sleeves. "They shall remember us as bolts of lightning." And I thought, "Okay. Sounds like a plan." But why would anybody remember me? And why would it be as a bolt of lightning. Lightning doesn't last long. It's a quick flash. So, are people going to remember me only briefly—only as long as it takes for lightning to flash?

GABE moves out of the light.

NILE: (*Stepping into the light.*) You know when you run into somebody you haven't seen in a while—like somebody you went to elementary school with... and summer camp... and high school? But it's been a while. Like five or six years since you've seen each other. You don't

know what to say. You know them—you know a *version* of them—but you don't have a... current connection, so you can only talk about stuff in the past. It's a little awkward at first, but then, it's, you know, whatever. Whatever... When I ran into Kat—at a coffee place, not like we literally ran into each other—I definitely recognized her. I was, like, "Kat, hey!" But she just looked at me—like I was a complete stranger. But, like, whatever, right? So I reminded her that we've known each other since, like, second grade, but she still had no idea who I was. Not a clue. So, I tried to remind her of specific things that had happened, and she said...

KAI, KAT, and KATRINA: I have holes in my memory.

NILE: And I was, like, you have what?

KAI, KAT, and KATRINA: Holes in my memory.

NILE: I've heard of people having holes in socks and, you know, like potholes in the road, but not holes in your memory. So, I joked about the time we were on the merry-go-round on the playground and we were spinning it around so fast and she got thrown off and landed pretty hard, and I was like, "Maybe that's when you got the holes." And I kinda laughed, but she didn't. And then, I was, like, backpedaling out of the awkwardness, like, "No, I guess not, because then a whole bunch of people would have holes in their memory, too. And maybe they do. Maybe *most* people have holes in their memory." (A beat.) That seemed to make it more awkward. She said her name was Kai and I wasn't sure if she had changed her name at some point in the past five or six years or, if she didn't know who she was—like from amnesia or something. So I said her name, but like it was a question. "Kai?" And she said, "I changed it." Which seemed like a much better option than having amnesia. The name she was born with—like on her birth certificate—was Katrina, but, by the time we got to high school, everybody called her Kat. But, whatever. I can call her Kai. I'd call her whatever she wants to be called. But what if the Kai name falls into one of the memory holes and, the next time I run into her, she's somebody else. Would she be somebody who remembers getting thrown off the merry-go-round, or when we shook up jars of cream till it turned into butter?

NILE moves out of the light.

KAI: I keep it on the shelf. (*Explaining.*) The picture. I keep it on the shelf of my bookcase. It's a family photo. Framed. My parents, my brother and me. My mother framed it—not me.

KAI, KAT, and KATRINA: It was taken when I was almost four. In the picture, I'm wearing a paisley print blouse and a red sweater vest. More like burgundy—but burgundy *is* a shade of red. My brother is wearing a matching outfit—in the picture—but it's a different color. His was brown. I always got the brighter colors. Do the colors that our parents pick for us become *our* colors?

KAI: (*Cont.*) I look at the picture almost every day. I make a point of looking at it. It reminds me how far I've come, and how different my life is now. (*A beat.*) The day that picture was taken was the last time I felt happy—or safe—in my parents' house.

KATRINA: The first time somebody hits you, it's almost like it's not happening. Your brain tells you that it must be a mistake. That you must be imagining it—*dreaming* it. But nobody dreams about getting hit by somebody who's supposed to love you and take care of you. (*A beat.*) People think those kinds of... experiences get burned into our memory. If it hadn't happened to me, I'd have thought that, too. Getting hit over and over isn't a special event. It's not the Super Bowl or Christmas day. It's a Thursday. And a Monday. And a weekend afternoon when he started drinking earlier than usual. It's almost every day. It's as regular—and as ordinary—as mashed potatoes or meat loaf.

KAI: How young is too young to start forgetting things?

A silent beat.

KAI: To already be forgetting things?

A silent beat.

KAI: It wasn't a rhetorical question.

NILE: (*Moving into the light.*) It went around and around. The merry-go-round at the playground. That's what they're called. Merry-go-rounds are different than carousels, but it's easy to get them confused. A carousel has horses that go up and down, as the carousel goes around and around. A merry-go-round—the ones

they used to have on playgrounds—had things you could hold onto, once the merry-go-round was going around and around. You could make it spin really fast, too, if you had a few people who knew how to get it going. If you weren't holding on really tightly, you'd fly off. And that was dangerous. Which is why a lot of people purposely didn't hold on, so they'd get hurled off by the force of the spinning. I was not one of those people. I was a tight-grip hanger-on-er kind of kid. Always. I watched the other kids go flying off and land with a thud on the ground or, a few times, slam into the bottom of the sliding board and get a gash in their head or on their face. They stopped laughing then. A lot of them cried. But nine out of ten times, they got back on the merry-go-round and let themselves get flung off again. The flying only lasted for a couple seconds. The amount of time it took to get the merry-go-round up to flying-off speed was a lot longer. But that's no different than the ratio of time on an amusement park ride compared to the amount of time you wait in line to go on the ride. (*A beat.*) I'd watch the other kids fly off and different kids jump on and keep the merry-go-round spinning 'till they got flung off. Some days, I spent the whole recess on the merry-go-round, waving hello to the kids jumping on and waving goodbye to the kids as they went flying off. (*A beat.*) The merry-go-round is a lot like life. People come and go—sometimes really quickly and, sometimes, with tears. But the world—just like a merry-go-round full of kids—keeps spinning. A lot of playgrounds got rid of their merry-go-rounds. Too dangerous, people said. Same thing for a lot of sliding boards. A couple of bloody kids with really protective parents can turn a playground into a lot less playful place.

NILE moves out of the light.

KAT and KATRINA: When you live in a house where the grown-ups are either doing bad things or pretending that nothing bad is happening, it makes you think that grown-ups don't care what happens to you. So, when you're at school and an adult asks if everything's okay, you say, "Yes." Because you've learned not to trust adults. And one or two friendly teachers aren't gonna change that. And when the kids you sit with in the cafeteria tell you you're

acting all quiet and weird because you want attention, you don't tell them what's going on at your house.

KAT: (*Cont.*) You don't tell them that your dad pushed you down the stairs the night before and said, "Kitty Kat fell down," as he pushed you.

KAT, KATRINA, and KAI: Does that shock you? That's only because it wasn't happening to you. People only care about what happens to *them*.

DOCTOR LUCA: (*Moving into the light.*) I decided to go to med school after my dad got sick. I wanted to help people going through what my family was going through. And my dad—what he was going through, obviously. Helping him. I wanted to help him. (*A beat.*) But he died—the week before I started my residency. (*A beat.*) I'm a neuro-oncologist whose father died from a brain tumor. (*A beat.*) And I couldn't do anything to help him. Nothing. Too little, too late. (*A beat.*) And now, every day, I see patients, and they all make me think of my dad. And it makes me sad. (*Quick beat.*) Yeah, yeah. I know what you're thinking. "Get over it. Get over *yourself*. Be a different kind of doctor. Be something else." But that's not as easy as people think it is. It's not. So, I think about other things. I *obsess* about other things. Fascinating thing, like TLEs. (*Explaining.*) Transient Luminous Events. They're upper-atmosphere phenomena that can be triggered by thunderstorms. Like blue jets and sprites. (*Quick pause, enthusiastically.*) See, you're fascinated, too. Blue jets zoom out from the core of a thunderstorm. Sprites are what red lightning is called. *Regular* lightning—the kind we're used to seeing—extends from up in the clouds down to the ground. *Red* lightning—which lasts only for about a millisecond shoots *upward*, from the clouds up—*way* up—into the atmosphere. That's just cool. And rare—for people to see—because red lightning happens so far above the cloud layer.

DOCTOR LUCA moves out of the light.

NILE: (*Moving into the light; to KAI.*) Remember that time we went camping, and we decided to sleep outside the tent so we could look up at the sky—and the stars? We put up the tent, but we didn't sleep in it. (*The memory washes over NILE.*) It was magical. Talking about

life and stuff and looking at the stars. With the campfire crackling a few feet away. And we fell asleep, and it was perfect. (*A beat.*) And then, it rained in the middle of the night. No thunder or lightning, so we didn't wake up right away. Not 'till we were soaking wet. And we tried to run into the tent, but the ground was muddy from the rain, and we slipped and fell, and every time we tried to get back up, we'd slip and fall and get muddier. We were *covered* with mud. And we couldn't stop laughing. (*A beat.*) It doesn't seem funny now, but, at the time—when it happened—it was very funny. It was.

KAI: I don't remember.

NILE: Sure you do.

KAI: No. I don't. (*A beat.*) I have holes in my memory, remember?

NILE laughs.

KAI: You think that's funny?

NILE: No. Of course not. It's just how you said it. "I have holes in my memory. Remember?"

KAI: I do.

NILE: You remember that you have holes in your memory, but you don't remember what you don't remember. That's kind of ironic. Or maybe just unfortunate.

KAI: Nobody remembers what they don't remember.

NILE moves out of the light.

KAT: When somebody pushes you down the stairs, you can't help but fall, and roll, and kinda bounce, and land in a really awkward position.

GABE: (*Moving into the light.*) I wasn't around a lot. Even when I lived there—in my parents' house—I wasn't around a lot. I stayed in my room. Or I'd go to a friend's house. Some people's parents will kind of adopt you if you're around enough. They'll feed you, let you sleep over as often as you want or need to—even take you on vacation with their family. Like weekend trips and big vacations. When I was twelve, my friend Brandon's parents took me to Disneyworld with them just so Brandon would have somebody to go on the rides with. They took me to Vegas like a dozen times. They liked to gamble—

slot machines and stuff—so Brandon and I just hung out in the hotel room and played video games and ordered room service. We went swimming, too, and walked around. The year after they took me to Disneyworld, they took me to Europe. *Five places* in Europe. London, Paris, Rome, Vienna, and Prague. We were gone a whole month. They paid for everything. Brandon's dad bought me a tie in Paris. He told me it was better than a postcard or a refrigerator magnet, because whenever I wore the tie, I'd think of Paris. That trip and the way Brandon's parents treated me—like I was their son, too—not just a friend of their son—showed me a different way to live. Every time I buy a shirt or tie or whatever on a business trip or vacation, I think of them. One time, when I was about fourteen, I told my dad he should be like Brandon's dad. He slapped me with the back of his hand. So hard it knocked me down. (*A beat.*) Weak, pathetic people hit their kids. (*A beat.*) I said what I said. (*A beat.*) And I know Kat—I mean Kai—I forget about the name change sometimes—I know she had it way worse than I did. Way worse. I know that. And I know that, if I was around, I could've done something to help. (*His eyes well up with tears.*) I could've done something. (*Wiping away tears.*) But I was afraid. (*A beat.*) So, I wasn't around. And I hate myself for doing that. (*A beat.*) I hate myself... and I saved myself. (*A beat.*) Both things can be true. Both things are true.

GABE moves out of the light.

TATE: (*Moving into the light.*) It's hard to watch somebody you love fade away. (*A beat.*) It's brutal. And knowing what she went through when she was younger, it might be good to forget those things. Because I can't fix those things. I can't make it better. I don't think she's even told me the worst of it. Sometimes, when she's telling me about her childhood, she gets a faraway look in her eyes, and it's like she's back there. I try to change the subject or make a joke, so she'll laugh or just stop thinking about it. I wish I could do more, but... I can't. Nobody can. When bad things happen to somebody—*anybody* you love—when they're young, you can't change those things. A lot of times, you can't even understand those things. Wondering how somebody could do whatever unfathomable things

they did to the person you love won't help you understand it, and it won't change what they went through. Everybody's got some kind of baggage, and you've just gotta deal with the baggage the best way you can.

TATE moves out of the light.

LOTUS: (*Moving into the light.*) I met Kai when she was in college.

When she was still going by Kat and sometimes Katrina, depending on the situation. I was working as a therapist and crisis counselor in the university health center, and she came in. Food poisoning, I think. Some kind of gastroenteritis. There was only one waiting area. It didn't matter what you were there for—everybody used the same waiting area. I was finishing up with a client—a student dealing with an eating disorder—and I was walking him back to the waiting area, when a girl came in crying. She had blood on her arms and legs. The girl wasn't Kai. Kai was already in the waiting area. Everybody was looking at the girl who was all bloody and crying, and she kept saying, "I didn't fall down the stairs. Somebody pushed me." (*A beat.*) As the nurse took that girl into an exam room, I saw Kai start to cry. Softly at first, but then the tears turned into sobs—like, full-body sobs. She was shaking. Visibly shaking. I asked her if she was okay. She was obviously *not* okay, but that's what I asked her. And she said...

KAI, KAT, KATRINA: It's in the past.

LOTUS: The past has a way of sneaking up on us. Usually, when we least expect it.

KATRINA: We were doing a lesson on responsibility. Being responsible. Doing what we're supposed to do. My sixth grade teacher, Mr. Huth, was big on responsibility. We had a chart with jobs on it—like cleaning the white board, or putting the trash can outside the classroom door at the end of the day. Or picking up trash on the playground—stuff like that. But for the lesson, we had to fill out a worksheet about things we were supposed to do at home. And we had to write down the things we were *supposed to do* but *didn't do*, and explain why we didn't do those things. Everybody else wrote down stuff like, "I was supposed to clean my room, but I didn't, because I was doing my homework." Or, "I was supposed to unload

the dishwasher, but I didn't, because I had a stomach ache." (A *beat*.) I couldn't think of anything that I was supposed to do that I didn't do. Because I always did what I was supposed to. Because not doing what I was supposed to do would be... bad. Other kids would say, "If I don't get good grades, my dad will kill me!" Nobody thought that would really happen. But, with *my* dad, having him kill me felt like a definite possibility. There were times when he was hitting me, and he had this look in his eyes that was so scary that I thought, "This is when he kills me." (A *beat*.) Do you have trouble understanding that? Just because you can't understand something doesn't make it any less real. Just because you can't imagine how somebody could do that to his own kid doesn't make it any less true. (A *beat*, back to her story.) So I didn't write anything on the worksheet. I figured that Mr. Huth would do what he always did with worksheets—put 'em in a folder on his desk and never look at 'em. (A *beat*.) But not that day. After he collected the worksheets, he flipped through them with an occasional, "Hmmm," or a nod. And then he got to mine. He inhaled through his nose, like a big sniff. And he walked over to my desk and stood there looking down at me. "This is an interesting choice, Katrina. Making the choice not to do the assignment isn't like you... Not at all... Feeling lazy today? Feeling recalcitrant?" (A *beat*.) Most of the other kids didn't know what that meant, but I did. Without looking up at him, I whispered, "No. I just couldn't do it." With another big sniff, he said, "You have a hand that can write, and a pencil, and you had the worksheet, so I don't see how you *couldn't* do it. You just *didn't* do it." And he turned to the whole class and laughed. An actual laugh. And he said, "It's almost funny that she didn't do the assignment about something she was supposed to do but didn't." Everybody looked away—like they didn't wanna see what was gonna happen. "So, what were you supposed to do... but didn't?" he asked.

KAI: It wasn't a rhetorical question.

KATRINA: "Let's do the worksheet together," he said, like he was starting a game on the playground. And he moved his chair right next to mine. "What were you supposed to do but didn't?" he asked again. (A *beat*.) "Practice for my piano lesson." I said it so quietly that I wasn't sure if he heard me. But he slapped his hand onto my desk and yelled, "Why? Why didn't do you it?" (A *beat*.) I couldn't

breathe. I thought I was going to pass out. And I started to cry. (*A beat.*) I held up my hands, so he could see the cuts on my finger tips. My father took a pairing knife from the drawer in the kitchen, and he cut every one of my finger tips, because I was playing the piano when he came home from work. And, as he was doing it, I thought, "This is better than getting my fingers *broken*." (*A beat.*) I always try to look on the bright side. (*A beat.*) But Mr. Huth didn't see the cuts. 'He didn't even look at my hands. He just shook his head and said, "Detention. After school. Today." (*A beat.*) I threw up twice before the end of school that day. (*A quick beat.*) In the *bathroom*. Not anywhere else. (*Confirming.*) I didn't make a mess. I *never* made a mess. (*A beat.*) After school, it was just Mr. Huth and me. "I don't know what's gotten into you today," he said, shaking his head. "Maybe I should give your dad a call and see if he knows what's going on with you." (*A beat.*) I said, "Not my dad. Please. Not my dad." I started to cry. I was crying and hyperventilating at the same time. I showed him my fingers, again. He didn't look at them. He just stuffed a granola bar into his mouth and mumbled, "I'm having a bad day, too." (*A beat, as her eyes well up with tears.*) A bad day... Good to know.

A beat.

KATRINA: If you know why somebody did a horrible thing, does it make what they did any less horrible?

A beat.

KATRINA, KAT, and KAI: No. No, it doesn't.

KATRINA: (*Cont.*) He never called my dad. He never asked about the cuts on my fingers. Or the bruises. Or *anything*. He must've had lot of bad days. But I never cried in his class again. And I finished every worksheet. I said what he wanted to hear—what *everybody* wanted to hear. (*A beat.*) I did what I was supposed to do.

KAT: Nobody plans to have a car accident. Nobody gets up in the morning and says, "I think I'll have an accident today." They just happen. Accidentally. Some of my friends and I were on our way home from a picnic in a big park on a Sunday afternoon in April of

my junior year of high school. The picnic was in a big park, like I said. I know that sounds like the start of something that isn't true, but it is. It's true. It's what happened. We were driving in, like, a caravan. We were the first car, and our friends were in four or five cars behind us in the caravan. It was raining—and there was thunder and lightning—which is why we ended our picnic sooner than we'd planned. The roads were slippery. I wasn't driving, but you don't have to be driving to know that the roads are slippery. And we hit a big telephone pole. And our friends in the cars behind us watched it happen. I got knocked unconscious. Everybody in the car did. The person driving got two broken arms and a broken leg. The girl in the back seat broke a couple ribs. Both had cuts and there was a lot of blood on them. Not me, though. I just got hit in the head. By the time I was in the ambulance, there was a pretty big bump. (*Shows the spot.*) Right here. The guy in the ambulance said I was lucky. He told me that after I woke up. (*Clarifying.*) After I regained consciousness. I didn't have to stay overnight in the hospital. Some traumatic brain injuries don't look as bad as they are. Some TBIs don't look traumatic on the outside. The trauma is hidden. At least for awhile. I went back to school the next day. I had to be at school. I had things to do. Things that I was supposed to be doing, and I didn't want to *not* be doing them. And I didn't want to be at home where my dad could make more bruises than the car accident did. I didn't want to be there. Nobody wants to be where they're not safe. Happy you can fake. Sometimes, happy looks like pretend even when it's real. But when you're not safe, you can't pretend you are. To somebody who doesn't live in your house—somebody who doesn't pay attention to the things we should all be paying attention to—to those people, it can seem like you're safe. To those people, it's easier to pretend. It's easier not to notice, because then they can go on like everything's fine. They can live next door and say they had no idea that anything so horrible was going on.

A beat.

KAT, KATRINA, and KAI: Everyone's pretending something.

TATE: (*Moving into the light.*) Bad stuff leaves scars—sometimes literally—and you can't pick at the scabs just because you wanna know more or it makes you feel better. Sometimes, even when you think something's in the past and not a problem anymore, you get a reminder that it's still a problem and might always be. (*A beat.*) A while back—like a year or two ago—I was watching a tennis match on TV. I *play* tennis, too. I don't just watch it. I'm not one of those guys. I get pretty involved—pretty intense—when I'm watching a match. And I moved my right arm really fast, like I was using my backhand to return a serve. And Kai flinched. She was sitting next to me and me raising my hand... (*He demonstrates.*) Like this. It pushed a button—like a survival instinct—and she flinched, and ducked. We've been together about three years. I'd never hit her. She knows that. But she flinched. It's happened other times, too. She gets really quiet when I raise my voice. Shouting and cursing are definite triggers. So, I don't do them. (*With a grin.*) Not around her. (*His eyes well up.*) I just wish I knew her when she was little. I wish I was in her life back then. Back when her father was beating the hell out of her. I'd have done something to help. I don't know what. I don't know how. But I'd have done something.

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