

spontaneous



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aaron starmer

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Level 13, 201 Elizabeth Street, Sydney NSW 2000, Australia
Unit D1, 63 Apollo Drive, Rosedale, Auckland 0632, New Zealand
A 53, Sector 57, Noida, UP, India
1 London Bridge Street, London SE1 9GF, United Kingdom
2 Bloor Street East, 20th floor, Toronto, Ontario M4W 1A8, Canada
195 Broadway, New York NY 10007, USA

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To the ones who feel like it could all come apart at any moment . . .
and to the ones who comfort us and keep us together

Call the death by any name Your Highness will,
attribute it to whom you will,
or say it might have been prevented how you will.

It is the same death eternally—inborn, inbred,
engendered in the corrupted humours of the vicious body itself,
and that only—Spontaneous Combustion,
and none other of all the deaths that can be died.

charles dickens

Bleak House

how it started

When Katelyn Ogden blew up in third period pre-calc, the janitor probably figured he'd only have to scrub guts off one whiteboard this year. Makes sense. In the past, kids didn't randomly explode. Not in pre-calc, not at prom, not even in chem lab, where explosions aren't exactly unheard of. Not one kid. Not one explosion. Ah, the good old days.

Katelyn Ogden was a lot of things, but she wasn't particularly explosive, in any sense of the word. She was wispy, with a pixie cut and a breathy voice. She was a sundress of a person—cute, airy, inoffensive. I didn't know her well, but I knew her well enough to curse her adorable existence on more than one occasion. I'm not proud of it, but it's true. Doesn't mean I wanted her to go out the way she did, or that I wanted her to go out at all, for that matter. Our thoughts aren't always our feelings; and when they are, they rarely last.

On the morning that Katelyn, well, *went out*, I was sitting two seats behind her. It was September, the first full week of school, an absolute stunner of a day. The windows were open and the far-away drone of a John Deere mixed with the nearby drone of Mr. Mellick philosophizing on factorials. Worried I had coffee breath, I was bent over in my seat, digging through my purse for mints. My POV was therefore limited, and the only parts of Katelyn I saw explode were her legs. Actually, it's hard to say what I saw. Her legs were there and then they weren't.

Wa-bam!

The classroom quaked and my face was suddenly warm and wet. It's a disgusting way to say it, but it's the simplest way to say it: Katelyn was a balloon full of fleshy bits. And she popped.

You can't feel much of anything in a moment like that. You certainly can't analyze the situation. At least not while it's happening. Later, the image will play over and over in your head, like some demon GIF, like some creeper who slips into your bed every single night, taps you on the shoulder, and says, "Remember me, the worst fucking moment of your life up to this point?" Later, you'll feel and do a lot of things, but when it's actually happening, all you can feel is confusion and all you do is react.

I bolted upright and my head hit my desk. Mr. Mellick dove behind his chair like a soldier into the trenches. My red-faced classmates sat there in shock for a few moments. Blood dripped down the windows and walls. Then came the screaming and the obligatory rush for the door.

The next hour was insane. Hunched running, hands up, sirens blaring, kids in the parking lot hugging. News trucks, helicopters,

SWAT teams, cars skidding out in the grass because the roads were clogged. No one even realized what had happened. “Bomb! Blood! Run for the fucking hills!” That was the extent of it. There was no literal smoke, but when the figurative stuff cleared, we could be sure of only two things.

Katelyn Ogden blew up. Everyone else was fine.

Except we weren’t. Not by a long shot.

let's be clear

This is not about Katelyn Ogden. She was important—all of them were—but she was also a signpost, a starting point on a path of self-discovery. I realize how corny and conceited that sounds, but the focus of this should be on me and what you ultimately think of me. Do you like me? Do you trust me? Will you still be interested in me after I say what I have to say?

Yes, yes. I know, I know. “It’s not important what people think of you, it’s who you are that counts.” Well, don’t buy into that crap. Perception trumps reality. Always and forever. Simply consider what people thought of Katelyn. Mr. Mellick once told Katelyn that she “would make an excellent anchorwoman,” which was a coded way of saying that she spoke well and, though it wasn’t clear if she was part black or part Asian or part Hispanic, she was pretty in a nonthreatening, vaguely ethnic way.

In reality, Katelyn Ogden was Turkish. Not part anything. Plain old Turkish. Her family’s original name was Özden, but they

changed it somewhere along the line. Her dad was born right here in New Jersey, and so was her mom, but they both had full Turkish blood that went back to the early Ottoman Empire, which, as far as empires go, was a pretty badass one. Their armies were among the first to employ guns and cannons, so they knew a thing or two about things that go boom.

Katelyn's dad was an engineer and her mom was a lawyer and they drove a Tahoe with one of those stick-figure-family stickers on the back window. Two parents, one kid, two dogs. I'm not entirely sure what the etiquette is, but I guess you keep the kid sticker on your window even . . . after. The Ogdens did, in any case.

I learned all the familial details at the memorial service, which was closed casket, for obvious reasons, and which was held in State Street Theater, also for obvious reasons. Everyone in school *had* to attend. It wasn't required by law, but absences would be noted. Not by the authorities necessarily, but by the kids who were quick to label their peers *misogynistic assholes* or *heartless bitches*. I know because I was one of those label-happy kids. Again, I'm not necessarily proud of that fact, but I certainly can't deny it.

The memorial service was quite a production, considering that it was put together in only a few days. Katelyn's friend Skye Sanchez projected a slideshow whose sole purpose was to remind us how ridiculously effervescent Katelyn was. There was a loving eulogy delivered by a choked-up aunt. A choir sang Katelyn's favorite song, which is a gorgeous song. The lyrics were a bit sexy for the occasion, but who cares, right? It was her favorite and if they can't play your favorite song at your memorial service then when the hell can they play it? Plus, it was all about saying good-bye at the

wrong moment, and at least that was appropriate for the occasion.

There's a line in it that goes, "your hair upon the pillow like a sleepy golden storm . . ." Katelyn's hair was short and dark, the furthest thing from sleepy and golden, but that didn't matter to Jed Hayes, who had a crush on her going all the way back to middle school. That hair-upon-the-pillow line made him blubber so loud that everyone in the balcony felt obligated to nod condolences at the poor guy. His empathy seemed off the charts, but if we're being honest with ourselves—and we really should be—then we have to accept that Jed wasn't crying because he truly loved Katelyn. It was because her storm of hair never hit his pillow. Sure, it's a selfish thing to cry about, but we all cry about selfish things at funerals. We all cry about "if only."

- If only Katelyn had made it through to next year, then she would have gone to Brown. She was going to apply early decision and was guaranteed to get in. No question that's partly why her SAT tutor, Mrs. Carbone, was sobbing. All those hours, all those vocab flash cards, and for what? Mrs. Carbone still couldn't claim an Ivy Leaguer as a past student.
- If only Katelyn had scammed a bit more cash off her parents, then she would have bought more weed. It was well-known among us seniors that Katelyn usually had a few joints hidden in emptied-out mascara tubes that she stashed in the glove box of her Volvo. It was also well-known that she was quickly becoming

the drug-dealing Dalton twins' best customer. Such a loss was surely why the Daltons were a bit weepy. Capitalism isn't an emotionless endeavor.

- If only Katelyn had the chance to accept his invitation to the prom, then she would have ended up with her hair upon Jed Hayes's pillow. It was within the realm of possibility. He wasn't a bad-looking guy and she was open-minded. You couldn't begrudge the kid his tears.

That's merely the beginning of the list. The theater was jam-packed with selfish people wallowing in "if only." Meanwhile, outside the theater, other selfish people had moved on and were already wallowing in "but why?"

As you might guess, when a girl blows up in pre-calc and that girl is Turkish, "but why?" is fraught with certain preconceived notions. It can't be "just one of those things." It has to be a "terrorist thing." That was what the cable-news folks were harrumphing, and the long-fingernailed women working the checkout at Target were gabbing, and the potbellied picketers standing outside the theater were hollering.

Never mind the fact that no one else was hurt when Katelyn exploded. We were all examined. Blood was taken. Questions were asked. Mr. Mellick's class was considered healthy, if not in mind, then in body. We were considered innocent.

Never mind the fact that there wasn't a trace of anything remotely explosive found in the classroom. The police did a full

sweep of it, the school, Katelyn's house, the nearest park, and a halal restaurant two towns over. They didn't find a thing. FBI was there too, swabbing everything with Q-tips. Collective shrugs all around.

Never mind "if only." A girl with so much potential doesn't suicide-bomb it all away. She just doesn't. Sure, she smoked weed, and if the rumors were true, she was slacking off in pre-calc and fighting with her mom, but that's not because senior year was her year to blow things up. It was her year to blow things off, perhaps her last chance in life to say fuck it.

It was a lot of people's last chance to say fuck it, as it turned out.

how you feel

To describe how you feel after a girl explodes in your pre-calc class is a tad tricky. I imagine it's similar to how you feel when any tragedy comes hurtling into your life. You're scared. You're fragile. You flinch. All the time. You may have never even thought about what holds life together. Until, of course, it comes apart.

Same with our bodies. You can imagine cancer and other horrible things wreaking havoc on our doughy shells, but you don't ever expect our doughy shells to, quite literally, disintegrate. So when the unimaginable happens, when the cosmos tears into your very notion of what's possible, it's not that you become jaded; it's that you become unsure. Unsure that you'll ever be sure about anything ever again.

You get what I'm saying, right? No? Well, you will.

For now, maybe it's easier to speak about practicalities, to describe what exactly happens after a girl explodes in your pre-calc class. You get the rest of the day off from school, and the rest of

the week too. You talk to the cops on three separate occasions, and Sheriff Tibble looks at you weird when you don't whimper as much as the guy they interviewed before you. You are asked to attend private therapy sessions with a velvet-voiced woman named Linda and, if you want, group therapy sessions with a leather-voiced man named Vince and some of the other kids who witnessed the spontaneous combustion.

That's what they were calling it in the first few weeks: spontaneous combustion. I had never heard of such a thing, but there was a precedent for it—for people catching fire, or exploding, with little-to-no explanation. Now, unless you've been living in the jungles of New Guinea for the last year, you already know all this, but if you want a refresher on the history of spontaneous combustion, head on over to Wikipedia. Skip the section on "The Covington Curse" if you want the rest of this story to be spoiler-free.

From Linda, I learned that it was normal to feel completely lost when a girl spontaneously combusts in your pre-calc class. Because in those first few weeks I'd find myself crying all of sudden, and then making really inappropriate jokes the next moment, and then going about the rest of the day like it was all no big deal.

"When something traumatic happens, you fire your entire emotional arsenal," Linda told me. "A war is going on inside of you, and I'm here to help you reload and make more targeted attacks. I'm here to help the good guys win."

At the group sessions, Vince didn't peddle battlefield metaphors. He hardly spoke at all. He simply repeated his mantra: "Talk it out, kids. Talk it out."

So that's what we did. Half of us "kids" from third period

pre-calc met in the media room every Tuesday and Thursday at four, and we shared our stories of insomnia and chasing away bloody visions with food and booze and all sorts of stuff that therapists can't say shit about to your parents because they have a legal obligation to keep secrets.

Nutty as she was, Linda helped. So did Vince. So did the rest of my blood-obsessed peers, even the ones who occasionally called me insensitive on account of my sense of humor.

"Sorry, but my cell is blowing . . . spontaneously combusting," I announced during a Thursday session when my phone kept vibrating with texts. It had been only six weeks since we'd all worn Katelyn on our lapels. In other words, too soon.

"I realize that jokes are a form of coping," Claire Hanlon hissed at me. "But tweet them or something. We don't need to hear them here."

"Sorry but I don't tweet," I told her.

That said, I did fancy myself a writer. Long form, though. I had even started a novel that summer. I titled it *All the Feels*. I think it was young adult fiction, what some might call paranormal romance. I didn't care, as long as I could sell the movie rights. Which didn't seem like an impossibility. The story was definitely relatable. It was about a teenage boy who was afraid of his own emotions. In my experience, that summed up not only teenage boys, but teenagers in general. Case in point:

"This is a healing space and that makes it a joke-free zone," Claire went on. "I don't want to relive that moment and you're liable to give me a flashback."

"I like Mara's jokes," Brian Chen responded. "They help me

remember it's okay to smile. I don't know if I'd still be coming to these things if it wasn't for Mara."

"Thank you, Bri," I said, and at that point I began to realize that we were a bit of a cliché. Stories about troubled teenagers often feature support groups where smart-ass comments fly and feelings get hurt, where friends and enemies are forged over one-liners and tears. But here's the thing. Even if we were a bit of a cliché, we were only a cliché for a bit. Because almost immediately after announcing his dedication to my humor, Brian Chen blew up.