



TREVOR DODGE

# We Always Just Say Catastrophic

DODGE

I didn't come here with Tawnya McNeil, nevertheless she is slow-dancing me above a gymnasium floor freshly sealed with acetane two days ago and definitely still reeking of it. Bon Jovi's power ballad "Never Say Goodbye" is thundering its way through the other couples here on the floor before shattering against the bleachers where other color-coordinated pairs of people are either arguing or not trying hard enough to conceal their clumsy groping of one another.

There are also a few singles sprinkled amongst them, but the loners mostly sit in the front rows of the bleachers, where the couples have dibs on the higher planks, higher and further back at nearly a 45 degree angle overhead. By the time the sound waves get here, they are thin, watery, and a bit shrill. This, despite the fact that the Z-103 sound crew (comprised of only one dude, a lone radio DJ who calls himself Logan Tusow (aged 46) and has arguably the area code's thinnest beard (b/w matching moustache that doesn't touch) and rents to himself his rent-to-own PA system on Friday nights (divorced three times, currently engaged, no children) to all the junior high schools) has the bass jacked up so high that the large framed photos of basketballers

in short-shorts are rattling against the brick wall to which they (the photos—not the basketballers nor their short-shorts) are affixed, as are the shoegazers underneath who don't feel like bleaching it, who instead park themselves at L-shaped angles against the walls surrounding the entire area, so from way up above it would almost seem like the borders of this room are constantly infected with carpenter ants. Occasionally glances rise up to make sure the photos buzzing overhead aren't ready to crash down on them when they aren't looking (which is never) or in some way expecting it (ditto).

Because that would just be their luck, they think, and it would confirm their reticence to come in the first place, so, in a sense, there are a handful who are actually wishing for it to happen, so they could later tell their respective whomevers I TOLD YOU SO, and soak deep down into their self-deprecation. But for the majority of them, the longing to be part of the central scene on the dance floor—to be one of those stiff compasses lumbering and spinning around one another — well, that longing simply overwhelms them.

Case In Point: Lucy Walker, cajoled into coming by her friends Monica and Shawneen, who pur-

posely didn't tell Lucy they were meeting Terry and Tracy Franks here, and who, upon seeing aforementioned Franks Brothers, squealed in complete syncope as if they had rehearsed the precise tone and octave (which they had) for the last two weekend sleepovers at Monica's house.

Case In Point: Graham Nelson, whose mom begged (and ultimately bribed) him to come tonight for the official reason that all his friends from this new school would be here (all zero of them) and he wouldn't want to regret not going to this some 20 years later, but for the unofficial reason that Graham's mom was meeting Graham's dad for a roleplay session at the Purple Sage Motel just down Kimberly Road, and she couldn't miss her chance (again) to play Daddy Warbucks in their Little Orphan Annie Routine.

Case In Point: Cindy Barker, who didn't go home after school today, hiding in the shower room until the Sadie Hawkins affair tonight started taking shape with its folding tables screeching across the gym floor and the early-arrivers arrived early sporting their identically-paired/colored/sized/stretched/embroidered Izod polos; Cindy Barker, who took Angee Feltman's threats all week to "beat" her "ass"

as true and unalterable fact; Cindy Barker, who had blown the points curve for all the pre-algebra classes all trimester, five straight tests and six pop quizzes in a row.

Case In Point: Angee Feltman, who is totally unaware of Cindy Barker's breath, scent or smell here along the wall, but even if she were, the plain truth of the matter is that Angee wouldn't make good on those earlier promises to "beat" any portion of "ass" because she is here waiting for Val Talamander and Katrina Ailes to show up. And they aren't going to. And Angee hasn't started to realize this just yet, so she is perpendicular to the wall, just left of the double metal doors propped open-open with matching metal folding chairs, her toe touching the same wall where Lucy, Graham and Cindy currently reside, Angee pretending that she is only temporary here despite the fact she isn't rocking an Izod, the embarrassing truth still waiting to reveal itself while she queues for Val and Katrina all evening, because what it all really boils down to is everyone here is just killing time until their parents roll into the parking lot at 9:30 to corral them all like farm animals. It just seems that some of them—the wallflowers especially—are more aware of this fact than the others.

I am aware of this only because as Tawnya continues spinning me around (she always leads) in her half-circle steps, the scene on the wall refreshes in my view every five seconds, and virtually without exception the figures and faces remain motionless and changeless, a fleshy mural interrupted only by the shift of an arm or the deep heave of a chest when its owner takes in a big breath to immediately push the air out, thin mouths with lips gapped into half-sneers as the pale rush of popcorn breath floods the room. See, she is left-handed—more like left-bodied—and is out and out militaristic about exercising her southpaw tendencies (see above). She not only writes left, bats left, throws left, but leads-on-the-dancefloor left (she always leads), so our combined orbit is always counter-clockwise, and about every 10th step I fumble my own left foot either too near inside or too far outside the narrow fulcrum we've created between our feet to pivot around, breaking the nervous rhythm nearly every time I do this. She shifts her leading arm (she always leads) to compensate for the break, to wit I respond with my own compensation with my trailing arm, so the total effect is something like an airplane's propeller sputtering and wobbling immediately after ignition.

And she always notices the sputterings, keeps mental count of them for each slow song, tabulating them at the end of the evening into some karmic algebra that will help her formulate her next move in our 36-minute old relationship which started beyond the double metal doors, taking me largely by surprise

Like I said, I didn't come here with her. Didn't make plans to meet her by the pay phones or outside the bathroom. Didn't write her a legal paper note in purple ink to slide between the chevron slits of her locker. Didn't meet up with her in the lunch line to plan the whole evening out, in between the lunch ladies piling our molded brown trays with various shapes and thicknesses and smells of carbohydrates and fat.

I for reals and truly just didn't.

I did, however, do all of those things with Natalie Boxnard, whose name does an adequate job of describing her, moreso really than I could do or want to. Natalie is pretty much the girl version of me, especially in the fact that she's hopelessly right-handed, passive-passive aggressive, and considers any Friday night exciting in as much as it contains viewing either of the Patrick Swayze classics (namely, Dirty Dancing and Point Break) on videocassette. These

are the evenings of her clad in her United Colors of Pajamaton, her father's athletic socks scrunched down on her ankles, quite possibly the world's largest bowl of unsalted/unbuttered popcorn strategically positioned on the couch between us to ensure it totally kills any potential for something even faintly resembling a romantic mood (Natalie's flood insurance-selling father has used this tactic for a long long time, having perfected his libido-crippling concoctions on Natalie's three older sisters; suffice to say, Mr. Boxnard knows his stuff when it comes to flatlining his daughters' emerging sexual proclivities, and most definitely keeps better tabs on teen hormonal swings and the flavor-of-the-week androgynes adorning the covers of Tiger Beat, 16, etc. etc. etc. (bold pastel-colored blocks of lettering floating over naturally curly hair: "Justin Dreams of You!", "Inside Kirk's Dressing Room!", "Taylor-Joey-Taylor Throws The Best Pool Party EVER!", etc. etc. etc.) than he (Mr. Boxnard) does when it comes to whatever particulars flood insurance salesmen are supposed to keep track of (if any). I know the popcorn routine far too well, and have endured it far too many times than is reasonable for a completely harmless boy like myself).

The very fact I did this as long as I did reveals this simple, serious truth: girls completely own me.

Which made what happened 36 minutes ago fairly effortless, really, for Tawnya, because despite the fact Natalie and I had been Going Together for 3 months and 11 days, Natalie and I are quite easily the two most passive people in this room (note: the KMart brand polos we're wearing, that stale unsalted/unbuttered shade of white) and our relationship is way more one of acquiescence than attraction. I have never thought Natalie is pretty. Far from it, actually. Her mouth is barbed with dental braces; she wears cat-eyed, pink-framed eyeglasses with thick, oblong lenses to correct what apparently is one of the longest ongoing cases of early onset astigmatism her ophthalmologist Dr. Schiel has ever seen; despite having just turned 14, she is already cursed with her mother's gourd-shaped figure (more like a bowling pin come to think of it), her widening hips showing little sign that they will ever swing back in a graceful S-pattern; her short hair is the color of Cheerios left too long in the morning's breakfast bowl, a bloated yellow fading into a more bloated yellow fading into an even more bloated yellow, like the hair of airline stewardesses who simply wait too long to do some-

thing else with their lives and so will pretty much always be thought of as airline stewardesses who have their runs down so pat they can literally do their eye makeup in their sleep (and most mornings, it's near impossible to tell); Natalie's eyelashes are so colorless as to appear clear upon first glance, their lack of hue only magnified by the huge honkin oblong lenses held perpendicular in front of them, the blink of her eye like a fly skittering quickly along the bottom of a wet drinking glass as its user tips the last drops of whatever into his/her mouth; and just past the lashes are vacant spheres of pale blue, irises constantly flared wide open, thin trickles of red blood vessels crisscrossing each other with no particular place to go.

And I have never thought Natalie is smart. Because if she is, she never would have dated me in the first place. Natalie and I started as payback for how Mindy Eters returned her half of the sterling silver Mizpah necklace when we broke up for the third time six months ago. Mindy took the right half and I took the left half and we swore to wear them even in the shower. Natalie has never seen it, but she knows I still have a green spot on my chest left from the chemical reaction. Natalie and Mindy aren't

currently best-best friends, but they were for a long time, and they will be again before the night's over. Mindy has ruby-tinted contacts which she trades out for tangerine-tinted ones which she trades out for canary-tinted ones which she trades out for shamrock-tinted ones which she trades out for cornflower-tinted ones which she trades out for fuschia-tinted ones. My dating Natalie was Jake's idea. Jake and I are currently best friends, and have been for a long time, but we won't be forever. Mindy had Jake give me her half of the Mizpah, tucked inside a note she wrote on lined paper with the jags still hanging from where the spiral binding bit down, her vowels as big loops in blue ink. I don't know whose idea that was. One thing I do know for certain: neither Mindy nor Jake are here tonight.

And in about 13 more minutes, Natalie won't be either. Her mother is already en route, having received word of it all, the news already engorged by a game of telephone, the news of the shit she just pulled (she always leads) 36 minutes ago billowing with enough despaired distortion from each successive retelling of aforementioned word to get Natalie's mother to remove her avocado green dishwashing gloves, pluck the communal keys to the

mudstained Honda Accord off the pegboard, heave the vehicle into the street after a thick grind into reverse, and commence rescue operations inside her daughter's chest cavity. It's important to note that Natalie did not place the originating call into her parents' keyhole-shaped neighborhood from the thin trio of payphones outside, nor did she relay, follow-up, prank, phreak, hack, jive, cajole, or in any possible way rebroadcast the sad sad news; furthermore, it is largely impossible to monitor the total number of pulls she will take from the Ipratropium Bromide inhaler vised between her index finger and thumb and scraping back and forth against her dental work during her mother's crucial ETA, the seconds ticking silently away below the Accord's digital speedometer, because Natalie's new best-best friend Erline Sadler has never seen anything like this up close before, and certainly doesn't know the drill when it comes to slowing Natalie down with her pulls, and—besides—is too busy plunking one quarter dollar after another after another into the three coin receptacles as fast as her fingers can handle.

At least that's what Katrina Ailes' report says from the hallway where she can't really see what's happening too much past the steel-plated firedoors,

and she's pretty much considered a pathologic liar despite being confused all the time for her twin sister Katherine, who everyone always believes for no good reason whatsoever. But more than that, just about everyone feels the same contempt for Natalie that I do, so the hard brutal truth is that pretty much the only one who might be even remotely interested in Katrina's report is right here in front of me (she always leads). And this isn't the first time Tawnya has hijacked me like this, so I would be lying if I said that I am surprised right now. In fact, pretty much the last thing I am right now is surprised.

She is not looking towards the hallway or the double metal doors framing it or the chairs propping them open or the bleachers or the short-shorts or the floor. Because when she stepped between Natalie and I during Logan Tusow's tinny spin of Sheriff's "When I'm With You" 36 minutes ago, she has not looked anywhere but directly into my eyes and she simply will not stop.

And this is the part I can't see coming. And the truth is I simply don't want her to stop.

Tears are skimming the mascara from her big chocolate eyes, pooling and draining into the creases of her lipstick-less mouth frequently enough to

probably say she has been crying this entire time, but only in the most technical sense of the word; the thick cotton of her crayon-purple Izod splotted and spattered with hollow, inky rings in the drop zones below the thin rivers of black staining her cheeks.

I am unlocking my hands from the small of her back and raising them to her face, my thumbs extended. We are stopping our feet in the last place where they stepped, spaced apart so we both have our balance. She is blocking my hands at my wrists, and her gaze burns through my optic nerves. Logan Tusow is mumbling into his rent-to-own PA system, and all the bleacher bums and wall warriors are already past the firedoors, spilling into the parking lot. The fluorescent lights in the ceiling are stumbling awake. We are swaying; she is digging her little fingernails into my wrists; I am following; we are stopping. Stopping.

She pulls her gaze away to bury her face into my shoulder. My shirt bruises instantly there, mascara and navy eye shadow.

Our parents in idling cars out in the parking lot. This is how we've said it, Jon Bon Jovi be damned.