

Breathe Today  
High School Entry

Introduction:

It takes light from our Sun eight minutes and twenty seconds to reach the Earth. If our Sun were to suddenly go supernova, we humans wouldn't even feel it for eight minutes.

It would probably take the scientists about a minute to discover the disaster and post warnings to Twitter, Facebook, and national news, but it would already be too late. What could you possibly do in the seven or less minutes you would have before you were blown to atom-sized pieces? Or, what if you knew ahead of time? You'd still have time while you waited for the the Apocalypse to come to you. But what would you do? Call your best friend, fiancée, or relatives and tell them how much you love them and then listen as their screams filled you, and they were burned to a crackly crisp? I couldn't. Would you try to find a way to escape the inescapable? Do you think there might just be enough safety in the tornado shelter in town to protect you from the star which makes up 98% of the mass in our solar system? Would you run there screaming, shoving old women and little children, at the chance of saving your own life? Is it really worth that to you? A tornado shelter wouldn't protect you anyway, even if it was built at earth's core. *Nothing* could save you.

Would you spend your futile moments praying to God? Asking him PLEASE to remember you when His purpose was fulfilled? Many would. I doubt there's anything that could bring a prodigal human back to his Creator like knowing that he had eight minutes to live, and there wasn't a single solitary thing he could do about it.

Some would despair; many would leap over buildings or try to throw themselves off a bridge. What's the point? You have 500 seconds to live; why try to shorten it?

The stupidest people of all are the ones who hear that they're all going to die and immediately whip out their iPhones and start taking pictures of everything. Idiots! Those 200 pictures you just uploaded to Facebook will mean NOTHING when everything crashes and burns. I shake my head at such futility and waste of the seconds.

So, since anything you can or would do is futile, what SHOULD you do while waiting the indefinitely agonizing eight minutes and twenty seconds while the Sun's supernova blast crawls toward us at light speed?

My answer:

~~Run for your life~~

~~Find all your friends and tell them you'll miss them, even though it won't be true~~

~~We're all dying anyway, might as well jump off a building~~

~~Spend your last moments trying to find your family~~

I honestly have no clue.

August 1.

5:15 PM

I bob my head as I sing along to the radio. It's turned up and I'm thoroughly enjoying the song. If Mom were here, she'd disapprove of me having "distractions" while I'm driving HER Altima solo for one of the first times, especially close to twilight, but she's not here. I'm only going to the store, anyhow. It's not like there're that many ways to wreck in the

two miles between home and Circle K. I turn it down a little as the song changes and flick on my left blinker and ease into Circle K, which serves as the nearest convenience store to my house.

I park the Altima quickly and twist the keys out of the ignition. Before getting out, I peek in my mirror to make sure I don't look like something that crawled out from under a rock. My longish chestnut pixie bob isn't sticking straight out, at least, and my Irish eyes don't look *too* bad. Good, I guess.

I hop out and up the curb to our dead-quiet Circle K. The cleanly new building looks out of place compared to our dusty little town, I notice. Even the chime-y bells that greet me as I shoulder the door sound new and foreign.

Colby, the sole cashier today, is slumped behind the counter until he hears me come in. When he sees me, he runs his fingers through his crew-cut reddish-blond hair--which could use a glob of gel, in my opinion-- and straightens his shirt. Colby's cute enough, I guess, but he's so cluelessly obvious about his crush on me that it's hard not to treat him like a puppy.

Colby stands up, trying to play the part of the helpful (cute) store clerk. His cover breaks when I catch him watching me closely in the surveillance mirror. He sees me watching him and I roll my eyes. Boys.

"Hi, Colby," I say a little pointedly.

"Ah-I-Hi Kali-- Kalyssa. Wha'can I get ya today?" He fumbles his words and brushes at his hair again. I almost giggle.

"I'm just here on a run for chocolate chips for cookies. Still have any semi-sweets?" I try to ignore his nervousness.

He doesn't say anything, just gestures expansively in the direction of where I already know the chocolate chips to be. I grab the goods and head to the counter, already digging in my pocket for money and slapping a five on the counter. My iPhone is going berserk in my other pocket, so I haul it out and happen to glance at the time. It's 5:15 PM. This time my noti list says:

Twitter:

The Solar Research Institute (@solar\_research): Recent solar readings indicate expected supernova is occurring NOW. Worldwide emergency declared.

Karsten Astronomy Labs (@karsten\_labs): Previously predicted solar supernova occurring NOW. Go to [www.karstenlabs.1org](http://www.karstenlabs.1org) for more info.

United Nations Breaking News (@UNbreakingnews): Worldwide State of Emergency declared due to impending supernova of the sun. More info pending.

United Nations Breaking News (@UNbreakingnews): USPresident to deliver worldwide speech on all radio stations/TV channels Re: Solar explosion.

I don't look at it for more than a second, but the list seems endless. What the all-loving HECK is going on?! Is the SUN really going to explode? Or supernova?! This HAS to be a prank, right? A bunch of terrorist hackers deciding to have a few minutes of fun and scare the daylights out of everyone in the world?

I hear radios outside blaring the nerve-grating sound that always plays before a National Weather Service announcement. I catch a sentence or two after that, something about the President speaking to the country in a few moments.

I don't hear anything else, though. My phone explodes with new texts, tweets, news messages, and a call all at once, as does Colby's. The town outside us is erupting in chaos, starting with a bloodcurdling scream from a woman in a business suit running out of the post office and looking at the sun. She's followed by people from businesses all over the Main street who must have all just heard the same thing we did.

I answer the call automatically, somewhat in a daze.

"Hello?"

I hear a click, then the mechanical voice of a woman starts speaking loudly in my ear. I flinch.

"This is an important news broadcast brought to all citizens of the United States. Scientists have confirmed a suspicion that because of an unexplained and uncontrollable phenomenon, the Sun is going prematurely supernova. This means that in eight minutes, an enormous explosion will reach Earth, destroying it completely. All life on Earth will likely perish. You are advised to remain calm..."

I drop my iPhone and the chocolate, unfortunately. I'm in a disbelieving shock, a paralyzed fog covering the stabs of horror in me. All life on Earth, destroyed? In less than eight minutes?! And their only instruction is to remain calm?!? How in the name of Suzanne Collins are we expected to keep CALM after being given the death sentence?! This can't be true, it's gotta be a hoax. I must be dreaming. MUST be.

I look at Colby. I get the stupidest urge to hug him like you would a teddy bear. I do end up hugging him, for half a second. Step outside to look at 90% of the working population of our little town, who're all holding their cells to their ears, their expressions matching mine. I see Kaleigh Sanders, the realtor who sold our old house and always had cream soda lollipops in her office. She's in shock; in fact she looks like she's about to faint. I see Margaret and Jason Breck, who moved here from Alaska last year and have terrible taste in clothes. Their kid goes to my school; his desk is next to mine in Biology. I see Brennan Matthews, who used to be a teacher but now works at Walgreens as a pharmacist and is the only person in town who drives a "boxfish car." I see them all. I know them all.

They're all looking heavenwards, toward their own destruction. *They're--we're--all going to die.*

5:17 PM

That thought echoes in my head as I look at the quirky people I see every day. A shock like lightning goes through me, and I suddenly find myself in the car, driving--flying, really--toward home. The blinking seconds on the car's clock seem to be crawling, dragging.

Around me, people are standing on the sidewalks, all of them gaping at their life-giving betrayer as he glows innocently in the noon sky. None of them are breathing, I know.

None of us can. Perhaps no one on Earth can breathe today.

Then I'm home and the car must be somewhere in the driveway, but I don't remember parking it. I slam the front door open and fall into Mom's arms. She smells like perfume and cookie dough. Her arms are so protective and familiar as she wraps me up that it

immediately calms me down. She's crying; I can feel her tears press into my cheek as she hugs me breathtakingly tightly. I hug her back and tears of my own well up.

"Where's Lacey?" I ask Mom when she finally lets me go. Lacey's my older sister, and she volunteers at our local animal shelter during the summer.

"You haven't heard from her?" Mom says around the lump in her throat. I shake my head. I haven't seen Lace since breakfast.

I hear something pounding outside, then Lacey explodes through the door, bawling. Tears are marking rivulets of mascara down her face. It's the only flaw in Lacey's otherwise perfect complexion.

"You're back!" Mom gives Lace a hug as crushing as the one I got, then she pulls back and looks at her eldest daughter. Her daughter who was going to go to college and become a veterinarian, or maybe an animal surgeon, or maybe just a nurse. Her eldest daughter, who'll now never live to see 21. She won't even live to breathe in the freshness of tomorrow.

"I would have left as soon as--\*sniff\*-- I heard the announcement, but they asked me to stay and help with something. They were going to--\*gasp\*-- gonna put--\*hiccup\*-- all the animals--" Lacey loses her voice and sobs into Mom's shirt. I make out one more word, "sleep," and I know why she left. Lacey's too tenderhearted to ever hurt an animal.

I guess it really hits me then: the world is ending TODAY. In less than five minutes, if the scientists and the countdown playing on the radio are correct! I'm going to die.

Mom's going to die. Lacey and Colby and Suzanne Collins and David, our next-door

neighbor's dark-eyed son, and Chrysanthemum, my green parrot, and Karra, my best friend who lives in Maryland, and--everyone I know or have known is going to die today. That's when I break. Tears free-flow from my eyes and my soul crushes, shatters and I fall down to the grey carpet I've always hated and I feel like *death*. I scream and grab fistfuls of grey shag and throw myself away. I hate the Sun, hate the canned voice of the announcement for telling us to be calm. Hang it ALL!! But I'm too broken to do more than sob into the carpet. I can't breathe. I don't think I'll ever breathe again. The world's going to end all around me and I'm helpless, everyone's helpless!

5:18 PM

There's a knock on the door.

I almost fall out of my skin.

Mom answers it; she's the only one not completely broken down.

It's Mrs. Bryant, David's mother and our next-door neighbor. She's not alone: a posse of almost everyone I know from town follows her, some carrying crying children. I start sobbing again at seeing them. Mrs. Bryant speaks to Mom for a moment. I can't hear what they're saying over the sobs.

Mom comes over and whispers to me, "She's arranged a community vigil. We're all going to sit and hold on until it ends."

That sounds nice. I don't think I have any more tears to lose.

5:19 PM

Ninety seconds later, and almost everyone I know sits in a circle on the bridge over the river, holding hands. No one breathes a word. We're all waiting for something yet hoping to God that it doesn't come. I sit between Lacey and Mom, completely blank. I'm empty.

Tears still spill from my face, but I don't feel anything but despair. Looking around the circle, I see that most people are wearing the same look. David's dark eyes watching me draw my gaze. He nods at me almost imperceptibly and his lips twitch sadly. I know it's a goodbye and the hello that he never said.

A couple of people have already gotten up and hurled themselves over the bridge. Their agonized screams are echoing numbly in my ears. Are they the smart ones?

Someone shouts out the time. There's about a minute left. It's making me insane, knowing exactly when I'm going to die.

5:21 PM

The sunset is gorgeous. Too bad that in one minute, the blues and pinks will be burning my body to ash. It's redder than usual. I wonder if that could be the start of the supernova. My heart leaps into hyperdrive. Is this it? Is the end really coming now? Am I really going to die, sitting on West Bridge, in a few moments? The sky is so red... And it's too warm, for a summer night. This must be the end. It's getting hotter. I'm so scared, I don't know how to think. I just sit there on the bridge, waiting and watching, wondering at each breath if this will be the last time

I  
will  
breathe  
today.