

## The Explosion

I was awake, but my eyelids were reluctant to open. I thought, "I'm cold." My next thought was, what time is it? Opening my eyes and glancing at the bedside clock, I saw it was 1:05 in the morning. I pulled the quilt up under my chin and hoped and waited to see if that would make a difference, but after several minutes, I was just as cold. My feet felt icy, and I was too cold to fall back asleep. Disinclined as I was to leave my bed, I sat up, turned the bedside lamp on, got out of bed, walked over to the closet, and grabbed a quilt that I hurriedly laid over my bed. Switching off the lamp, I quickly got under the still, slightly warm bedclothes and waited to warm up. However, my mind was now engaged in random thoughts, and as I again glanced at the clock, I saw it was 3:05 a.m.

Waking up, I glanced at the clock on my bedside table, and it read 6:05. Rising, I could feel not only my tiredness but also the cold morning air nipping my naked body as I made the bed. As soon as I was finished, I headed to the bathroom. Brr, I thought as I walked back to put on sweatpants and a heavy t-shirt.

Arriving in the kitchen and pushing the on button to heat water for my coffee was always first. I checked to see if Sam, the feral cat, was there for breakfast, and he was, so I fed him first.

I named Sam Sam because he was a very long-haired cat, and I couldn't visually sex him or her. Sam was a cute name because it was appropriate for Samuel or Samantha. After nearly a year of feeding Sam, Sam was still wild and would scamper and jump off the deck whenever I wasn't behind a window or a door. I preferred things the way they were, and I respected Sam being wild and feral, and I didn't mind being the human that fed Sam. Plus, I didn't want a roommate.

I made coffee and sat in my chair. After my morning meditation and an English muffin with raw onion and a fried egg on each half for breakfast, I still needed to wait before I could phone the propane company I used. Thankfully, when I phoned, someone answered. I asked the woman if she could send someone to light the pilot light on the propane stove in my bedroom and the one in my guest unit. To my delight, she said someone would be there that morning.

A little later, I set off on my morning walk, but just after leaving my house, two trucks from the propane company arrived. I turned, walked back, and greeted the two young men. As we shook hands, they introduced themselves as Dylan and Connor. I walked them up to my house and showed them the two stoves. Connor said he would light the guest unit stove, and Dylan did the bedroom stove. In less than ten minutes, both stoves were alight, the thermostats had been set to seventy degrees, and all seemed good. We all shook hands, they left, and I restarted my morning walk. Upon returning, I turned both thermostats down to fifty-five degrees as I don't like sleeping in a hot bedroom, nor did the guest unit need to be that warm. A room warmed to fifty-five degrees when I'm in bed is perfect for me.

The next day was Saturday, and the night must have been warmer because the stove didn't come on in my bedroom. I checked the guest room later that morning and could feel the stove had come on, as it was still warm to the touch. I then closed the windows, which I had failed to do the day before.

I went to bed late on Saturday night, and the propane stove came on at 1 a.m. The stove's clicking and clacking as it heated up and cooled down was so annoying for me; I got up and turned the thermostat off, climbed back into my still-warm bed, and, while I couldn't fall asleep for a couple of hours, eventually, I did.

Waking up, I noticed it was already getting light, and the clock read 5:55. I got up, and it was cold in my bedroom, so I turned up the thermostat and began making my bed, as was my routine. However, the urge to pee was too strong, and ignoring it until I had finished making the bed wasn't working, so I turned to walk to the bathroom at the far end of my bedroom. As I turned, I noticed the tip of a thin, round piece of metal, nestled in amongst the fake logs of my stove, glowing red, and I thought, "Huh. I don't remember seeing that before." As I neared the bathroom, I saw the window was open, and I thought about closing it, but the urge to pee was too strong. I was reaching down to lift the toilet seat when an explosion caused me to cower, followed by an awful, unfamiliar smell. I stood upright and was utterly bewildered by what had just happened.

I turned finally and was going to walk back into my bedroom when my bare foot stepped onto something sharp. Looking down, I could see, through the smoke in the small hallway leading to my bedroom, large and smaller pieces of glass strewn on the carpet.

Leaving the bathroom and entering my bedroom, I could see glass nearly covering the bedroom floor, and there was no safe way to walk without stepping on the glass. The air was still thick with nasty-smelling smoke, but as carefully as possible, I chose the spaces with the smallest pieces of glass to get to where my clothes were. Often, I needed to stop to pick bits of glass that cut into the callouses on the bottom of my feet, but I was never cut deep enough to bleed.

Grabbing my sweatpants and t-shirt, I again picked my way towards the hall, which was also strewn with glass, but here, the pictures that once hung on the hallway walls were now lying broken on the floor. Carefully, I made my way toward the kitchen and living room, and they, too, had sharp shards of glass scattered on the floors, though there was not as much as in the bedroom.

From naivety, adrenaline, shock, or the combination of all three, confusion controlled my brain. Finally, I dressed and pressed the on button to heat water for coffee. I raised my hands to see if they were shaking, and they weren't. That surprised me, as it seemed my everything was shaking or should be. I noticed the tiny, shiny shards of glass stuck in my hands, so I carefully removed them. Sam was nowhere to be seen.

Leaving the explosion behind me for the moment, I sat in my chair with my mug of coffee. I could see the steam rising, and I immediately felt cold. Lighting my wood stove was very simple, as I had prepared and placed everything, the wood and the pine cones that I used for lighting my fires, in a convenient place that made lighting my morning fires simple. Once the wood stove had a robust fire burning, I again sat down, put the blanket I kept near my chair over me, and sipped my coffee. My mind was playing back the time from waking until the explosion, and then, without a pause, it would again play that reel. While watching that reel, I realized how close I had come to being seriously hurt or worse. The word eviscerated popped into my mind, and the ensuing imaginary images made me cringe.

Long after I had finished my mug of coffee and long after the cup had gone cold, I rose to pick up the glass. Carefully tiptoeing my way back to the bathroom, I took the trash bin I kept there and, after picking glass from the balls of my feet and between my toes, I knelt on the bathroom's linoleum floor and began picking up shards of glass. As I finished one area, I moved forward, eventually crawling on my hands and knees onto the carpet in my bedroom. Three or so hours later, I had finished picking up everything I could see, though later, I would find I had missed many pieces. I glued two broken picture frames back together and began vacuuming. I could hear tiny shards of glass being sucked up, and I picked up those that weren't tiny enough to be vacuumed.

I posted a picture and a summary of what happened to my nearest neighbor, and she phoned me immediately. She told me she was going into town and asked if I would like coffee and a piece of apple strudel, to which I answered yes. She and her boyfriend arrived later and, after warm hugs, gave me my treats. I have to say that was the tastiest cup of coffee and piece of apple strudel I have had in a very long time. And their hugs warmed and consoled me some, too.

While I sat finishing the coffee, I posted a picture of my bedroom right after the explosion, plus a short commentary on my Facebook page, and another nearby neighbor texted me right back, telling me he had heard the explosion, only for him the blast had sounded like a gunshot from inside his house. I texted back asking if he had a ShopVac I could borrow, and he agreed to not only lend it to me but also to get it from his storage shed and deliver it. About an hour later, he arrived.

That neighbor and his wife hugged me warmly and were genuinely happy I hadn't been hurt. Their hugs were also comforting for me. By then, I had vacuumed the carpets probably eight times or more, and after they left, I used the ShopVac and very slowly vacuumed the carpets and the bricks under and around the stove until I could no longer hear any shards being picked up.

The time was now 3 p.m. I was tired and realized I was hungry.

Sitting down in my chair, I began, once again, to think of the explosion and how close I had come to getting seriously hurt. Again, the word eviscerated came to mind, and I saw myself lying on the floor with my intestines hanging out of my stomach.

I thought, "How would I crawl on the dry carpet with my guts hanging out like that? I would have needed to reach my iPhone to phone for help, but my phone was in the kitchen!" For about a minute, the scene in my mind of my belly being blown open and my wet intestines dragging on

a dry carpet and being further pulled out of my body and apart was gruesome. But in my mind, there were no eyes to shut to stop seeing that scene. The video my imagination had created slowly faded, and I knew the scene wasn't real. But for that one minute, which seemed so much longer than that when warped by fear and my rampant imagination for what could have been, the scene in my mind was my reality. Taking a deep breath, then another on top of that before a long exhale, helped calm me a little.

Again and again, the perfection of the timing that took me from my bed, where I had stood so relaxed and at home, directly in front of the propane-fired, cast-iron stove, to the bathroom was literally no more than ten seconds. As I sat thinking, I counted one one thousand, two one thousand, three one thousand, four one thousand, five one thousand, six one thousand, seven one thousand, eight one thousand, nine one thousand, ten one thousand, BOOM, the awful, deafening explosion emanating right in front of where I had been standing.

I sat humbled yet confused, and I was cognizant that the experiences that happened in my life, or at least the significant experiences that have occurred in my life, always contained a profound reason. And usually, the reason was to get my attention to change something. A significant experience usually happened because I hadn't listened, seen, or paid attention to the less boisterous signs that had been trying to point me in the direction that life, the universe, God, or whatever we wish to call the force or forces that guide us through our lives, wanted me to take. I knew my focus now was finding the reason or reasons for the explosion. I also knew I needed to contact my insurance company and the company whose employees had last touched that stove. But the last two things needed to wait until tomorrow.

And still, I sat in my chair. I sat from mid-afternoon through when I usually enjoyed a beer or an evening glass of wine. I sat through my dinnertime without rising. I sat until day turned to

night, and I kept sitting. Hours passed until I finally rose, turned out the lights, and went to bed, exhausted.

At one in the morning, I woke, and I was cold. Realizing I needed to do something about the cold, I grudgingly got up and fetched the electric blanket from the closet. Removing the quilts and putting the electric blanket in place was simple. I attached the controls, plugged them in, turned the blanket on, and replaced the quilts. Once that was complete, I got back into bed, and I could already feel the electric blanket beginning to warm me.

As Sunday became Monday, I noticed my stress level was still very high, as was my anxiety. I had already decided not to drink alcohol or smoke any whacky baccy for a while as I wanted my mind clear. After my morning meditation and chores and waiting until eight o'clock, my first phone call was to my insurance company. When I began telling her the story about my stove exploding, I became very emotional, which surprised me. I told the woman I needed to phone her back and hung up. After collecting myself, I did just that, and I was able to keep my emotions in check.

However, I would return to why this incident happened whenever I wasn't busy. During my morning meditation, I asked aloud why this happened, and during other quiet times, I would also ask aloud why it happened.

I posted the experience on FaceBook, and some FaceBook friends, as they're referred to, responded with encouragement and kindness, which benefited me greatly. Strangely, though, many people I thought were face-to-face friends completely ignored my post, and several of those I then emailed or texted, and I repeated the short version of the explosion, only to be ignored again. I telephoned my daughter and son, and after leaving them voicemails describing

the incident, they both ignored my message. I phoned or texted several other friends, some of whom I have known for decades, leaving voicemails or messages saying that if they had five minutes, I had been through an experience I would like to share. Again, to my surprise, only one of the people I contacted responded, which is odd because my reaching out to anyone for anything is rare. My childlike expectation, however, was that my friends would want to hear what had happened to me. I also wanted comfort from those I thought were my friends, and I believed hearing from them was a sure thing because they were my friends.

My empathy towards others is deep and genuine. I am not a transactional person with those I call friends, so I was emotionally hurt by those I considered friends ignoring me. A requirement I have for friendship is that I'm not the only person being a friend.

However, my deeper issue wasn't with them, and I started to see that whole train of thought and the accompanying emotions as a distraction from the real issue.

I was born a stranger, so much so that my mother gave me away at birth. She gave me away to strangers, probably saying or thinking, "Here. I don't want him." And in the few minutes it must have taken to hand me over, two highly significant events occurred that could never be undone. My chance of being raised in a family that cared and loved me and my chance at unconditional love evaporated.

To this very day, I remain the type of person most have never encountered. I'm a stranger everywhere I have traveled, which has become a badge of honor. My badge of honor is that I have made it this far safely and, to a great extent, without anyone's help. That said, I have what I thought were friends despite having left everyone and everything I loved or who loved me to travel on and experience all this life has to offer me.



I have written stories for as long as I can remember, and while I have not been as successful as the most successful writers, I am successful in my own right. I write from a lifetime of having experienced the life I wanted to experience while also experiencing a life that wasn't my choice to experience.

But somewhere lately, I lost my motivation and the singular purpose for why I write stories. I write because there are stories I have to tell. But somewhere, through laziness or a need to try to fit in, I began writing almost unconsciously for subsets of people. It doesn't matter who or which subset that is, but what matters is I had stopped writing for myself.

In my initial meetings with people, animals, birds, or insects, I am highly gregarious, which many people misunderstand as me being a social person. I inserted gregariousness to find out who and how people are as quickly as possible. Are you friendly, or are you not? Are you mean or violent? Are you mentally ill in a negative way? These are the questions my initial, gregarious meeting with new things undergoes, and they continue throughout the life of the relationship.

I met countless people as I hitchhiked and traveled for four and a half years through twenty-five countries. I created a friendship scale, with ten being the best; only a scant few ever made it past one, and fewer reached nine, mainly because the definition of a traveler is someone who travels from place to place, and I was a traveler. I haven't gone back to rekindle friendships with the people I left. I keep a distance from mean people and narcissists that disinclines them from coming closer, and if that doesn't work, I will tell them I am not interested in their friendship.

The explosion helped me understand that I didn't know there was a need to add a third category called acquaintances to the two I had for friends and those I loved. I only had two categories:

Friends and Loves. I have now added the third category, acquaintances, and I added that because my expectation from acquaintances is just that they aren't mean. My categories are now Acquaintances, Friends, and last, but in no way least, is Love.

However, the explosion and subsequent self-reflection helped me realize that my writing should not, in any way, be determined by my acquaintances, friends, or loves. The gatekeeper I had positioned at the entrance to my creativity somehow got removed, allowing those who voiced opinions or arguments to influence my creativity positively or negatively. And, in the ensuing time, I began changing my writing to appease others.

As the days since the explosion grew from four to five, I kept asking, "Why did this happen?" as I said I would. Of course, my stress and anxiety levels were still super high, but people I thought were friends continued ignoring me. When only a few people bothered to follow up and ask how I was, I was more than a tad embarrassed that these were the same people I had succumbed to and altered my writing to try to appease.

I came to see the reason between the blast in my bedroom and the self-imposed introspection that resulted was that I needed to ask again my two core questions: who am I now, and why am I here now? The similarity was this: just as I had been led away from the explosion, with only seconds to spare, I will add, now I was being directed away from a different type of harm. That this harm was self-inflicted harm isn't the issue; changing that harm is now the issue.

In my world, I am a deeply empathetic person. I care about people more than politics, television shows, gossip, or shallowness. I care more about a person than any argument or disagreement we might have.

I tend to keep my life's meaning, my core, to myself, including that I am a lover of ideas, laughter, happiness, creativity, and optimism. My traits are mine and for me to know. Reading my stories is the only way people will discover the depths I have mined in my life. While I hope my stories entice and seduce people to want to read more, I try to write my best for everyone.

So, I am relieving the burden of friendship from those I mistook as friends when they were just acquaintances, or in some cases, I was only a transaction in their lives. At the same time, I will keep those who also felt they were my friends as friends. I feel genuine sadness in learning that I am merely a transaction to some people. Nonetheless, I now accept the people I know for who they are rather than what I want them to be. And I have come to understand that if someone wanted to contact me, they would have.

I believe there are other reasons for the explosion, too. The explosion was never meant to hurt me. However, as one friend commented, "I must admit your spirit protectors were cutting it pretty close." The explosion was meant to significantly impact my conduct and way of thinking and force me to sit down to reflect deeply and accurately on who and what is essential to my life. The blast reminded me to ask, Who am I now, and Why am I here now?

Before the stove exploded, I thought my life needed to return to what I called a "gloves off" approach, meaning I would no longer cater to, dumb down, or intellectualize my writing so some people could more readily understand what I or my writing is about. I learned recently that catering my writing to the intellect, feelings, or both to subsets of people negates my ability to write my story authentically. And, of course, writing my stories is to tell the story using the best grammar, punctuation, and spelling I can. That's it. I'm writing stories.

Of course, since there are no absolutes in life, I will limit myself to not caring about the things I cannot change. People who are recalcitrant about politics, religion, or creativity possess personalities I doubt I can change. However, writing about their decision to be so obstinate is something I will and have gladly taken on when we have sat down together.

And, in a strange loop of logic, that is how I have lived my life. But also, in my life, there were times when I relaxed my will and core beliefs to try to fit in. This fact is simple: a stranger cannot be a part of a community, clan, or tribe because they have no shared sphere of influence. Individual members of a community, tribe, or clan have their personal lives to share, plus they share the collective lives of those they grew up with, while the stranger comes in with only his life to share, and many don't care about his story.

No matter how often I have tried to fit in, I failed. Trying to fit in has never worked for me, usually because I didn't stay long enough or everyday life became boring, and I moved on. Metaphorically speaking, someone always spots me and shouts, "Hey, you're a stranger. You don't belong here," so I quit trying to belong. But the thought never occurred to me, not for the longest time, that I should never have tried to fit in. And I don't know why fitting in seemed so important to me. Apparently, I again strayed from my life's path and again tried to fit in despite having proof that being my singular self works just fine.

I have left places and people because I was getting too much attention, and being the center of attention made me feel too anxious, yet that's ironic because my trying to fit in caused the attention.

If I were to guess why I still try to fit in, it would be because I was given away not only at birth, but I was given away so many times that I lived in seven different foster homes by the time I was

five. That might also be why I only like transactional people in stores and restaurants. And fitting in might mean I finally succeeded where I had failed every time as a child.

As I sat meditating this morning, I felt sad I was alone. That is an odd feeling for me because I enjoy and like being alone. I live like I do because I want to live this way. I created all I have because this is what I want. And yet, this morning, something was missing. I sat in the quiet and calm of myself and my home, but I longed for a hug. I asked my god if I could have a hug, but I didn't know how I would get the hug. All I knew was that a hug would feel good to me. Would it be my god, the universe, protector spirits, or the spirit of my deceased dog? I felt the need to ask for a hug from god. In this time of feeling so profoundly alone, I asked my god out loud for a hug.

“God”, I asked, “Can I please have a hug?”

And as I sat alone, I began to feel a warm, encompassing energy surrounding me. The feeling was subtle, like how a heated room softly enveloped me as I entered from the cold outside. Or how a gust of warm air, seemingly from nowhere, wafted over me on a summer's day. The hug was tender and caring, emanating from outside my body, encircling and seducing me until finally capturing my heart and soul. I was being hugged by love and caring, and I no longer felt alone or lonely. I felt complete and that I had finally received all that I needed from this experience.

What could have been horrible wasn't; instead, the blast had blown me back onto my path.

Having reconnected with my god so firmly and being anything other than my genuine self is now beyond my control. I am happy and optimistic once again.

The End.

Written by Peter Skeels © October 8th, 2023