

## Explode a Moment and Shrink a Century

### What does it mean to “explode a moment?”

Exploding a moment relies on the writer’s ability to manipulate time and space in order to emphasize the importance of a single moment, in which time seems to stop for the person or character experiencing this moment. By using rich detail, playing with the five senses, and delving into the consciousness of a character, the writer is able to stretch a brief moment into an entire paragraph or a page or more. Such split-second moments stretch across a page and seem to occur, for the reader, almost in slow motion.

### What does an “exploded” moment look like?

The inside of the place surprised me. Not because it wasn’t how I had imagined it, but because I had never taken the time to imagine it at all. Paper-thin walls covered in paneling and a waiting room with a few straight-back chairs. I could hear a television playing at the end of the hall. I glanced toward the nurses’ desk, then moved stealthily into the hallway. Ten good steps and I found myself inside a barren, clinical-looking room. Thin white curtains hanging limply from tiny rails, running in a maze across the ceiling. I could hear the mixture of television game shows and soap operas buzzing from behind these frail cloth barriers. Most of the curtains weren’t pulled completely, and I could make out what looked like vinyl dentist chairs behind each antiseptic curtain. I could hear machines pumping and sucking, thumping and churning. I thought I recognized my grandfather’s boots behind one curtain, and I repositioned myself.

My grandfather was making himself comfortable in one of the vinyl chairs. He had placed his left arm on a wide, flat armrest and rolled up his sleeve. The nurse who had walked him back had just finished adjusting the knobs and buttons on an ugly metal and fiberglass machine, a bundle of hoses and nozzles growing perversely out of it. She bent down to rub ointment on his arm. The needle appeared to me the size of a pencil, and I watched it sink into my grandfather’s arm. Limp and gnarled. I knew his arm well. In the last year or so, the outline of the shunt had become scarily visible from beneath his skin, the papery flesh between each vein having sunken, I imagined, from years of needles just like this one—from tubes poking, prodding, and abusing his veins and arteries. His withered and bruised flesh seemed barely to cling to his bones, and this was why. I winced. My grandfather didn’t even blink.

He was used to it. For nearly eight years they had been draining the life from his body. They told him that it cleansed his blood—something his kidneys refused to do shortly after his first heart attack. So now he came to the center twice a week, every week, to have his blood *cleansed*. At first, he tried to drive himself. But not anymore. He was sixty-nine years old. You wouldn’t have guessed it. Dialysis is a slow road. He once moved hundreds of cattle in a single day . . . Now, he could barely open a pickle jar. With every year he needed a little more help. He couldn’t even clean his own gutters.

Other men and women were in other chairs, behind other curtains, with their own machines hissing and gurgling, TV reruns their only company for the next two hours—three for some. The smell was strong. Iodine and antiseptic—as though the walls had absorbed the mixture.

“Ah, you must be Josh.”

## Explode a Moment and Shrink a Century

### What does it mean to “shrink a century?”

Shrinking a century is simply a writing strategy one may employ in which time is condensed by omitting *details* and focusing instead on *meaning*. To shrink a century you may start with an experience in which time is an element—not in the way of details, but rather an experience in which the *passage of time* carries some meaningful importance. If we were to write down every detail of every year, week, day, and minute that passed, you might end up with thousands of pages—and who wants to read all that? However, neither should you ignore the significance of time—it can be extremely important to the reader’s understanding of the significance of an experience. For instance, you could write, “She died,” but that that’s deadly boring and doesn’t really represent the magnitude of the experience. It’s much better to write, “We married in the spring; she died in the fall. It was the bitterest winter of my life.” In the second sentence we have greater human interest. We’ve managed to condense a period of months into a sentence or two, and yet we’ve retained the importance of the passage of time. We now have more reason to read further. This sentence would make a great narrative hook.