**Exploding the Moment**

By Dee Grimm

Imagine you are in the last game of a baseball tournament. The bases are loaded and it’s your turn to bat. The coach walks up to you and asks you not to swing at the ball. For a moment you wonder why until you hear your coach whisper to his assistant, “They’ll never strike out that shrimp.” You then realize you are on the first string only because you are short and too difficult to strike out.

Now, imagine you have written a freewrite or portfolio on this experience and you want to revise it. One of the things you MUST do before you revise is to locate or identify the BIG MOMENT in the story and build on it as much and as strongly as you can. We call this “exploding a moment.” Here is how the writer of the above story exploded his moment:

*I could feel my cheeks flush red with embarrassment. I reached down and picked up the bat. It was cold in my hands. I looked up at the stands and I could see my father cheering. He was thrusting his fist up in the air and shouting something I couldn’t understand. I looked at the pitcher. The ball was moving up and out of his glove following his hand, in one fluid motion. I swung before it was halfway there. “Stee-rike,” the umpire shouted…*

Here’s another writer exploding a moment when she poured a quart of milk over her sister’s head in an essay called “Sisters,” by Jan Wilson. Notice this exploded moment is quite a bit longer. Ask yourself why this is more effective than simply saying, “then I dumped the milk over my sister’s head and she was a real mess.”

*I watched myself begin this horrible deed. My hand seemed to suddenly have a will of its own. I picked up the milk carton. The spout was already open. My arm extended over Carol’s head, tipping the carton. The liquid poured in a slow, steady thick unending stream down through her long blonde hair, soaking the back of her clothes and running onto the floor. As the milk reached the floor, I shifted the spout slightly to begin another long milk journey down the front of her. It poured over her forehead, in the eyes, running in rivers down each side of her nose, converging on the chin and splashing into her plate. Her food was soon awash and the milk poured over the edge and ran into her lap. And still I poured on—it was too late to stop now. The rapture of it all. Oh, sweet revenge.*

*Carol was shocked into absolute silence, her milk-washed eyes staring at me in total disbelief—almost uncomprehending. What had I done? I only meant to pour a little to scare her and now it was all over—everywhere. Her chair was a four-legged island in the middle of a giant white pond in the kitchen floor. How could one quart of milk go so far? For a second or two she didn’t react and I had a brief but fleeting prayer that she was stunned speechless. However, not for long.*

*“Daddeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!” she screamed at the top of her lungs. The sound of cocktail glasses being knocked over the coffee table in the living room and my father charging around the corner happened almost simultaneously. In an instant he took in the whole scene. Horrible big sister pours milk over innocent little sister’s head. It simply couldn’t have looked much worse. It didn’t take any smarts to realize that. I know there was no way of explaining my way out of this one. “Guilty” was the immediate verdict of the judge. My mother, the long since powerless “jury” of one, as usual, did not interfere.*

*My father, in self-righteous splendor, straightened to his full 6’6” of height, and livid with rage, dragged me into my bedroom, stripping off his belt on the way. I tried to escape his iron grip, to no avail. I had the horrible impression this was going to be a beating I’d never forget.*

This is how the piece continues; notice how exploding the earlier incident brings home the terror the two girls feel growing up in a house where parents were not always in control.

*Later, laying on the bed, my whole body agonized with pain. The least movement brought more tears to my eyes, and I could feel the welts raising on my back. I couldn’t imagine being able to get up, much less walk to school the next day.*

*The door creaked open and by the light from the hall Carol crept across the room. “Oh, Janie, Janie,” she whispered, bending over me. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to do it.” She didn’t mean to do what? I asked her.*

*“Yell for Daddy,” she said. Her tears splashed on my face as she put her arms around my shoulders, hugging me gently.*

*I struggled up on one elbow and wrapped an arm around her. “It’s O.K. Carol. Don’t worry,” I crooned, trying to comfort her. She seemed so small, frightened and confused.*

*We wept together, quietly, in the darkened bedroom—clinging to each other in near desperation. The only other sound was the faint tinkle of ice cubes in the kitchen as the next round of drinks was being mixed.*

Notice how the writer put the reader in the moment with her snapshots, thoughtshots, and bits of dialogue. The more the writer describes the crucial moment, the more significant the emotion becomes.