

The Fiery Five

Only five people made it out alive when the gas station exploded. Five. That's what's in the official report. Early estimates said there may have been as many as twenty people pumping gas at the BP on Wilson St. that day. Some witnesses claimed they saw six or seven people make it out alive; one person even said ten people survived, but there were five people. No more, no less. The rest were either instantly incinerated or caught a ride on a fireball reaching a thousand feet into the air and were scattered about the town along with debris. People from three counties away reported seeing the massive pillars of smoke. It was such a big ordeal it made national news. Perhaps you've heard of it? It was called the BP Blast, and it leveled an entire city block in the small town of North Point, NY, almost two years ago.

The five survivors shared one thing in common: they sustained no injuries. Other than singed of hair and torn clothing, none of the lucky quintet had a scratch on them. At first, law enforcement officers discredited any claims of anyone surviving the blast, but credible testimonies given by community members who witnessed the event corroborated the stories maintained by those five individuals, and so they became The Fiery Five.

Originally, six people were said to have survived the explosion. Most of the confusion over whether the final count was five or six was based on false witness testimony that went viral on Facebook before the authorities could properly dig through the facts. A sixth person did step forward claiming she too survived the explosion but was later discredited on national television when a rather determined news media member found photographs of the woman shopping at the

local Meijer on her Instagram account taken at the exact time of the tragedy. The supposed sixth survivor, a preschool teacher named Daisy Keller, was forced to make a public apology and was sentenced to 100 hours of community service for lying about her involvement. She was quoted as saying she, "just wanted to feel important."

The five tragic heroes who survived the incident included a dentist, a high school junior, a freelance writer, a pharmacist, and a homeless man, who staggered rather miraculously out of the debris and reeking of booze ten minutes after the fireball ignited. Once EMTs examined each of the survivors to make sure none of them sustained any serious or critical injuries, The Fiery Five were handed over to police for official investigation.

Police interviewed the high school junior first. Savannah Wainright, age 17. Volleyball and track star at North High. She was wearing her letterman jacket when she came running out of the smoke. She claimed she had been using the bathroom out back when it happened, and that the blast had knocked her off the toilet and caused her to pee on herself. However, this made her of little use to the police because she didn't actually *see* what happened, she only heard and felt the explosion. As far as I know, that young woman went on to study chemistry at Syracuse University and is just about to wrap up her sophomore year as a college student.

Savannah was with her mother, Susan, and younger brother, Nate, at the time of the explosion. A majority of their car, a 2003 VW Beetle, was said to have flown a block away and landed in the backyard of a man named Jim Stewart. Jim and his Corgi, Skippy, were nearly crushed by the front bumper of the German auto just as they stepped outside to see what the commotion was all about. While neither Jim nor Skippy were injured, Savannah lost both family members. Can you imagine not only losing a brother, but also losing your mother the same day? Madness. But, I digress. Despite her losses, Savannah cited her life-long relationship with Jesus

Christ as the sole reason for her survival and blessed her departed family members, saying "I'll see them in His light soon" at a press conference two days later without so much as a single shed tear. She did, however, refuse to comment further on what happened in the bathroom.

Police interviewed the freelance writer second. Craig Bosely, age 35. Balding. Penchant for Acapulco shirts and Marlboros. Craig wrote lifestyle articles for the local newspaper and a magazine circulated in the big city two counties over. His specialty was writing restaurant reviews, which he apparently did for a living before moving to North Point sometime in the early 2000s. The writer mentioned in his official statements that "This kind of city drama is the exact type of [expletive deleted] that made me move out to the boonies in the first place." The media tried to spin the comment as a call for local pride. In turn, Craig would become the spokesperson for a local dealership and was handed a key to the city. He was also made the poet laureate, even though he had never written a single poem. Craig was driving a car he purchased from the very dealership he would later sponsor, a used 79' Plymouth, when the BP station lit up like a Christmas tree. The writer told police he figured the automobile's solid-steel frame helped him withstand the blast. Paramedics found Bosely and his vehicle turned on their side and covered in bagels and coffee grounds in the kitchen of the café next door. The writer said he usually doesn't wear his seatbelt, but for some odd reason put it on just before he went to leave the gas station that day. Unlike Savannah, Craig Bosely had never been a religious man, but when asked if he felt divine intervention influenced his decision to wear a seatbelt that day, Craig had no further comment.

The dentist and the pharmacist were actually a married couple originally from Long Island referred to as the Anxious Olsons. Bill and Mary, aged 45 and 46. No children, no pets, met in high school, got married, and made for the country shortly thereafter. Twenty-year

residents of North Point, they got their nicknames partly because they were always on the go, but also because they were rarely seen in public outside of their jobs, and when they were, both went as far out of the way as possible to avoid contact with other people. In a place where everyone knew your business as well as they knew your name, this was unusual. Not unlikely, but unusual, considering both worked so closely with the public in their respective professions. Police interrogated the Olsons far more extensively than the other three survivors because of the, well, let's just say peculiar circumstances surrounding how paramedics found them. They were both reportedly wearing flame-retardant suits when EMS arrived, including helmets and facemasks, steel-toed boots, Kevlar vests, shoulder pads, shin guards, wrist protectors, and cups. And no, those aren't misprints. I don't think I could believe what they were wearing myself if I hadn't witnessed it with my own eyes. In defense of their outfits, Bill and Mary took to Twitter in the days that followed saying their clothing choices were because "#youneverknow #bettersafethansorry".

The final survivor interrogated by police was me, the homeless man, Charles Daubney, age 52. My family and friends mostly live in Cleveland. Not the one in Ohio, but the other one in Tennessee, where I'm originally from. Prior to the 9/11 attacks, I lived in New York and traded auto stocks. When the bottom of the market fell out, I got the ax, along with several hundred former coworkers. My wife died of cancer two years ago and ever since then I've just been sort of, well, let's call it "roaming the country," taking on odd jobs here and there to stay fed. When the national index took a nosedive it awakened something inside of me. Kelly dying was just further fodder on the fire. Life just didn't mean the same thing anymore. So I left the city behind and decided it was time to go back to my roots and moved out to the country. Unfortunately, most of my net worth was tied up in bonds that also went kaput when the market bottomed out. I

was eventually evicted from my apartment in Long Hill, just outside of the Great Swamp National Wildlife Refuge there, and I've been on the road ever since. It's not the most proud life, but it's simpler. It's been so long I almost can't imagine what life was like living in the city. Although, a part of me feels like there really isn't much difference between the country and the city. Everyone has problems. The city just has more people to cause them.

I've finally decided to write down my account of what happened mainly because of how widely publicized and falsely drawn the other four stories have been. Craig Bosely, after receiving the key to the city, wrote his own take on the events in a now famous editorial for the *The New York Times* called "Life in the Incinerator", which was later lengthened and released as a personal memoir. He's currently on tour to promote the book and share his experiences surviving the tragedy. It's a good read, if you're into sappy, sensationalized bullshit, but I suppose a good read nonetheless. The book sold over 20,000 copies in its first week and is well on its way to becoming a national best seller. In fact, just last week I was walking past a small general store in Dayton, OH, with a TV in the window and there was Craig on some talk show no doubt yammering on about what it was like to come-to covered in burnt bagels and smelling like the insides of a gas pump.

When the incident took place, I was in the Beer Cave, a solid-concrete refrigerated room with only one way in and one way out. I told the police several cans and bottles of beer burst when the pumps exploded and that's why I smelled so much like alcohol. They said they understood, but I've been around the block enough to know they never took my claims seriously. About why I smelled like booze, that is. I still don't know how I made it out alive that day. Some nights I have nightmares about a ghost version of me that's wandering the world and doesn't realize he's dead. I wake up in cold sweats, panting, but I usually feel better after a few minutes

and a glass of water. I'm not sure why I'm telling you this, but I think it has a lot to do with what hasn't been said about The Fiery Five. And I'll explain.

While his story is entertaining, Mr. Bosely is wrong about why the fire started, and I'll go on record right now and dare anyone to prove otherwise. From what I've read, each and every interview and account of what happened given by my fellow survivors is either incorrect or lacking one very crucial detail. And it's time to set the record straight. According to the writer, static electricity caused by uncharacteristically dry summer air resulted in a spark that ignited a pool of gasoline or some other flammable liquid lying on the concrete. The Olsons corroborated that story by saying they had spilled an indeterminate amount of gasoline on the ground just prior to explosion.

For starters, the media should have spent more time on why the Olsons were wearing fire-resistant riot gear. How that wasn't a crucial talking point baffles me to no end. I'll admit I don't know either of them from Dick and Jane, but from the moment I saw those two pull into the station and up to Pump Four I had a terrible feeling something bad was about to happen. I know a "gut instinct" isn't a valid reason to accuse anyone of something like the deaths of close to twenty people and decimating an entire city block, but I took no comfort in watching Bill and Mary step out of their vehicle dressed like it was May 4, 1970. None, whatsoever.

I had just wrapped up a three-day job hauling manure for a man named Thed Tomlinson, who owned a dairy farm five miles outside of town, the afternoon before the explosion. After enjoying a delicious breakfast made by the farmer's wife, Minnie, and collecting my pay, I made my way up County Road 583 into town to check for help wanted ads. I've found that city hall bulletin boards are a great place to check for jobs, and was on my way to North Point's city center when Mother Nature called, so I stopped at the BP just inside of town. There was the

typical bustle of people coming in and out of the gas station you might find in any small community. A few cars were parked at the pumps, including Mr. Bosely's Plymouth and the Wainright's VW, while a group of older gentleman shot the breeze in wicker chairs near the front entrance of the station's store. The old men all stopped talking as I approached, all eyes on me. I figured they must not get too many outsiders and just kindly nodded in their direction as I walked in.

"Hey yeah," the clerk said to me as I entered. It was a man in his mid-thirties wearing a goatee on his chin and a bright white polo shirt with a green collar and the BP logo on his left breast. He was smiling just as brightly as his shirt and looked so ready to assist me I thought he might leap over the counter and carry me to whatever I needed.

"Anything I can help you with?"

"Yeah," I told him, "I need to use the bathroom and buy some snacks for the road," pointing to the pack on my back.

The smile on his face vanished almost instantly. To my right and out the window, the elderly sight-seers were peering in through the glass. The clerk hesitated a moment and nodded and produced a small blue key with a little stick-figure man attached to it.

"Outback," he said. "Return the key when you're done."

To be perfectly honest, I didn't really need the snacks, and wouldn't have bought anything even if the explosion hadn't happened that day. I've just learned that you can't walk into a gas station and say you're not going to buy anything and then go around back and stink up their lavatory without catching some guff for it. Most places won't even let you use the bathroom unless you're buying something.

It was at that moment the Olsons walked in. I don't think I'll ever erase that image: The two of them, one-by-one, entering the cramped station sideways and decked out, head-to-toe, in the flame-resistant riot gear I mentioned earlier. Apparently, this was a common occurrence because no one else in the station, the clerk included, seemed to think it was strange.

"Good morning!" the clerk shouted in the same manner he had greeted me. "Anything I can help you with today Bill? How bout' it, Mary?"

Their returns were the life-equivalent of rocks attempting personalities.

"The usual," Bill shot back. "Gas and two coffees. One for me and one for Mary."

"Certainly," said the clerk. "What pump?"

"Four," said Bill, waddling over to the counter with two hot coffees in his hands already. He moved as quickly as a person could in a get-up like that and set the drinks down. Then he began digging through the suit to find what I sincerely hoped was his wallet.

It was.

"What's new?" the clerk said, as he rung up their sale. "Are those the new helmets you was telling me about last week?"

"Indeed," said Bill, with as much brevity as possible. "They just came in the mail yesterday."

Bill pulled out a two twenties and tapped their edges impatiently on the countertop.

"Are they comfortable?" asked the clerk, eyeing the couple over with great admiration.

He responded matter-of-factly.

"They get the job done, Zach. Now, how much do I owe you?"

"\$60.92."

Then the clerk turned to me and asked if I was well.

"You don't look so good," he continued.

I was so busy staring at Mary and Bill and wondering what corresponding level of The Twilight Zone I had just stepped into I completely ignored the station clerk instructing me to take the key and be quick about it. He stared me down suspiciously as I approached the counter.

"You been in town long, sir?" he asked, already full-well knowing my answer.

"No," I responded, "I just arrived in town now. I've been working up on Thed Tomlinson's dairy farm." I paused a moment to see if they recognized the name, but nobody moved. I then told them I was on my way to town hall to see about work and that I stopped off to use the bathroom and maybe buy a snack or a drink. I think that was actually the exact moment I decided I needed a beer. But, I'm getting off track.

Out of nowhere, Bill Olson turns to me and goes, "Mary and I were just up at Thed's this morning. We bought twenty pounds of fertilizer." And then Bill turned and gave his wife a look I don't think I'll ever forget and says, "...to run experiments."

"I helped move that manure," I said proudly, attempting conversation, but the clerk moved me along with an obvious clearing of his throat.

"Quick and the key," he reminded me again, "The doors lock automatically behind you. I don't feel like calling Frank to pry open the shitter door again today, so don't let it shut without the key."

Well, I had no idea who Frank was and absolutely no desire to find out, so I obliged the man with a nod, picked up the key, politely circumnavigated Mary, and made my way to the back of the building, where I found two doors in serious need of re-painting and laced in graffiti. On the one sat sun-faded lettering that said, "Genlemen" without the T. The other said, "Females" in black paint that looked somewhat new. I tried the handle out of habit, which, of

course, wouldn't move because it was locked, and then used the key like I should have in the first place. The state of the bathroom looked pretty similar to the state of its door. Paint falling way from equally eroded cinder blocks painted white and green in the company colors. The floor was a bluish-gray concrete with large cracks and a wet brown substance I sincerely hoped was just mud tracked about here and there. An entire roll of toilet paper sat in an unrolled bunch in the corner of the small room next to the toilet; only a few sheets of toilet paper left on the current roll. All in all, it was a typical gas station bathroom, and I made as much good time as I could.

While I went about my business, all I could think about was what that man Bill had said.

"We bought twenty pounds of fertilizer to run experiments."

Now, just what sort of business do you suppose "experiments" and "twenty pounds of fertilizer" have in the same sentence?

My first instincts were benign. I vaguely remembered reports about Timothy McVeigh, the Oklahoma City Bomber, and his infamous fertilizer truck bomb. But, to be perfectly honest, I was too amused and terrified by the actual sight of the couple to think clearly. With the way those two looked and the demeanor they gave off I was half tempted to walk out the back of that gas station and never look back, Frank the Shitter-Door Prier be-damned. I trust people and always have, the same way Thed Tomlinson trusted me around his cattle, or how Merrill Lynch used to trust me with major hedge funds, but something stank, and it wasn't the bathroom.

Small town/big city; weird people live everywhere. I've always held that if a person judges someone else based on how they appear without getting to know them, than that same person must still believe the Earth is flat based on how it looks out their front door. And while Bill and Mary put the downright scare in me that morning, I finished my business in the bathroom, rounded the corner, nearly ran over some young kid on her way to the bathroom

(Savannah Wainright), bid hello to the elderly gentlemen in lawn chairs again, and entered the station to return the key as instructed.

The Olsons were already back outside and pumping gas into their Smart Car. They're the damndest little things. I can hardly believe they go over twenty-miles-per-hour. They look like children's toys, in my opinion. But, at the time, I didn't have a vehicle, so what real say do I have on who drives what and why? Bill was sitting in the driver's seat, while Mary stood next to the vehicle, watching the fuel gauge and price tickers click away from zero as the tank filled. I remember it was hot that morning and already well into the eighties by the time the explosion happened. I had worked up a pretty good sweat just from walking around. It must've been ten or twenty degrees hotter with all of that riot gear on. Everything was really dry, too. It looked like it hadn't rained in the area for days, maybe even weeks. Looking back, it probably would have been a nice day if things hadn't turned out the way they did.

As I walked through the station door, Craig Bosely, the writer, was getting out of his own vehicle to pump gas. I can clearly remember his wide stride, almost a strut, getting up out of his massive car and the swing of his right arm back as he shut the Plymouth's door. He was wearing an unbuttoned yellow Acapulco shirt covered in red palm trees that day that was nearly soaked the entire way through.

I can almost recall his left hand was to his face as I walked by, but I only caught a short glimpse of him then before I entered the station.

I kindly placed the key back on the counter and thanked the clerk, who was too busy reading an NRA magazine to acknowledge me and grumbled apathetically. Being as hot as it was, I decided a drink might not be such a bad idea after all, and why not after a job well done?

The air inside The Beer Cave was freezing on my sweat-soaked skin. I can remember it made my shorts stick to my legs, but it felt great compared to the brutal heat sweltering outside. Most of my options for beer were domestics (Budweiser, Coors, Miller, Pabst), but I'm a simple man and don't really care what I drink, unlike a lot of folks from the city who need their beer to have sprig-of-unicorn or whatever other colorful bullshit the kids are drinking these days.

As I grabbed a random six-pack from the racks, I noticed something unusual happening in the parking lot. From where I was standing, I could see the inside of the store through the glass door of the cooler and bits and pieces of the parking lot through the front windows near the front entrance. There were two views I could make out in particular through the racks of beer: clear shots of Craig Bosely's Plymouth and the Olsons' Smart Car at opposite ends of the station.

All of a sudden I could hear shouting from outside. I looked up and saw Bill yelling at Mary from inside the Smart Car. Mary looked like she was ignoring most of what Bill was shouting as she ran over to the trash can in between the pumps to grab a handful of paper towels, ran back to the car, and then dropped out of sight on the other side of the tiny vehicle. I couldn't for the life of me understand why Bill was yelling so much, and so angrily, considering how mild-mannered, weird, yes, but mild-mannered the man seemed in person. Mary got back into the car yelling at her own frenetic pace, and the two began pulling out of the station.

That's when I look to my right and find Craig Bosley, the media's Wonder Boy and Meal Ticket, climbing out of his Plymouth to rerack the gasoline nozzle and twist his gas cap back into place before slapping the hatch shut and climbing back into his car. But not before he flicks a smoldering cigarette to the ground.

Boom: ipso facto North Point Nagasaki.

Craig never mentions this in any of his interviews. It doesn't appear in his book, either. The way the writer paints the portrait, one of the Olsons caused the explosion by dragging their feet on the ground and building up a static charge in the dry air. When one of them went to place the nozzle back it sparked and proceeded to blast a hole in the ground ten-feet deep and thirty-feet wide. Mary admitted to police she spilled the gasoline and that it might have been possible she collected enough static electricity to ignite the pump, but her testimony doesn't add up with what Mr. Bosely claims. Mary Olson vehemently argued she and her husband were halfway onto Wilson St. by the time the explosion happened. Forensics haven't been able to determine whether or not they were next to the pump when it exploded or if they were actually on the street, but something tells me if a gas station explodes and you're two feet from ground zero, odds are you aren't walking away to write books *or* experiment with manure.

So, there it is. That's the truth of the matter. I apologize for the way it's written. Writing has never been my strong point, and the research to piece everything together and make sure I had all my ducks in a row before I began was like pulling lion's teeth. That's partly why I've waited so long to write this story down, but I felt it had to be told. If not for the sake of truth, but for the good names of misunderstood country folk like Bill and Mary, who have probably received more public attention on account of what happened than either cared to in their entire lives.

As for me, I made out alright. Right after the initial wave of publicity hit, and word got out that I was jobless and homeless, offers for new jobs came on like freight trains. I now work as a local tax preparer in a small town in Virginia called Blacksburg. Some of you may know the place as the collegiate home of the Hokies. It isn't much, and definitely nothing like New York City, but I get along just fine. I like that it's a mix between the two. Not so far out as to have

people like Bill and Mary Olson running around in full riot gear for no apparent reason, and not big enough to be the center of some international terrorist plot. I get the feeling walking around here that nothing bad ever happens in Blacksburg, with the exception of the occasional missed midterm or dopey drunken decision.

I'm starting class at the university here in the spring to get my master's in accounting. I think it'll help take my mind off of things. "Lend me some perspective," as they say. Those nightmares have continued to some degree. Sometimes I wake up from dreams about that Wainright girl and her family hitching a ride in a flying VW or that I'm being consumed by fire. Bit by bit I've been able to get back on my feet, and the memories of what happened in North Point fade more with each day that passes. But I'm excited about this stage in my life, and I've got a good feeling about things. I can just tell 2007 isn't going to hold any surprises.