

## FROZEN STARS

*David Scrivner*

I was on my second cup of the day when an email from my wife popped onto my screen, and I clicked it open without really thinking. It said:

WHAT IS UP PLAYER! DON'T YOU THINK THAT WOMAN LIKE THE MEN WHO DRESSES LIKE THE BIG BOSS? ;) MAYBE THE BURST WATCH WILL MAKE YOU THE GUY WHO DRIVES THE LADY'S WILD! COULD BE!! CLICK THIS LINK FOR BEST ROLEXS AND YOU CAN BE SEXY LIKE PRESIDENT BILL CLINTON!

which was confusing for a number of reasons, not least of which was that my wife died three years ago under circumstances that I rarely allow myself to think about directly for fear that I might fall into what I have named the

black-hole of unending mental anguish. Also, in a tribute to my memory for the inane, I seemed to recall reading in a *Details* magazine once (someone left it in the seat-back pocket on a plane and I *really* needed something to read that day; don't judge me) that Clinton was a Tag Heuer, and not a Rolex, man, which meant that someone hadn't done his homework.

Anyway, I just kind of sat there, staring at the screen and working really hard to not let my lower mandible drop the foot and a half to my desk's surface for what must have been something like two minutes, my temperature going a little haywire and my mind a swirl with words like, "tragedy," "survived by," and "burst watch." The last word surely a typo, but it seemed to fit perfectly with the email and the sender and my whole situation in a way that was like, well, the hundreds of tiny watch parts that somehow fit together to click away the seconds until you find that you have to stop wearing a watch because the ticking of the seconds only reminds you of all the stuff that happened in the past and that's the last thing you need when you are trying to sleep.

So then I was reading through the email again and wrinkling up my nose at that winky-face when Mitch Hollingsworth poked his head into my cubicle and asked if I wanted to go with him down to Cosi to get a flatbread

and “eye-fuck that new cashier chick with the lip ring,” which didn’t really sound that great to me, so I lied and told him that I brought a turkey wrap and some hummus from home. He shrugged and told me that it was my loss and he would tell me what she was wearing when he got back, as if she ever wore anything other than a Cosi polo shirt and tight black pants.

After he left, I read the email again and felt some pretty real anger, like I wanted to find the asshole hacker who had somehow gained access to my wife’s—deceased wife’s—account and like break his fucking head open, but then I remembered a story I had heard on NPR a few weeks ago and thought it probably wasn’t some guy—not like the early-nineties movies I had seen growing up where some nerd dressed in all black with fans cooling his neon-glowing motherboards would have carefully massaged the tumblers of my wife’s password until he had gained access to her email and could begin the work of making his fortune selling fake watches. No, the truth was probably that some computer infected with a worm had infected some other computer on which my wife’s information was stored, and that first computer, or some other computer maybe, was now flinging these messages to all of my wife’s contacts, which probably meant that her parents and friends were also getting this and in some weird way no one was sending these emails—they

were just being generated out there somewhere—and my anger kind of lost its force like a sagging hot air balloon because there was no one to blame for it all.

I picked up the file on top of the stack next to my computer and opened it but put it back when I found myself pressing my middle finger like a rubber stamp on the name of each doctor listed in the application for coverage: clearly, right then was not the best time for me to underwrite anything. So I got up and took a walk around the department, past Peter's cubicle, which smelled of curry, and Gayle's, from which Billy Joel's grating abomination, "For the Longest Time" emanated, and I was looking mostly at my shoes and jingling my keys in my pocket and thinking about the first and only time that I had used the ridiculous phrase "black hole of unending mental anguish" out loud, which had been about a year after Elizabeth died. I was going for a jog with my older brother, who had always been a little more together than I, and who was, at 34, successfully running a golf equipment wholesale business while I, at 31, was still kind of bouncing around and reading too much fiction. I was visiting him and his family in Baltimore for a few weeks and, in a pretty sweet way, I think that Phil had decided that he would take this time to straighten me out and get me "back on track," an idea

made literal by him actually getting me out there running laps with him. And so we jogged through the streets of Canton on the way to the high school track and Phil told me that I shouldn't be afraid to really dive into "all the shit" (which is how he referred to my wife's death) and "really get into it," a suggestion whose very need to be uttered accounted, I believe, in some way for our different stations in life. I didn't know how to respond so I just kept pointing out how stupid people looked in their dressy clothes *just to go out to happy hour*, to which Phil made no response. Phil had been jogging more than I, so his voice was deep and confident and mine was wheezy and I felt like I had to be forceful with my words so that they wouldn't be scattered like fallen leaves by the wind. He dialed it back a bit and said that it was unbelievably bad the way things "shook out," but he cared about me and I couldn't let what happened two years ago determine what would happen in the future, and I wanted to tell him that in this case what I wanted was almost entirely irrelevant, but instead I nodded and asked him how much farther I had to go.

Around lap seven, after Phil explained to me that the next step in golf clubs had nothing to do with performance and everything with aesthetics, we returned for a moment to my wife and he said after a long pause that he

was so sorry that it happened. Against my better judgment, I told him that there was a part of me that felt like if I tried to really deal with it I might fall into a black hole of unending mental anguish. He made no response—none. So I tried to then veer back into non-crazy land by saying that what I meant was that I would have to take little bites off this for a long time, and from his further non-response I think that he was realizing that this meant I'd be a bummer to be around for who knows how long, and if he was in fact thinking this, he was right. My phone rang a lot at first, and then not so much.

When I walked past Gayle's office for the second time and heard the cringe worthy doo- wop opening of "For the Longest Time" (really, Gayle? running *this* one back?), I realized two things: 1. I couldn't just keep making laps around the third floor or people would think I was crazy and 2. It would probably be inappropriate for me to enter Gayle's cubicle and retrieve her small stereo so I could then smash it in front of her while singing "I—don't—care—what—consequence it brings—woo-ooo-oo!" so I returned to my cubicle, grabbed my coat, and took the elevator to the lobby. I started walking down the hill to the shopping center that housed Cosi and a coffee

place and a few other stores that would be packed this time of day with workers from the seven office buildings that lined the road along the hill.

But when I got about half-way down the hill, I found myself thinking about all the things I had planned for that day and realized that I wasn't going to do any of them now. I had found that making a list worked best—even the simplest things, like sending a thank you email or paying a bill online—to get through the day. Here was something I could look at to see just how much I was doing. Here was proof: look at all the things I did today! Things had been better lately, but there were some days early on when it was an accomplishment to cross off the first and sometimes only item: make a list of things you are going to do today.

No, I wasn't going to run after work today, and I wasn't going to check my neglected profile on my online dating site, created mostly at the urging of Mitch and the few other people who were probably the closest thing I had to friends, and I wasn't going to read for one hour, and it was all because that email came in like some ransacking crook from a movie and tore everything open just when I had gotten pretty good at putting things away neatly. Instead, I was just going to go home and pace around my apartment and turn the television on and then off and wonder if getting in bed before the sun

was all the way down suggested something about me that would have made me sad to have heard said about someone else. And I was kind of shocked at how much force it held after so long and so much thinking and effort and so many promises, kept and broken, to myself and others.

I made a loop around the Sunoco and started heading back up the hill. There had been a time soon after it happened when I entertained the idea that people could tell that I was different, that I had been marked in some way by Elizabeth's death, which of course made me want to be around people even less, which made me even more uncomfortable around them, which made me more certain that they could see that something was wrong with me, which— you can see where this is going. The pizza delivery guys started calling me by my first name.

On the flight home, I was sure that everyone on the plane knew that the coffin in the plane's belly belonged to me, while at the exact same time I knew that none of them could have known it was there since it had been loaded well before we boarded.

When I reached my building, about three-quarters of the way up Independence Drive, I kept walking up the hill. I felt a little wetness under my arms, so I raised them, one after the other, and zipped the underarm

vents in my jacket about halfway open. And that day in the clinic in Listvyanka, which I would have guessed from the smell was a vet's office and not a doctor's, I had tried to show a doctor who didn't speak English that my wife was no longer able to move her limbs by making what I guessed was a kind of dead face and holding my arms out like a zombie and jerking them up just a little but groaning to show that things weren't working. A week earlier, I had amused/embarrassed Elizabeth in the Beijing train station by clucking and flapping my arms like a chicken to indicate which ramen I wanted. The woman behind the counter allowed this to go on for maybe a little too long before she said, "The chicken, then." But in the clinic, the pantomiming had lost its air of playfulness, and the doctor's eyebrows went up and he spat Russian at me or at the nurses and we all looked at each other and I spent the next fifteen minutes using my phrasebook to write down very carefully what I hoped would translate to "WIFE MORE UNABLE MOVE MUSCLES CHEST HURTS PLEASE HELP" and I didn't have a phone because we were Young and Adventurous! and I really didn't want to start crying in front of a Russian because our journey north from Beijing through Mongolia on the train had done little to dispel my belief that Russians were

aggressive and would despise my liberal American loose-tea drinking weakness.

The ambulance that came to pick us up the next morning looked like a VW Bus's not-so-fun cousin with no windows in the back, which I regretted since it seemed to me that my wife's eyes had lit up yesterday when she saw the unbelievable expanse of Lake Baikal as she had been wheeled into the clinic, and I wished that she could have seen it as we drove next to it for the first few miles. The name on the back of the vehicle was a combination of letters and numbers separated by a dash like the name of a missile or rocket, and that reminded me of a short story I read in high-school where a Communist farmer explains that he didn't name mules or horses for the same reason that you didn't name a hammer or a screwdriver and this, this, is what I was thinking about as I held my wife's hand tightly on the hilly road back to Irkutsk because she could no longer grip mine.

The hospital in Irkutsk was clean and bright and my wife of two years died there after three days spent attached to every kind of life-support machine imaginable and then I walked through the front doors on the other side of the world and wasn't sure where I would sleep that night. The one English-speaking doctor there told me that my wife's condition "Was like

lightning being struck,” and I knew what he meant but I wasn’t sure if the emphasis on randomness was supposed to make me feel better or worse.

After I left the hospital and had waited at two different bus stops for about 30 minutes, I became convinced that the bus table I had been given in the hospital was out of date, so I began walking until I reached the waterfront where people were roller-skating or biking and some were having beers and kebabs. Stereos blasted American Top 40 dance music, and I followed the path along the river until I reached a square with a big statue of some Russian bad-ass surrounded by scaffolding. I sat down there and tried to figure out what it meant that my wife hadn’t been able to talk to me or blink her eyes of her own volition in her final day or two because her nervous system was shutting the body down section by section like the last worker turning out of the lights in an office, and I wondered if the woman who had told me once that “Billy Joel is to music as Nicholas Sparks is to literature” had been trapped in there somewhere or if she was already gone. Then I tried to figure out what that meant—being gone—and I wondered if someone could be alive and somehow dead at the same time.

When I reached the top of Independence Lane, I crossed the two-lane road and began to descend. A steady stream of cars passed me on the way

back to the office. I knew that I had to go back into the office, so I had to get it together. I was repeating to myself the word “No” under my breath because it sometimes helped me to stop thinking about Elizabeth, but at the same time I was thinking about the night in the train car before we crossed into the Gobi desert. We had sprung for the two-person train car for this first leg of the trip, Beijing to Ulaanbataar. Out of the same sort of impulse that had once driven her to purchase a French Horn and at another time to take up carpentry, Elizabeth had purchased a series of lectures on CDs and was listening to one on modern physics. The deal we had made was that she would listen and then share with me the salient points of what she learned.

I had to stop thinking about this.

I had never traveled by rail and the metallic clunk-*clunk* of the train was incredibly relaxing and reassuring in a way that made me think that the world was not that bad of a place if people still traveled like this. In the early afternoon, we sat at the little fold-up table eating the chicken ramen I had purchased in the Beijing rail station. We drank tea and watched the mountains of northern China give way to scrubby expanses. When we would wake up the next day, after a few hours during the night spent waiting for them to check our passports and change the bogies so that the train could run

on the Soviet tracks in Mongolia, we would see the insane desolation of the Gobi—completely flat and sandy in all directions as far as we could see. But the night before that, after her physics lesson, Elizabeth and I drank Chinese vodka and fruit punch that came in cartons out of our rubber, collapsible REI cups and she explained to me that the Russians called black holes frozen stars, and that in many ways, this was probably a more accurate term than the one we used.

“You see,” she explained, “a black hole is just a mass whose gravity is so great that the escape speed is greater than the speed of light.”

“Of course. Who doesn’t know that?”

“No”—she took a long drink. “Escape speed is how much speed something needs to be able to escape the gravitational pull of an object. Like—if you could throw a tennis ball at like eight miles a second, it would never come back to Earth.”

“I’ve done that. Twice. And then once with a kickball, but I booted it like an NFL punter.”

“And so a black hole is just something whose mass is so concentrated that the escape speed is greater than the speed of light.”

“Sounds like a great place to keep convicts. You know, because they can’t esca—”

And she took a drink and from her pretend-annoyed look I could see that this game we were playing was really enjoyable to both of us and we were hurtling across China—China!—and I kind of believed the things hippies and retired people said about life being an adventure.

“So the thing is that a black hole doesn’t really suck things in like we are told in movies—it’s actually just, like, this frozen place. If you could see me as I was about to cross the edge of a black hole, the event horizon, I wouldn’t disappear into it—from your point of view. Gravity makes time dilate, or something. I would just slow down and eventually stop moving. For you, it would be like I was hanging on the edge forever.”

“I’d go there, too. We’d hang out on the edge and just kind of check out the black hole.”

“No, see that’s the thing. I’d actually be gone. I would have passed into the black hole—”

“But you just said that’s not how it works.”

“No—you can go into a black hole if you enter its area, but it doesn’t suck things in. Like, it’s gravitational field is only a certain area.”

“You know what does suck things, and particularly people, in? The novels of one Nicholas Sparks. You see, in this one masterwork called *Nights in Rodanthe*, there is a man and a woman, and they—”

“If you keep talking about Nicholas Sparks, I’m going to punch you through the roof of this train and into a black hole. Let me finish!” I put my hands up defensively, and she took a long drink and stuck her tongue out a bit. “These cups will never not taste like rubber.”

We heard noise in the hallway outside and a burst of Chinese. The train swayed a little and we heard the reassuring clink of the wheels on the tracks.

“Right, so frozen stars. So the Russians call black holes frozen stars because we can actually never see the black hole part of it—we can only see stuff before it goes in, and it just... freezes on the event horizon.”

I decided to push my luck a little. “It’s funny that you bring this up, because The Frozen Stars were my favorite emo band of the 90’s. I loved their song, “It’s All Your Fault, Dad.” She picked up a small bag of fried wonton and fired it at me. I caught it with a slight crunch and hammed it up even more. “The noodles! Noooo!” I raised the now slightly crushed bag up like a sacrifice.

“Ok, I’m done explaining this to you if you are just going to make jokes, and actually, jokes, like black holes, is a misnomer in this case.”

A horn honked and I looked up and saw Mitch’s grey Accord as it cruised past me, turned into our building’s drive and headed toward the rear parking lot. I decided I would walk around to the back where Mitch had just gone so we could walk in together because it would look better to be coming in with someone else, but my right foot hit the curb as I stepped up to cross the small lawn in front of the building. I brought my left foot forward to compensate but not fast enough and I was on my knee and felt a wet patch, and I told myself again that it was time to stop thinking about all this.

I knew that when I went back around the building and saw Mitch he would make a joke about me pissing my pants even though it was my knee that was wet, and as we waited in the elevator he would say pretty crude things about the girl at Cosi, and I knew that when I went back upstairs I’d have to figure out what to do about the email from Elizabeth because I couldn’t have this happening every day. I wondered if there was someone at the email company whose job it was to handle this type of thing—some kind of modern day electronic dead-letter office staffed by sad Bartlebys, flooded with emails every day from people who wanted, above all else, to not be

reminded of what had happened in the past and whose loved ones were not reaching out to them.

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**David Scrivner** was raised in Baltimore, MD and is currently enrolled in the PhD in Creative Writing Program at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa. His recent fiction has appeared in *Barrelhouse*, *Paradise Review*, and *Hawai'i Review*. Dave's fiction won the National Society of Arts and Letters's Short Story Contest, regional, and was selected as a finalist in *Glimmer Train's* Short Stories by New Writers Contest and New Letters's Alexander Patterson Cappon Fiction Contest.