

Floaters
By Richard Bangs
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I can hear you. But I can't see you because bandages cover my eyes.

I don't want to talk to you, or anyone, right now. I know you're standing near the door of my hospital room talking to two others.

One of the others is my doctor, I think. The other voice I don't know. But the way you, my wife, are talking to him, I suspect he is some kind of shrink.

I would like to get out of this hospital room in Montana right now, but I'm strapped to the bed.

You ask if that is necessary. My doctor mumbles something. The other voice agrees.

The voices are reduced to mumbles. You must have moved out of the room to the hall. You all don't understand.

I'm not sure I understand, but this whole horrifying episode is just coming into focus.

It all started about three months ago in February when I was at work at my computer station in an IT center of a small business. The day had gone well. I had completed all the morning procedures on time and the business was up and running. I noticed some spots on my glasses. I grabbed some tissue, wiped my glasses clean, and went back to work.

After a few minutes, I noticed the spots again, especially on my right lens. After a silent scoff, I pulled off my glasses, wiped them down again, glanced around the room and went back to work. My duties at that moment included filling out log books, delivery reports to company officials and checking overnight drop boxes.

When I got back to work on the computer an hour later, the spots were there again. I held my glasses up to the light. They were clean. But the spots in my vision were still there. I could see the spots clearly when I looked into the light. I glanced one way, then the other. The spots followed my eye direction. When I looked at a darker section of the room, the spots seemed to fade and disappear. After trial and error, I determined the spots weren't fading in the dark, they were just harder to see.

I also determined that there were spots in both eyes. The right eye had the larger spot but there were definitely spots on both eyes. I called my optometrist.

"They're called floaters," my eye doc said after an exam in his office. "It often happens with old age. Some debris from inside the eye has been shaken loose and now is just 'floating' in your eye."

"But how could this happen so suddenly," I asked. "And in both eyes. You'd think I would have noticed it earlier. Not just suddenly out of the blue. And I'm not THAT old, just 60."

"If you had a sudden bang in the head, it might have shaken something loose," he said. "But often it's just a sign of aging."

The doc assured me the spoys would not affect my overall eyesight. He said I would just have to get used to little dark spots floating around in my line of sight.

I began to think back. A bang on the head? I couldn't remember running into anything -- no encounters with a door, no bang on the head from rising up under a table. Nothing like that. The only thing that came to mind was an encounter with a hard-packed snowball.

A few weeks earlier there had been a big, unusual snowstorm. In February in Montana the storms usually bring light, dry and fluffy snow because the temperatures are well below zero. During this storm, however, the temperature was about 35 degrees. The clouds were dark and there was thunder and lightning. The snow was heavy and wet. That brought out everyone to build snowmen, snow forts and lots of snowballs. On my walk to work that next morning I had been attacked by a couple of young men who hurled snowballs my way. It was all in good fun

and I stopped to fire a few shots back at them. That, of course only egged them on and soon the battle raged. I was surrounded with snowballs coming fast and furious. It didn't take long before a large snowball, packed with a little ice I'm sure, blasted me square on my right ear. It knocked me flat and I landed on a large snowbank on my left side, my head nearly covered in snow. I stood, held my hands up in surrender, laughed, shook off the snow and tried to dig the ice out of my ears. By the time I got to work my head was throbbing. Several Advils later it was getting worse and developing into a full-blown migraine. But after I finished the morning computer procedures and relaxed for a bit, the pain subsided and soon I was back to normal.

But looking back to that time, that was the only thing I could think of that might have caused my floaters. With that rational explanation, I quickly came to grips with my new reality. I would have to get used to looking past my floaters and carry on. No big deal.

But it wasn't that easy. The little guys were always there, dancing around my eyes, bouncing up and down as I moved my eyes. Darting in and out of the shadows as I looked from dark to light. Soon I began to play little games with my floaters, trying hold them in my focus, trying to make out definite shapes and sizes. The largest floater in my right eye was shaped like a tiny seahorse, standing upright and sometimes turning to change his profile. He had a long tail and a head topped with appendages that swayed as he moved. Yes, I did assign gender and names to my little buddies. I called the right eye floater Guy. The left eye floater, named Shelia, was smaller with a shortened sea horse tail and no flaring antlers.

I first heard Guy about a month later. Not really heard. Not through my ears, anyway. I was watching him dance against a white background one day after work when his presence became more than visual. "I'm here. I'm alive."

I shook my head and looked away from the light. Guy disappeared. I don't often day dream but I must have drifted into one, I told myself. But I do have a vivid imagination and I often have fantastical dreams and sometimes scary nightmares.

I didn't "hear" from Guy for the next week or two. Work had been very busy and in the evenings I had activities that kept me distracted. The next Saturday, however, I was cross-country skiing with my wife, cruising along a well-groomed trail in a beautiful mountain setting. Guy was the farthest thing from my mind when, suddenly, he was there. "I'm still here. Help me please!"

I nearly fell over on my skis.

I regained my balance, looked back to see my wife coming, shook my head to make Guy go away, and started off again. But he wouldn't go away. The bright snow-covered terrain made a perfect backdrop for Guy and he was taking advantage of it. He kept dancing in front of me, not letting me push him away. I had to keep looking straight ahead to follow the ski track and it was a perfect setting for him.

He seemed to grow in the bright light. Well, maybe not grow, as in get bigger, but his shape became more defined. Now I thought I could begin to see tiny eyes, a mouth. And were those tiny arms, or wings, coming out of his sides?

I stopped skiing and told my wife I had to quit. "It must be the bright sunlight," I said. "I'm getting a really bad headache."

On the drive home from the mountains, Guy was always there, often just off to the side of my vision, or just below my line of sight, but always there. And there was the murmurings. "I need your help." "I'm trapped." "Please save me." "Please give me life."

As soon as we got home I rushed to put our ski gear away then told my wife I had to go to bed, the headache getting worse. In the darkened bedroom, Guy faded almost to nothing and the murmuring slowly ended.

The next day before I got out of bed Guy was back. It was almost as if he was rising with the sun. I found a dark pair of sunglasses. They didn't help. I tried closing my eyes. He just began dancing on what seemed to be the inside of my eyelids. And the murmuring. It would not stop.

"Help me." "Help us." "We are trapped." "We need to live!"

We? I said to myself. Guy answered -- "I am Zorn. I need Zera. We need to live. We need to be free. I am trapped here. She is trapped there."

That's when I first heard Shelia. "I am trapped here. He is trapped there." The smaller floater in my left eye faded into view.

That's when my wife heard me scream. She found me in bed with the covers over my head.

Total darkness was the only way I could escape.

"Another nightmare?" my wife asked. Over the years there had been many times she would shake me awake because of nightmares.

I nodded my head "yes" under the covers.

"You don't usually have them during the day. Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. I just need to sleep." I kept the covers over my head.

That Sunday was a lost day. Guy and Shelia, or Zorn and Zera, were always lurking in the shadows. I couldn't see them as long I kept things dark, but I could hear them.

Most of the time they were talking to me. Asking me to listen, wanting to tell me a story, asking to be free, asking to live. I tried to ignore them.

At times they seemed to be talking to each other. When they did that it created a wavering humming noise, like really bad tinnitus, in the back of my head. It was as if the sound was rolling from one eye to the other via some nerve running right through my brain.

By the end of that Sunday, things had calmed down. I was able to uncover my head without having Zorn or Zera pop into my sight. The murmurings were almost gone. Just occasionally would I hear them talking to each other. They seemed to have given up on talking to me. Little did I know they were just planning their attack.

Several weeks passed and in that time things were quiet. In a bright light I could still see my floaters but the noises had all but faded away.

Then one Monday in early May things began to get worse. As I got ready for work, an uneasy feeling settled in. There was a growing presence of my little companions. Were they growing? They began flitting in and out of my sight. I breathed a sigh of resignation and tried to relax. The murmurings were barely noticeable.

I had almost finished my walk to work when a very loud buzzing blared through my head. It knocked me off my feet. As I pulled myself up, they were there.

"You will listen to us," they said in unison. Go away. You're just in my imagination. You are not real. You're just floaters.

The blaring buzz staggered me. I had to grab a street light pole to keep from falling. I looked for a bench on which to sit.

"You must listen. If you do, you will not be harmed. If you don't the noise will become unbearable, your eyes will explode and you will cease to function."

Ridiculous, I said to myself and tried to stand up from the bench. The noise drowned out everything around me. I couldn't see. I couldn't hear. I sat down again. My vision was blurred. I couldn't remember where I was. Was I going to work or coming home? Was it Monday, or Tuesday? Was it day or night?

Okay, I'll listen.

"We need to be free. We need to live. We must join each other to live." Their talk was in unison and set my whole head buzzing.

What do you mean?

"We are supposed to be together. We are trapped in your eyes. We came with the snow and our brothers and sisters are free and are living. We are trapped and dying. We must be free to live." How can that be?

"We were in the snow. The snow was in your ears. We are now in your eyes. We do not know how to escape. We have tried. We cannot reach your ears. We are trapped. We are dying. You must free us."

The snow?

"We ride gravitational wave to explore the universe. We came too close to your solar system, too close to your planet, and were trapped in your atmosphere and in that winter storm. We, millions of us, tried to escape but it only caused the storm to create extreme friction which further entrapped us and set off violent discharges of electricity."

Thunder snow.

"Now we are trapped on this planet and must learn how to survive. Others have made it. We are trapped. We need to be free. We need to live."

This is nuts. Am I going insane? You can't be real. You have to be only in my mind. I have to ignore you or I will go crazy. I'm going to put you out of my mind and go to work. Stay out of my head. I have to go to work.

I tried to get up but the buzzing blared, knocking me back to the bench.

Okay, okay. I'll listen, but can you give me some time. I have a job to go to. I don't want to lose my job.

"We do not have much time. We will die soon. But we will let you go to work for a bit and then we will talk again."

When?

"Two hours."

I rushed into work and began the morning computer procedures. Even though I was a bit late getting to work, I finished the required work on time. When my supervisor came in I said I was getting sick, upset stomach, headache, sore throat. And a strong headache was settling in. There was a growing pressure enveloping both eyes.

I rushed through the reports, checked the drop box and excused myself. I was back on the bench five minutes before the two-hour deadline.

"We have a plan," I heard Guy, or Zorn, say as he danced into my vision.

I have a plan. Just go back the way you came in, through my ears.

"We now know why we cannot," said Zera. "We have grown since entering your ears. We were microscopic then. We are too big now."

"We must go out through your eyes. There is no other way," said Zorn.

Okay. Just go then. I'll sit quietly. I won't stop you. I'll keep my eyes open and I won't harm you when you get out.

"We have tried. We can see your world through your eyes but the eye membranes are stopping us."

"And we are worried we will die if we exit your eyes on our own," said Zera. "We must leave at the same time and be joined immediately. We can survive your world together, but not alone."

How is that supposed to happen? Do you think I'm going to punch my eyes out just to let you escape. You who I still think are just a bad dream, a figment of my imagination? I'll make myself blind. I'm not going to do it.

"We have a plan," said Zorn. "If you let us live, you will not go blind."

Yeah! Sure! I'm supposed to punch out my eyes and then still be able to see? You don't understand. Humans have to have their eyes to see.

"You will see again after we leave and are joined and have a life of our own," said Zera.

With no eyes? I don't believe you. I can't do it. Even if I were to try, I'd pass out from the pain after the first eye was stabbed. I'm not going to do it. I'm going home to rest now and put this nightmare of you out of my mind.

I stood up to begin walking home. The loud buzzing and pain returned. If I hadn't been ready for it, it would have knocked me down again.

"That was just to get your attention," Zorn said. "We are serious. We can give you a stroke and you will die."

If I die, then you will die. What good will that do you?

"If you follow our plan, we all will live. And you will see the light," Zera said.

I don't just want to see light. I want to see everything. Full vision, just like I have now.

"Seeing the light will be better," Zorn said.

Sure. I'm going home. I continued to walk.

"Go home," Zorn said. "You will need to be home for our plan to work."

As I walked home the pressure in my eyes was increasing and my eyes were beginning to throb. As I started up the walk to the front door of my house a sudden blast of ringing and sharp pains staggered me and put me to my knees as I grabbed for the front door knob. I struggled inside and collapsed on a heap in the entry.

"The time is now. You have to do this now or we will die. As we die we will expand and your eyes will explode and you will truly be blind."

I lay on the floor gasping as Zorn and Zera explained the plan. I didn't think I could do it and resisted. Another blast of ringing and pain. I pulled myself up and to the kitchen. I found two small, clear plastic drinking glasses like the ones you'd find in a motel. I punched a small nail through the bottom of each glass.

I found a towel and some duct tape. I got another glass, filled it with water and got four Advil out of the medicine cabinet. By this time the ringing was constant and very loud. I couldn't hear Zorn or Zera but their instructions kept echoing in my mind.

I went to the front door, went outside and sat down on the doorstep leading down to the sidewalk. I called my wife and told her to come home immediately because I was having a medical emergency.

"What's going on?" she asked. "You were fine this morning."

I couldn't explain.

"Are you having a heart attack? A stroke? What's going on?"

I didn't answer.

"Call 911. They will get there faster than I can," my wife said.

Good idea.

I called 911.

"What is the nature of your emergency?"

"I've been attacked by a man with a knife."

"Is he still there?"

"No, but I'm bleeding badly."

"What's your address?"

I told them.

"Can you stop the bleeding? Do you have a towel or some type of cloth?"

"Yes."

"Take the towel or cloth and press hard on the wound. We are sending someone to assist."

I put down the phone, positioned the towel and duct tape near my left hand and picked up a plastic glass with each hand. With my head ringing louder and louder I placed the glasses over my eyes, took a deep breathe and slammed my palms against the nails.

Pain shot through my whole being but I managed to keep the glasses against my face for a moment. I could feel the blood spurting into the glasses. The last thing I heard in my mind was two faint voices trailing off as if they were going down a tunnel: "Thank you for letting us live. Now, put us together."

By feeling only, I brought the two glasses together and poured the blood from one to the other. I could only hold it for a moment before I began to get weak and was about to faint.

I dropped the glasses, grabbed the towel and pressed it against my eyes. I could still feel the blood running out of both eye sockets and down my face on to my shirt. I struggled to get the duct tape and wrap my head but I couldn't. I remember toppling over on my front porch.

Now, back in the present in the hospital, I could hear my wife and the doctors talking again.

"We've looked at the wounds and it is clear that only the eyes were damaged," my doctor said.

"He should be fine as soon as we remove the eyeballs and put in prosthetic eyes."

"Except he will be blind," my wife replied.

"Yes. The eyes were both pierced and both retinas were destroyed."

"How long will the bandages have to be on," my wife asked.

"We should wait at least a week to let the wounds heal. We will be taking the bandages off daily to treat the wounds but we must protect against infection."

"Why would your husband want to hurt himself," the third voice asked.

"He told the 911 dispatcher he was attacked," my wife said.

"But he told you he was having a medical emergency. The emergency crew and the law enforcement who responded found no one there and no one in the area. Your husband did this to himself."

"I don't know. He never gave me a clue. He was happy. Had a good job. I don't understand."

"We don't either and until we understand more, we will have to keep him restrained. And there will have to be surgery to remove the damaged eyes."

I looked in the direction of the voices and thought I could see them. My mind's playing tricks on me again.

But they were there. Shadowing figures but coming more and more into focus.

"I'm alright," I said.

They all turned and looked my way.

My wife hurried to my side.

"No you're not okay, Ray. Your eyes have been damaged and you lost a lot of blood."

"Don't worry. My eyes are fine and getting better every minute."

Now, as I looked closer at my wife, I could see her clearly and there was a faint bluish, red aura surrounding her. It was shimmering. Waving in and out from her upper torso and her head.

"I can see you. You're still wearing that green shirt you put on this morning to go to work in. And you're scared and happy at the same time."

"But you can't see," she said. "Your head and your eyes are covered in bandages."

"Hi, doc. Glad you're here. Still wearing the scruffy beard, I see. Hi. I don't believe I know you," I said as I looked at the second man.

"Dr. Phil Jones," the man replied. "Staff psychiatrist."

"Ray. What's going on?" my doctor asked.

"Take off the bandages. I'm okay."

"But Ray," from both my wife and my doctor.

"Take them off, now," I commanded.

Slowly my doctor unwrapped the bandages. As the final strip came off, his eyes widened as he stared at me. My wife gasped and held her hands over her mouth.

I could see the red aura of fear sweep around her torso and head. The shrink was backing off.

My doctor hit a call button to summon help.

"Doc. You can take these restraints off. I'm not going to hurt myself anymore. And I'm not going to hurt anyone else."

"Ray. There's something you need to see before I remove the restraints."

He held a up mirror so I could see my eyes. I looked to the side, back and forth. I looked up and down.

My eyes had a very metallic look. They were silver around the outside where normally they should be white. The irises were a bright sky blue but a solid color. There was no pupil. When the doc shined a light in my eyes, the irises did not contract. I was able to move my eyes easily from side to side with no pain. When I looked across the room and squinted, my vision zoomed in on the image and it became larger.

The doctor, and now several of his assistants, continued to examine me. They found my eye movement normal. They poked and prodded and asked if I was in pain. I wasn't. I just wanted to get out of there after five hours of being strapped to the bed.

The doctor said he would release me if I promised to come back for further tests. I agreed and a few minutes later I was walking out of the hospital with my wife.

It was a bright and warm early May day with the late afternoon sun reflecting off windows of the buildings along the street. My wife quickly put on her sunglasses and offered me a pair the doctor had provided.

I looked around, blinked my eyes twice and the blue pupils turned a dark green.

"I don't think I need them I said to my wife."

She just stared at me and said, "Let's go home."

Her aura was shifting between joy and fear.

As we walked sown the street to the car I could see an aura around everyone. There was a red fear, a blue happiness, an orange anger? a green envy? It was going to take me some time to be able to interpret all the different colors of lights. Then we were interrupted by an ambulance headed to the hospital. We stopped and watched as the ambulance pulled up to the emergency entrance. As the EMTs pulled a stretcher out of the ambulance, a black aura wavered over the body being hurried inside. Death? I thought.

And then I heard a faint buzzing swirling around the outside of my head. Zera and Zorn flitted by and then swooped off down the street. "Thank you. We live. You live," they said in unison.

"Your welcome. I CAN see the light now."

"What?" said my wife.

"Nothing," I said. "Let's just go home."

As we walked down the street toward the car we passed by several shops and I began to see reflections in the windows. There was my wife, her red and blue auras shimmering.

And there I was, along with my shimmering black aura.