

EXPIRATION DATE

By David Erik Nelson



Chapter 1

If you had told Bram that he would spend the rest of his life with Lizzie Bradford, he would have told you he felt like the luckiest man alive. And despite how deceptive such a sentence ultimately would turn out to be, in the end he still felt pretty damn lucky.

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Bram and Lizzie had only been dating for a few weeks. She'd been perfectly clear that she hadn't asked him to her family reunion to meet her family. Yes, he was a nice guy, but more importantly, he was the only person she knew with a car that was reasonably certain to make it from Columbus, Ohio to Huntington, West Virginia without major mechanical misadventure.

Bram, likewise, had been perfectly clear that he understood this to be a no-strings-attached family reunion. Still, he jumped at the chance to spend three hours alone in a car with Lizzie.

Subsequently, when he pulled up to the curb in front of her gentrified brownstone at 9am—sharp—Bram was mildly vexed to meet Lizzie's brother Chet, lumpy backpack at his feet. Almost two hours into the drive, Chet had inarguably proven himself an asset.

“OK, here's the thing I don't get,” Chet announced as they passed a dually pickup emblazoned with NRA and Keep Honking—I'm Reloading! stickers, “That 'gun family' sticker folks plaster on the rear window of their truck, that one that's like the stick figure family sticker, but silhouettes of guns? It's pretty clear that the dude who owns the car thinks of himself as the AR-15, and the kids are all the lil handguns, but between him and the kids—where there's usually the mom stick figure—there's an AK-47 and a Winchester .30-06. Those are both basically the same caliber. Is the dude a polygamist? Is he hinting that he's got, like, a secret Russian bride somewhere?”

Bram suggested that maybe the AR-15 was divorced and remarried, Lizzie replied that maybe the Winchester was another dude gun, and it was a modern blended family situation where everyone was basically cool with how stuff had sorted out.

Chet nodded sagely. “Yup: rifles marrying rifles, handguns using the shotgun bathroom, assault weapons adopting Nerf guns—”

“—Dogs and cats living together!—” Bram chimed in.

“Mass hysteria,” Chet finished.

And on it went. At every conversational lull, Chet tossed in some crazy-talk glitter grenade out of left field, and off they went, rollicking into Crazy Town.

Chet may have been sort of a weirdo, but he was an affable weirdo, and he annihilated any chance of the drive being awkward: He raised the “awkward” bar so absurdly high that you strolled right under it without even wondering if social awkwardness was a thing any more.

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Bram had met Lizzie the previous fall at an excruciatingly awkward faculty mixer. The head of Lizzie’s department hadn’t shown up, and as the only black woman there, she’d already been mistaken for a caterer twice when Bram asked her how she liked the iced tea. Lizzie’d been so relieved to be taken for someone drinking the tea, rather than serving it, that she’d immediately launched into a mini-tirade without first asking Bram if he was a post-doc or trailing spouse or what. He was none of these—he was, in fact, the manager of the cafe catering the mixer—but he kept that to himself, since the mini-tirade had made it pretty clear that this very tall, very sharp, very pretty woman did not hold the food-service industry in high regard. Besides, her riffs and jabs were really funny, and he didn’t want the conversation to end with her embarrassed retreat.

Lizzie, Bram quickly learned, studied the longevity and resiliency of tardigrades. These, Bram gathered, were commonly called “water bears” or “moss piglets,” measured about half a millimeter long when full grown, looked like chubby lil eight-legged pig-bears as imagined by whoever did the concept art for the Stay Puft Marshmallow Man, and were totally not made-up.

“Tardigrades are really, really interesting,” she said with a sort of sparkling glee; he quickly realized he liked Pumped-about-Whatever-the-Hell-Tardigrades-

Might-Be Lizzie even more than he'd liked Pissed-that-She-Was-Dissed-as-Hired-Help Lizzie. "They're amazingly resilient—easily the most resilient multi-cellular organisms. Tardigrades live in environments well above boiling and almost down to absolute zero. They survive repeated freezing and thawing. They can survive without water or oxygen, exposed to x-rays thousands of times the human lethal dose—they can survive the extreme pressure at the bottom of the ocean and the vacuum of space. They can do this because they voluntarily enter cryptobiosis—a real state of reversible death. They can chill out, dead, for a century and still reanimate."

This all sounded pretty rad to Bram.

Her work was pretty involved with "tun formation" and something called "trehalose metabolism and synthesis" and maybe also "telomere length" and "telomerase-independent, chromosome maintenance system"—although Bram had sort of zoned out watching her talk, and wasn't sure if that stuff was part of her work, or some other thing she was talking about. As she spoke, she seemed to glow like a 60-watt bulb, and this glow made it clear she was incredibly lovely.

Bram was absolutely in love with her before the conversation was through. More to her credit, when she wandered into the Illegitimi Non Carborundum Café later that week and saw Bram behind the counter, she neither fled nor shrank, but instead walked up, ordered an organic hibiscus tea, then picked up where she'd left off talking about anhydrobiosis, parabiosis, "stasis," Mars Missions, human longevity, and creepy Bay Area venture-capital bros.

She capped off the conversation by pulling out her phone and asking for his number. She immediately texted him her name and a coffee cup emoji.

"Call me sometime," she said. "I've bent your ear twice in a row; I owe you a cup of coffee made by someone other than you."

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About two hours into the ride Chet abruptly shouted "Hold up!" and dove into his bag, rummaging until he came up with a deck of cards still in its plastic wrapping. "It's one of those ice-breaker get-the-conversation-started games," he said, breaking the seal, pulling off the plastic, and dropping it onto Bram's floorboards. "Came in a box of promos at the shop."

He split the deck with Lizzie, and without a word the two fell to studiously sorting through them. "OK," Lizzie called out, "Got a good one: If," Lizzie intoned

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archly, “You could travel through time, forward or backward, would you do it? If so, when would you travel to?”

Chet brayed an artificial air-horn buzzer, then called out “Technical foul!” through his cupped hands.

“Wait, why?” Bram asked, laughing. “Why are you calling a technical on a pretty tame time-travel question?”

“—cause there’s all kinds of privilege built into that damned question,” Chet said.

“Mmm-hmmm,” Lizzie nodded matter-of-factly.

Bram laughed, “How? Would Rosa Parks have to sit at the back of the time machine? This seems like an equal opportunity question.”

“Nope,” Chet replied. “Traveling back in time is strictly White Male Patriarchy business; why in the world would any self-respecting black man—”

“—or woman, any color woman—” Lizzie interjected

“—or female, or queer dude, why would any of them take a single damn step back in time and risk a street-legal ass-whooping?”

Bram allowed that Chet had a point. “Well, I could argue that more than a few white male guys whose ‘love dare not speak its name’ had it just fine through big swaths of history—”

“Granted,” Chet nodded.

“But the past is so last year, m’man; I’d take the future.”

“For real?” Lizzie asked.

“Yep,” Bram replied.

Chet acquiesced. “Yeah, OK. I think future-oriented time-travel is suitably devoid of white male privilege. I’ll allow it. You can answer the question.”

“Thank you, your honor.”

There was a lull in the conversation, which Lizzie broke: “So are you going to answer the question?”

“I thought I did answer it. I’d totally travel forward in time.”

“But to when?” Lizzie tapped the card. “The question asks if you’d do it and when you’d head to? Like, how far in the future?”

“Well, I don’t know, exactly. Clarification: Do I have to name a specific date or number of years?”

Lizzie called for a sidebar. Brother and sister put their heads together briefly.

“OK,” she said, turning back around, “If you wanted to go back in time, then

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we'd allow something like 'the Italian Renaissance,' since nobody knows when that was—"

"14th Century through 16th Century," Bram said.

Lizzie scowled. "Congratulations: You narrowed down the start and end date to the nearest century. If that's as close as you can get, parallel parking must be hell for you. Anyway, point being, with most things in human history, there isn't a specific point in time—hell, even something that seems really simple and instantaneous, like the Kennedy assassination, it isn't a single point in time. Like, you know that was on November someteenth, 19-whatever—"

"Twenty-second," Bram said, "1963. At noon. You all are terrible at history. I mean, Jeez, 11/22/63; there's that Stephen King book that got made into the show with James Franco, and the date is the title. It's not obscure trivia."

Lizzie rolled her eyes. "Point being, the shots rang out at noon on 11/22/63, but when was the 'assassination'? When Oswald—"

"—or the Umbrella Man," Chet interjected, "or—"

"—or whoever, when he—"

"—or she—" Bram added with a smile.

"—pulled the trigger, when the bullet entered Kennedy—"

"—if—" Chet rang out joyously, and Bram laughed. Lizzie did not.

"It's like I'm stuck in the back of the middle school bus with you knuckleheads. Just listen: When was the assassination? When the trigger was pulled? When the first bullet hit home? When the last one did? When JFK started bleeding? When his heart and respiration stopped? When brain function began to fail? When all brain function irreversibly ceased, including brain stem function? When metabolic activity ceased? When cellular death reached a certain threshold? When necrosis set in? It's safe to assume that brain function ceased before cardiopulmonary death—just ask Jackie O's dry cleaner—"

"Too soon!" Chet shouted from the back seat. Lizzie ignored him.

"When you start to dig in, you can't even really pinpoint the moment of his death: Cellular death occurs hours, even days, after clinical death."

"OK, OK," Bram called out, "I got it! None of us really knows anything."

"Not very precisely, no," Lizzie replied primly, "Point being: You don't have to give a specific date or number of years."

"Gotcha. Perfect. That being the case, then I'd want to go forward to my, like, 'expiration date.'"

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Bram had expected to need to explain what he meant, but Chet and Lizzie immediately understood.

“You mean the day you die,” Lizzie offered uncertainly, as though she hoped she’d misunderstood.

“Yup. Not that I’d necessarily want to be there—I mean, double be there, since I’m obviously already there, if it’s my day to die—but really just to know the date. Like knowing the expiration date on a carton of milk, right? You make different decisions about what you’re cooking if you’ve got a half-gallon with a week left on it, versus a half-gallon that went bad yesterday.”

The car had gone silent, and Bram’s heart sank. Chet’s antics, he feared, had not in fact set the awkwardness bar as high as he’d calculated. Bram glanced at Lizzie, but her face was totally unreadable.

Chet broke the silence with a laugh. “Oh, man, Granny Gin is gonna love your white boy, sistah-my-sistah.”

Lizzie folded her arms and looked out the window. “Yeah, maybe. Maybe like a dog loves a bone.”

“Yikes,” Bram said, “Sounds like a helluva woman. What’s the deal?” He expected that the answer would be that she was real political—Third Wave Feminist of Black Power or Nation of Islam—someone with distinct, well-articulated, highly charged views of white men interested in black women, especially when those black women were also their smart, high-achieving, well-educated, well-employed granddaughters. At 25-years-old, Lizzie was the youngest full professor ever to join the Ohio State Biological Physics Research Group. Bram would not hear this from Lizzie—who’d point out that, at just 10 people, the sample size was a little suspect: She was also the tallest full professor ever to join the Ohio State Biological Physics Research Group, the blackest full professor ever to join the Ohio State Biological Physics Research Group, and the best Mario Karter ever to join the Ohio State Biological Physics Research Group—and she was terrible at Mario Kart (a fact Bram knew from personal experience).

While Lizzie might prefer Bram forget she was the youngest full professor ever to join the Ohio State Biological Physics Research Group, he’d discover at the family reunion that she was basically the only Bradford that felt this way.

“You’re here with Lizzie?” aunties and uncles and cousins would say over and over again, always quizzically. “We thought you were one of Chet’s comic-book friends. You know, Lizzie’s the youngest full professor ever to join the Ohio State

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Biological Physics Research Group. What did you say you did?”

But that was all later. Back in the car, Chet asked: “You for-real wanna know your ‘Best if Used By’ date?”

“Yeah. I wasn’t kidding.”

“‘cause Granny Gin can tell you.”

Lizzie whipped around. “Shut up, stupid,” she snapped. When she turned back to Bram, he was surprised to see her on the verge of tears.

“Don’t let Granny Gin mess with you.”

Bram had no idea what to make of this, let alone how to reply. He mumbled something like “Yeah, sure, totally” and the car fell silent.

And stayed that way for the remaining 52 minutes of the drive.



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