

EXPIRATION DATE

By David Erik Nelson



Chapter 9

Whatever it was Bram was seeing up in the sky, there were tons of them, as numerous and weightless and aimless and harmless as dandelion fluff.

He leaned forward, chest to the steering wheel and craned to squint up in the sky.

Bram smiled. They were maybe Mylar hippopotamus balloons? Maybe it was an art project? “What—?”

Chet leaned forward to see what Bram saw. “Dag, those are moving fast!”

And he was right; they were moving fast. Fast, but somehow gentle. They were pale and pearlescent pink, in the way of grubs, but ungainly and weirdly adorable, like marshmallow monsters. And mobile. They wallowed and bumbled in the air, clumsily paddling with their eight stubby legs, looking around uncertainly with their squinty, pig-snouted heads.

Lizzie leaned forward and hit the button to open the sunroof, which groaned and whined and grudgingly retracted, giving her a clear view of the sky.

“Tardigrades,” she said.

For a moment, all that popped into Bram’s head was the Latin *tardigradus*; “slowly stepping”—which seemed like a remarkably useless thing to know just then.

“Oh yeah,” Chet said. “They do look like water bears—or moss piglets, or whatever. But giant. And from space.”

“I had no clue they could get big,” Bram said.

“They can’t,” she replied. “Big animals, like whales, don’t have bigger cells than little animals; they just have more of them. Tardigrades are eutelic: every adult has the same number of cells, and they grow by cell enlargement, not cell division. Tardigrades are already as big as they can get.”

“How big is that?” Bram asked.

“About half a millimeter.”

The first one Bram had spotted—the vanguard—had now drifted down to the

EXPIRATION DATE

vicinity of the top of the Main Street Bridge's single supporting arch. It was at least the size of a semi trailer.

"So what are those?" Bram asked.

"I have no idea," Lizzie said. "But they are amazing."

The first tardigrade brushed up against the top of the iron arch. One of its rear legs, which were comically clawed, took hold of the arched iron i-beam bearing the bridge's weight. The giant tardigrade leaned along with the light breeze, like a Thanksgiving Parade float pulling against its guy wires, before drifting lazily back and settling above the arch, catching hold of it with another pair of legs.

Traffic around them slowed further. The folks crammed in the other cars were craning to watch the goofy giant moss piglets drift out of the upper atmosphere. In the other cars, slack jaws were blossoming into wide smiles of wonder.

Bram glanced to Lizzie. She was not gawping or smiling; her mouth was closed tight, bent with a few degrees of frown. Worry lines creased her forehead between her brows.

Bram looked back to the tardigrade on the arch. The wind gusted a touch, and the moss piglet firmed up its grip. The iron crinkled and crimped like tinfoil. Bram felt the vibration of the bridge deck moments before he actually noticed that it had begun to buckle up along one edge. A second tardigrade landed, clinging to the bridge, crumpling the iron with its claws. The iron leaned downwind with the added weight and the unexpected sideways force. The damn things caught wind like sails.

Minor fender benders crunched to the left and behind them. Bram wrinkled his nose: He smelled burnt cinnamon toast.

"Dammit; are we overheating?"

Chet sniffed the air and shrugged. Lizzie said nothing.

There were no warning lights on the dash, but Bram was barely idling along in the crawling traffic. He put the car in park, killed the engine, clicked on his blinkers, popped the hood—noting that no steam or smoke escaped—and got out.

The engine looked fine.

Bram stood back, rested his wrists on the hood, and looked back at the city. All over the skyline giant tardigrades were drifting down, clinging to the sides of Columbus' modest high-rises and gingerly setting down on parking structures before embarking on their trundling explorations. Occasionally a noiseless glitter of glass puffed up as a landing crushed the corner of a Mies Van der Rohe glass tower.

This, then, was the something they weren't supposed to know about—or

weren't supposed to tweet or pin or facebook or instagram for the world to see. Frankly, of all the apocalypses Hollywood and cable TV and video games had spent the last decade preparing him for, this seemed really, really mild.

Bram turned and looked at the riverside park that was their immediate destination. Despite the fact that it was 8am and the End of Civilization, there were still a few joggers there and a single little white man in a dark grey suit.

One of the down-drifting tardigrades managed to steer clear of all of the buildings and the bridges, bumble away from the river's waters, and settle down on the lawn with infinite care, like a blimp bearing a gondola filled with sleeping babies and sweating dynamite. As Bram watched, the joggers—who he imagined were wearing headphones—kept obliviously jogging. The businessman, who was just a few dozen feet from the inquisitive space monster, reared back reflexively. He stopped himself, stealing his nerve. The enormous moss piglet snuffled toward him, and the man stood amazed, staring at the big goofy beast. He took a step forward, raising one hand palm-out. The thing worked its way closer, snuffling back and forth, like a pig finding truffles. They finally reached each other on the grassy patch between the jogging path and river's edge. The man set his palm to the huge snout. The tardigrade lifted up to meet it, like a horse encouraging a child to rub his nose and scratch his cheeks.

And then it ate him.

The snout telescoped out, reaching with tentacles as stubby and adorable as toddler fingers, and slurped the man up, briefcase and all. No struggle, no scream Bram could hear, not an ounce of drama. It was as casual and final as a kid slurping the dregs out of his Dairy Queen cup before dropping it in the dirt next to a trash bin, not even breaking stride.

Bram squeaked, his stomach knotting.

A jogger was approaching the tardigrade's territory, distracted by her wrist. Maybe checking something on a FitBit? Bram had no clue, and it hardly mattered, because four strides later she was within 20 feet of the thing that had come from the sky. It snapped sideways with whipcrack fluidity, slurped her up, and then flopped back into the grass and resumed its slow, snuffling exploration—all the while working inevitably toward the city.

Bram finally found his voice, a beat too late. "LOOK OUT!!!" he screamed to the dead woman—who, he realized awfully, maybe wasn't dead; maybe her fate was to be slowly digested over the course of centuries in the tardigrade's gut, like Boba

EXPIRATION DATE

Fett in the Sarlace pit. This made an awful sort of sense; after all, wouldn't Granny Gin have mentioned it if she knew tons of people were going to die on October 10, around 8am?

Maybe today was their whole species' expiration date—but just like the Kennedy Assassination, the actual Zero Hour was a pretty open question:

Was it when the first businessman got gobbled up, or when the last cowering human died of dehydration, hiding in a WalMart while huge water bears bumbled around outside snarfing up Burger King wrappers and yew bushes and roadkill and crippled owls and everything else that was remotely edible.

And maybe it didn't matter; Bram was himself going to be dead in minutes.

Either way, he doubted the jogger—even if she yet lived—could hear him from inside the big, flabby mega-moss piglet. And yet he was still screaming.

And so he stopped, turned, and slammed the hood of the car.

"They're eating people," he shouted, half expecting Chet to make a Soylent Green joke, and then realizing that such a quip made no sense—Soylent Green was made of people, it didn't eat people. "They're eating people, and they smell like burnt breakfast!"

Chet and Lizzie got out of the car. Chet sniffed at the air. "Like bacon?" he asked.

"Like toast," Bram corrected.

"I don't smell anything, Bram," Chet replied. Lizzie said nothing. The siblings were just in time to see a second oblivious jogger get snarfled up, and a third jogger skitter to a halt, heave himself backward onto the path, spin back up to his feet, and bolt off like a cat on fire.

Bram looked up and down the bridge. He and Lizzie and Chet were the only people who had seen these rather startling developments. Everyone else was distracted by the closest water bear as it trundled adorably down the cables connecting the arch to the bridge's concrete deck.

A wave of quarter-sized black dots—each perfectly round and perfectly black—swam across Bram's vision. The smell of a burning Cinnabon franchise surged to fill his head, and in a heartbeat was replaced with the smell of an orange grove, and then the two together.

A single crystal-clear thought formed in his head:

Oh, a stroke. I'm having a stroke. Everyone else is getting eaten by giant bumbling pigbugs from space, and I'm having a fatal stroke. What are the odds?

EXPIRATION DATE

He checked the time on his watch, just wondering how far past 8am it really was, before remembering that he hadn't worn a wristwatch since he was 10-years-old.

The sidereal water bear continued trundling down the bridge's suspension cables. All of the cars on the bridge were empty now, all of the people milling around in wonder. Bram saw a little blonde girl in a red rain slicker tucked in among these gawkers, and then a pair of identical boys, their dark hair in identical bowl cuts, their dark brows simultaneously transforming from consternation to open-mouthed amazement. With mounting horror, Bram saw that there were a lot of kids sewn in among the milling crowd, down at knee level, clinging to hems and pantlegs.

Bram yelled at them to clear out! that these things were hungry little caterpillars!!! but his lips felt superglued, and all that came out was a muffled "Smrp!"

Chet turned to him. "Bram?" he asked, "You OK?"

Prying his lips apart was like peeling off a layer of skin, but painless. "Smurf!" Bram shouted with a stutter, his lips snapping shut on the heels of the word. He tried again. "Smark!" and pointed.

The kids were naturally clumping together, squirming to the front of the crowd for an unobstructed view. This growing congregation of yummy munchie people grubs was not lost on the hungry, hungry tardigrade.

Chet looked from Bram, to the crowd, to the kids. When he turned back toward Bram he was ashy.

Lizzie dropped to her knees, then pulled the laces tight on her florescent green-and-blue New Balance running shoes. She tied them using the tidy, symmetrical, secure "Seaman's Shoelace Knot" she'd found online three months earlier and dutifully practiced for five nights running. Now she could do it without looking, and so her eyes never left the water bear, never stopped gauging its rate of travel, the distance between that seeking snout and the children at the front of the crowd. She leaned in through the open car window, and then stood back, holding Chet's katana and umbrella in one hand, his big ole surplus megaphone in the other.

She tossed Chet the megaphone, then shoved the sheathed katana into Bram's hand. Chet's telescoping umbrella she kept, looping the lanyard over her wrist.

"You ready?" she asked.

"I'm already dead," Bram said through a mouth that felt numb and flabby. His head ached terribly, and although his vision had cleared, the universe stank of

EXPIRATION DATE

orange-grove brushfire toast.

“Not quite,” she told him. She stood on her toes and kissed his cheek. “You are still alive and you are a good man, Bram. Please clear the bridge. I love you.”

She stepped back, and in that moment Bram saw the transformation that had overtaken her: Somewhere in the seconds between her watching, aghast, as the jogger was devoured and her popping back up from tying her running shoes, the fog that had consumed her for months had burned off entirely.

She was elated, as brilliant as the day he had met her and she had told him all about her tiny tardigrades. Lizzie looked to her brother. “I’m sorry,” she said, “I could have been a better sister.”

He nodded. “You did your best. I’ll tell my kids and grandkids and great-grandkids about this next part, and leave out the crap parts.”

“Thank you,” she said, and then broke up the settling somberness by leaning forward and slapping Bram on the ass. “Go on, knuckleheads! Save some lives!”

“Hey,” Bram slurred, relieved to hear himself talking more or less normally, “Howsabout I just die trying?”

But she missed his final quip. Lizzie was already turning, undoing the securing strap on the telescoping travel umbrella, and dropping into a sprinter’s four-point stance. She leaned forward, bringing her spine into alignment, settling her gaze on the giant tardigrade now just a dozen feet above the crowd. She slowly lifted up on her fingers and toes, swung her right hand back, umbrella held by its handle.

Then she was off, so focused and with such a perfect burst of energy that Bram could have sworn he heard a starter pistol’s crack.

Bram thought about Lizzie’s daily runs, those punishing, insatiable sprints in all conditions with no discernible goal—not training for anything specific, but determined to live the intensity of a full life in less than half the years.

She sprinted down the lane divider, then jumped up onto the rear deck of an ancient and saggy-bottomed Caprice Classic. From there she hopped onto the Caprice’s roof, then leapt atop a Ford Escalade. That last jump wasn’t nearly so graceful, but her fresh New Balances kept their footing. More importantly, the thing from space took notice of her.

“Daaaaag!” Chet breathed.

“Yeah,” Bram agreed.

Bram decisively unsheathed the katana.

“CLEAR THE BRAM!” Bram yelled at the crowd.

EXPIRATION DATE

“BRIDGE!” Chet corrected, bringing the megaphone to his mouth.
“EVERYONE CLEAR THE DAMN BRIDGE!”

Bram launched himself toward the crowd, belting out a deranged, ululating war cry as he went. Chet continued barking instructions into the megaphone.

Some of the crowd—not all, but certainly many—turned at the noise, and saw the two lunatics—Oh my God! The white guy has a sword! They scattered, unconsciously moving as a single body, like a school of fish dodging sharks. And, as will all prey forever, the first thing that fleeing school did was swallow up and disperse its young, so that they would not be such easy targets for harm.

Lizzie, high on the Escalade’s roof, triggered the umbrella, which unfolded to reveal a great red and yellow and black Eye of Sauron, slitted and predatory as a serpent’s.

The water bear was momentarily affronted by this, halting its descent. It jerked back to reassess just how dangerous this new pond might be.

Time. Bram and Lizzie had no time left, but the crowd had time now, time to move clear of these things that could make a quick snatch, but couldn’t get anywhere fast.

Bram waved his katana and charged again, terrifying the crowd into flight. They scattered away, beyond the reach of the thing even if it flopped onto the bridge at that moment.

There was a sound in Bram’s head, incredibly loud, like a helicopter blade chopping into rough, sludgy waters. He collapsed mid-stride, unwinding as he did, knowing he would be dead before he hit the ground, and thankful that his final glimpse of life would be of Lizzie:

She crouched once more, swinging her arms back. The enormous tardigrade was wholly focused on her, ignoring the fleeing mass of crunchy-munchy people. It reared back to strike at this new monstrous predator, with its invisible body and single enormous eye.

Lizzie leapt, every muscle in her long arms and legs straining like a dancer, unearthly and fearless, driving the single terrible predatory Eye of Sauron into the round, tentacled maw of the thing from space.

It was not a winning fight, but dear God or whatever comes next, he loved her for having the grit to die trying.

END



Find the next chapter at
<http://www.arbortejas.com/Summer-Reading-Series/>