

EXPIRATION DATE

By David Erik Nelson



Chapter 3

It was maybe two months later that she called. Bram was at work. It was the afternoon lull, and he was breaking down the head on the newer of the two espresso machines in an attempt to banish disturbing inconsistencies in their espressos' crema.

He answered—despite not recognizing the number—but didn't speak, since 90 percent of the calls he didn't recognize were recorded messages trying to con him into a “free” cruise.

But this was not a robot, and the caller, against all odds, pronounced his name correctly: “Hello, Abraham Kryzewski?”

“Yes?”

“This is Dr. Ginevieve Chester, Ovander's and Betsy's Granny Gin.”

This meant nothing to him for a moment, and then it all flooded in at once.

“Oh! Yes. How are you?”

“I have your numbers.” She said. “Your telomere number and your correlated supertranslation number are in the same range.”

“OK.”

“Which tends to indicate natural death.”

“OK.”

“The correlated superposition number—the more precise of the two—comes to 11,442 hours.”

11,442 hours seemed pretty good. He breathed a sigh of relief, only then realizing how nervous he'd been.

“I'm sorry,” she continued.

“Sorry about what?”

There was a pause, heavy as a piano dangling from a fraying rope.

“You aren't very good at math, are you?”

He started to ask why, then actually started to think about the number: 11,442

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hours. That was only a bit over a thousand work days. Three years. His heart jumped.

“Three years,” he mumbled.

The woman tsked, not so much in judgement as pity. “Good Lord,” she sighed. “It’s 476.75 days—16 months from when you gave the sample. That’s,” he heard her tapping her fingernails on a countertop as she worked the sums in her head, “that’s Tuesday, October 10, around 8am.” Her voice slowed as she spoke, and Bram—whose head was swimming—assumed he was swooning. But he wasn’t. It was Granny Gin grinding to a halt.

“Dammit, Betsy.” She whispered, astonished. “Jesus Lord, what are the odds?” Then she hung up on him.

Bram set his phone on the counter, staring into it like a dark mirror.

What was he going to do about his mother? She didn’t have any siblings, her parents had been dead more than a decade, and she’d be a childless widow in just 400-ish days. He had no idea how he was going to tell her. He nonetheless picked his phone up to call her, but it rang in his hand. “Lizzie B.,” the screen told him.

This was unexpected: Lizzie had stopped returning his calls weeks ago, at first getting back to him via texts full up with the sorts of vague excuses someone gives when they don’t want to sign a petition—“Sounds great, but I’m really busy right now, maybe check back later”—and then even that stopped. She’d evaporated from his Facebook timeline, too; they were still “Friends,” it just looked, from his perspective, like she wasn’t really posting much of anything. He assumed that she’d adjusted some settings to sort of blackhole him. She was way better at that nit-picky technical stuff than he was.

There’d been no fight, no static, just a drift and fade. Rude? Maybe. But she was crazy busy; she was the youngest full professor ever to join the Ohio State Biological Physics Research Group, after all.

And now she was calling him.

Lizzie and Bram hadn’t spoken in almost a month, and he didn’t really get a chance to speak then, either: As soon as he hit ANSWER, she was already mid-tirade.

“This is straight-up BULLSHIT!” she shouted. “That crazy old BITCH!”

“Hey,” Bram began, “Good to hear—”

“This is so SCREWED UP!” she seethed. Bram could hear the swift, echoing tattoo of her heels, and could picture her pacing the long, narrow basement hallway that stretched from her lab to the elevator door. “So screwed up and so like her!”

“Yeah,” Bram tried again, sort of bewildered, not precisely sure what he was

agreeing about. “It’s screwed up. Stuff is pretty screwed.” Bram may not have been the sharpest knife in the drawer—especially by Bradford-Chester standards—but he wasn’t the most self-obsessed knife in the drawer, either. He understood that Lizzie was not upset about his impending death. She began to say something else, then choked, her voice breaking with a sob.

“Lizzie, Lizzie, it’s OK.”

She cried wordlessly, her weeping choked and bitter. “I can’t breathe,” she sputtered.

“Yes you can,” he said. Someone was at the counter. Bram waved her away. “You just said words. You are a biophysicist. You know that talking is vibrations in your throat, and there can’t be vibrations without air. You are breathing.”

“I can’t breathe,” she repeated, “I can’t stay in here. There’s no air in here. It’s like a coffin.”

The customer at the counter tried to get Bram’s attention again, and he swatted her words down. “Hey, jerkw—” she began, but Bram was already cutting around the counter and slamming out the door.

“Take the stairs, Lizzie,” he forced his voice to remain even and calm, like a flight attendant on a plummeting airliner, “Remain calm, walk up the stairs, and meet me at Columbus Commons. There’s plenty of air at Columbus Commons.”

“Yeah,” she panted.

“It’s cool,” he said, “I’ll stay on the phone.” His legs scissored against his flapping green apron. “The park is super mellow and really airy.”

“I’m feeling better moving.”

“Yeah. Get the blood pumping.” A horn blared, and Bram realized he’d stepped off the curb mid-block without looking. He leapt back, thought “Jesus! That bastard almost killed me!”

And then stopped.

That bastard had not almost killed him. He wasn’t going to die until October 10, around 8am. And no bastard was going to kill him: Bram was going to die of natural causes.

“OK,” Lizzie said in his ear, really just speaking to herself. “OK. It’s sunny out. OK. There’s a breeze.”

Bram closed his eyes and stepped into the street confidently, putting one foot in front of the other just like that crazy French acrobat who did that tightrope walk between the Twin Towers back when his mom was a kid.

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“OK,” Lizzie panted in his ear. “OK. Waiting at the crosswalk. Waiting at the crosswalk. Waiting at the crosswalk. OK. Crossing now. OK.”

Bram continued across the blacktop, heel to toe, eyes closed. Horns blared. Tires squealed. Step, step. Confident, easy, like strolling down the block.

A horn blared so close he felt it vibrate his pant leg, and then a car grill hit his thigh, connecting like a linebacker, tossing him onto the car’s hood with a hollow bonk. Bram’s eyes flew open, and the world spun around him as he rolled off the hood and collapsed on the hot blacktop. He popped up like a jack-in-the-box before he’d even fully processed that he’d been hit by a car and walked away unscathed.

“OK,” Lizzie said in his ear.

“OK,” Bram said, likewise talking to himself. “OK.”

He didn’t break stride as the panicked driver wallowed out of her car, shouting a mixed blubber of apologies and threats.

He was going to die of natural causes on October 10, around 8am—but that was no guarantee that he wouldn’t spend the intervening 400-whatever days a vegetable in a hospital bed because he stepped into the street like an idiot.

“OK,” Bram repeated. “No more experiments.”

“I see you,” Lizzie said. He looked up across the wide green lawn of Columbus Commons, in the general direction of her lab, and saw a tiny, distant Lizzie standing on the far corner.

“Coming,” he said, breaking into a sprint diagonally across the lawn.

“OK,” she said. “I’m OK.”

Bram leapt a napping man in a business suit, collided with a frisbee, cut around a picnic, and then drastically downshifted so that he was at a panting stroll when he got to where Lizzie stood, her phone still to her ear.

He had no idea what to do. He instinctively wanted to hold her tight, but had second thoughts, and then the moment had passed.

He put his phone in his pocket. She lowered hers, but her tawny slacks had no pockets.

“Hey,” he panted. “I came as quick as I could. It’s good to see you.”

“My Granny Gin called,” she said. “I’m going to die on October 10.”

It snapped together in his head, and Bram briefly went lightheaded. “At around 8am,” he said.

She nodded. “That old bitch has known since I was 15.”

This struck him as absolutely crazy. “I think we need to sit down,” Bram

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suggested. They found their way to a tall, square concrete planter housing a skinny, listless tree.

“This is bullshit,” she said again, not even looking up. “Such bullshit. Dead at age 26. In October! Do you know how busy I’m going to be in October 2017?”

“Not very?” Bram offered experimentally, hovering somewhere between joke and brutal truth. But Lizzie didn’t seem to hear.

“Our grant only goes through 2017, and we get new grad students and post-docs in the lab in August, so I’m gonna be tied up with them through September, and then hustling like crazy all fall. I can’t cram that all in before October 10. Granny Gin is crazy if she thinks I’ve got time for this.”

Bram was suddenly very worried about the timbre of these remarks. What did Lizzie expect to do? Renegotiate her expiration date with Granny Gin?

“Just tell it from the start,” Bram said. “Lay it all out for me.”

She was nodding. “Granny Gin was at Carnegie Melon still when we were kids, in genetics. MIT was later. But at CM, when she first started her telomere thing, it was a blood draw, not spit. And she needed a lot of samples. It’s really hard to get volunteers for a blood draw if you aren’t offering money—even at a Research I institution, where the average Jane Bookbag actually appreciates how important abstract research is. And Granny Gin . . . You’ve met Granny Gin.”

“Yes,” Bram said. “Yes I have.” Lizzie smiled, and Bram smiled with relief. Lizzie was looking less zombified with every word.

“She’s not good at politics. She’s not good at getting grants. So her lab had diddly-squat for funds. But Granny Gin needed her samples. Lots and lots of samples. Every big family event—especially Reunion, but even little big events like Christmas and Easter Sunday—she showed up with a damn box of phlebotomy stuff and an ice chest. Got to be a joke with a lot of the cousins—the white collar types, CEOs and accountants—that Granny Gin was a research vampire; ‘Ivory tower? More like Castle Dracula!’ and so on. But you know, just behind her back. To her face, when she asked for them to roll up their shirt sleeves? No hesitation. And when you asked what it was for, she gave this purposefully BS answer—way too complicated for someone outside the field to understand. And she did it in this shitty bored tone of voice that made you feel stupid for not already knowing. And that wasn’t because Granny Gin has crap ‘people skills.’ ‘Cause the thing is, her soft skills are tight as hell; she can play people like a fiddle. She’s just an asshole.”

“OK,” Bram said, taking Lizzie’s hands and enfolding them in his. “So, like,

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everyone in your family knows when they'll die? That's pretty nuts—”

“No.” Lizzie said flatly. “She never told them what the blood draws were really for. In all honesty, I doubt she even looked at their numbers, not individually. She doesn't really care when Cousin Lyle and Carla's Carl are going to die; she just needed data. Later she finally got a grant and hired someone who could straighten out the HIPAA stuff. She connected with a few hospitals, and I don't know that she ever did another blood draw with her own hands. And besides, soon enough, they went to assaying DNA using spit samples.”

Bram started to ask something—he didn't know what—but Lizzie went on.

“But anyway, the Christmas after the family Reunion where she drew my blood, she took me aside. I thought it was gonna be ‘the Birds and the Bees’ talk—'cause my Mama had just sat me down for the same talk, 7 months too late. But it wasn't.” She shook her head. “Nope. Instead, my Granny Gin—who'd always taken a special shine to me, because we looked so much alike, were so much alike: Both ran track, both nailed it in science class. She took me out to get a Starbucks, and when we sat down at the table she took my hands and told me I'd be dead right around my 35th birthday.” She sniffled back a sob, “She'd printed out the results from her data analysis of the quantitative PCR—scatterplots, candlestick graphs, even the stupid Southern blots showing the telomeric smears—and showed it to me. As though that helped. I was 15! But also, I was 15: I looked at that piece of paper and sipped my skim mocha and 20 years still seemed OK. Not great—I'd never have kids, I'd never get old. I'd never be Granny Liz. But I knew I could get something done in 20 years, something that meant something.” She sniffled again. “And I said something to that effect, and Granny Gin—hard and grating as carborundum—started to tear up. And evidently lost her damn nerve, failing to tell me that while I might die a natural death at 35, I was never gonna live long enough to do so, on account I'd be dead as hell by misadventure at 26.”

She was shaking her head. “Hardest bitch in the world, and she goes to talk the one goddamn time her hard-ass drill-sergeant BS could do some positive good.”

Bram was nodding, although he didn't know why. He worked his mouth and began speaking, having no idea what would come out: “Listen,” he began, “Lizzie, I know how hard this is.” He paused for a second, and then thought about the two cars that had just almost smashed him, the one he'd erroneously thought had ‘almost killed’ him, and the one he'd erroneously assumed couldn't hurt him. He took a breath to begin to talk about that—because something in that thirty seconds seemed

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like it sort of summarized the whole thing. But Lizzie cut him off.

“How?” She asked, “How can you have any idea what this is like, right now, this moment?”

Admittedly, he had no idea what it was like to work your ass off since you were 15, thinking you only had until 35, just to find out that when you were so close to hitting some big wins 10 years ahead of schedule, you were actually just about to lose the damn race on a technicality.

But he also felt like she was being a little unfair: He had also just learned he was going to die in about 400 days.

“I just mean that when your grandma called me, I wa—”

Lizzie didn’t have to interrupt him; her quizzical expression stopped him cold.

All at once it dawned on Bram that Lizzie hadn’t called him because they were evidently going to die together on October 10, 2017, sometime around 8am. Granny Gin hadn’t told Lizzie she’d called Bram—because why bother? Granny Gin didn’t give two craps about Bram; she’d called him as a courtesy, and when she saw that his expiration time and date were the same as Lizzie’s, had realized she needed to come clean to her best-belovéd granddaughter.

Lizzie hadn’t called him just because they shared deck chairs on the Titanic; Lizzie had called him because she’d gotten terrible news, and he was the person she wanted to talk it out with. His heart broke open, and he was full of light. Somehow, this had become the best day of his life.

Now he did take her up in his arms.

And she wept, and wept, and wept, and everyone walking past—from young cop to ancient homeless guy—studiously pretended not to see.

And then they went home, to Lizzie’s nice little brownstone, which they would henceforth share until the day they died.



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