

EXPIRATION DATE

By David Erik Nelson



Chapter 5

Granny Gin died of a brain aneurysm three days after their call. Bram very much doubted it caught her by surprise. He had to admire the gal; in her own understated way, she was a last-laugh kind of lady, and he appreciated that.

Bram never told Lizzie about the call—not that he was actively concealing it, he told himself, but just because it hadn’t come up, and once Granny Gin was dead it seemed awkward to bring it up.

Standing there beside Dr. Ginevieve Chester’s coffin, hands folded at his belt buckle and shoulders squeezed by his slightly-too-narrow suit jacket, Bram discovered that he’d reached Acceptance, passing the Kübler-Ross finish line without breaking stride.

He was going to die on October 10, 2017. Not before, not after, and there was no doing anything about it.

Sure, this raised questions—What would happen if he quit his job, quit paying bills, buying groceries? Would the apartment’s water just never manage to get shut off? Would a series of unlikely coincidences bring him three squares per day? What would happen if he pressed a revolver to his temple and just started pulling the trigger? Six misfires? What were the odds of that? And what if he reloaded and tried again. Six more misses? And six after that? Whole boxes, whole cases, of dud .38s?

But he didn’t spend long wondering about these sorts of things. Granny Gin had been right about him: Bram was no scientist; he was hardly even a social scientist. He didn’t really need to run out all the odds, or perform a series of shoddy experiments. He needed to live his life, and help Lizzie live hers.

He considered quitting his day job and really locking down on something—poetry or drums or learning to catch major air riding pools and half-pipes—but then he remembered that Malcolm Gladwell book, about how it took 10,000 hours to become a virtuoso at anything, and he only had about 11,000, one third of which he’d spend sleeping.

EXPIRATION DATE

All in, Bram really only had about 8,000 waking hours left, and that was if he totally single-mindedly devoted himself to poetry or percussion or pools or whatever.

And he didn't want to. With the clarity of scheduled and inescapable death, he discovered that he didn't really want to be a virtuoso, or even all that virtuous. He wanted to go to work and chat with the folks who came in, cook good meals, watch decent movies, and hang with Lizzie and Chet. So he did some math, double checked it, had Lizzie go over it and, miracle of miracles, he was right: Given their expenses and limits on his two credit cards, he could cut his hours back to a bit under half-time and just slow-roll it to the bitter end.

Where he hit the snag was explaining all of this to his mom.

Bram had assumed that breaking the news of his swift-approaching demise to his mom would bog down in the details—mostly on account that he wasn't precisely sure he properly understood the “telomeric signal ratio” part, let alone whatever event-horizon quantum business it was that resulted in the “coherent physical system math number,” but it never even got that far. He'd prepared a very brief “executive summary” speech—which he then practiced in front of the mirror until he could say the whole thing without rushing, pausing, or choking up.

“Mom: I have some really, really bad news. I saw this doctor—” which was technically true; Granny Gin had indeed been a “doctor” “—and she says that I've basically got about 16 months to live. They're still doing tests—” which was a straight up lie— “so I don't necessarily have answers to your questions, but there's no treatment and this diagnosis is so close to 100% accurate it isn't worth bothering to hope for anything.”

Then he called, moving fast so as to keep his resolve.

“Sweetie!” Bram's mother was pathologically chipper; most of what she said sounded like it warranted at least one exclamation point!

“Hi Mom,” he offered, feeling like the words were a rental tux crusted in vomit and grass stains that he was reluctantly offering back to the bridal shop.

“You don't sound good,” she said, standard motherly concern in her voice. “Is everything OK?”

“I'm . . . No. No it isn't. Listen...” And then he gave his speech, perfectly. When he finished, there was silence on her end of the line. He'd been prepared for tears or hysteria, or to keep repeating “I'm sorry, Mom; I just don't know” as she peppered him with detail questions.

EXPIRATION DATE

But he hadn't prepared for silence.

"Any . . . um . . . Mom?"

"Yes, sweetie?" She said, her voice a little distant—as though her thoughts were elsewhere—but sweet and light as a chickadee hopping among the brambles.

"Did you . . . Do you . . . Do you have any questions?"

"No. Well, yes: Are you seeing anyone?"

"Like, a specialist? No, Mom, see, this—"

"No, silly!" she chirped, "Like a girlfriend!"

"Oh, I . . . yeah. Lizzie. You remember Lizzie?"

"The black girl?"

"The, yeah, the scientist who is also a runner. And really tall."

"Yes," he could hear the bright smile in her voice, "She seemed like a nice girl. Lovely skin."

"I . . . Yes. She, um, moisturizes. She has a regimen." Lizzie had more little bottles of cremes, oils, and unguents than an olde-tyme snake-oil salesman. Even Chet had his nightly "regimen," which included Cetaphil cleanser, Crème De La Mer moisturizing cream, La Mer "eye concentrate" (whatever the hell that was), and thrice-weekly exfoliation.

"You know what, Sweetie, I have to go. I'm having dinner with a friend."

"Oh. OK. I love you, Mom."

"Love you, too!" He could hear her pulling the phone away from her face, and shouted.

"Wait! Mom, wait!"

"Yes?" Her voice was close again, but her attention still distant.

"Mom, you understand that I'm going to die, right? That I'm dying?"

"No," she said, no inflection in her voice. "No, I . . . Abraham, please . . . Please don't joke like this."

"Mom, I'm not—"

But she'd already hung up; he was just talking to a dark hunk of glass and metal pressed to his face.

He tried calling back, and went straight into voicemail. She'd powered down her phone.

Bram wasn't really clear where to go from there. He tried to get Lizzie's thoughts that night, but she kept changing the subject until finally she set down her fork, locked eyes with him and said:

EXPIRATION DATE

“Listen, Bram: I can’t help you. I have no idea. I haven’t told my folks, and I’m not going to. They already think I’m going to be dead at 35, they’ve mourned that, and they’ve worked through it. You know how hard that is? It isn’t like there are couples counselors with experience in coaxing folks through the pre-grief that comes with knowing when your kid is going to die. They got through it their own way, but it took more than 15 months, so it ain’t like I’m pulling the rug on them now. They can just grieve the plain old way in October.”

Bram nodded. He didn’t agree, but he didn’t have anything to say.

“You want my advice?” she asked.

“Well, yeah; that’s why I asked to begin with.”

“Let her do her. Your mom pretended not to hear because she didn’t want to hear. Don’t force it on her. Did she ask to meet me?”

It took Bram a second to follow the sudden conversational juke.

“Hunh? No, but, I mean, you guys met—”

“You told us each other’s names on the porch before taking her to that tea at Kelton House Gardens.”

“You had to get to that work thing—”

“We didn’t even shake hands, Bram.”

Bram suddenly realized he hadn’t even noticed that his mom hadn’t offered Lizzie her hand—or, more his mom’s style, hadn’t taken Lizzie by the shoulders and given her a bracing little hug, frail, birdlike hands gripping with unexpected strength.

Lizzie gave him The Look. What jumped to his mouth—but thankfully did not clear his lips—was the insistence that his mom couldn’t be racist because Kelton House is an Underground Railroad museum!

“Well,” he said awkwardly, “We could drive up to Michigan on Sunday afternoon, take her out for lunch and—”

Lizzie picked her fork back up. “Let her do her, Bram. We have 402 days left; I don’t really want to spend any more of them being awkward than is strictly necessary. I imagine Thanksgiving in Michigan will be enough awkwardness for a lifetime.”

“Well, we’ll only have to do it once,” he said, poking at his chicken. It came out so sulky and ridiculous that he began to snicker. And Lizzie caught the giggles from him, and they just went on with their lives—because it was true, 402 days and counting. No sense in picking fights. Just like Hugo Chávez: Why assassinate a man who’ll be dead on his own soon enough?

EXPIRATION DATE

They ate in silence for a while after that, then cleared the table, and turned in for the night. In the darkness of their small bed they held each other like orphaned monkeys holed up from a raging storm. They kissed, and then made love. They made love often, because while neither of them were dying, both of them would soon be dead—and in contrast to everyone else on earth, they knew it.

#

The worst times were not the ones where Lizzie was depressed—then, at least, Bram felt like he knew what to do. No, the worst times were the strings of days during which she was slowly sinking into depression, like an airplane losing altitude, the controls non-responsive, the instruments lying to her, saying everything was fine.

Once, two days into such a slow crash, Bram spent his afternoon off googling tardigrades, in the hopes of being able to ask a non-stupid question or two and get her talking. He was desperate to get her talking about her work, getting her glowing like she did. He figured he'd hit pay dirt when he learned that although tardigrades could survive for a century or more in insanely harsh conditions provided they were snuggled up tight in their self-imposed suspended animation—which always made him think of Han Solo at the end of *Empire Strikes Back*—they only lived for a few months when they were in fully hydrated normal walking-around mode.

That night he launched his conversational gambit over home-cooked pasta alla puttanesca and Greek salad—which was sort of a weird pan-European combo, once he thought about it, but went well together nonetheless.

“Hey, so, I was reading online about tardigrades, and how they last centuries encased in their cryptobiotic carbonite, but less than a year when they're, like, thawed out and doing their thang. Granny Gin's patented telomere tasseography could totally give you some insights about that, right?”

Lizzie was slow to respond—so slow that Bram started to wonder if she'd heard him, and then wonder how she could not have heard him; her kitchen table was hardly four feet across. He was about to try again when she frowned, shaking her head slowly.

“No.” She didn't look up from her food. “It's complicated. Some aspects of tardigrade resiliency, we're getting a handle on those. Kunieda and his team, they altered human cells using tardigrade DNA in order to suppress X-ray induced damage. That's cool, but that's not aging.” Bram noticed she hadn't really been

EXPIRATION DATE

eating, just pushing her meager portion around, like an extra in a restaurant scene. “The tardigrade telomere sequence is unknown—it doesn’t fit into any of the known ancestral telomeric motifs that would make sense—and they have a telomerase-independent chromosome maintenance system. Their longevity . . . it’s not like ours. I . . .”

Lizzie set down her fork. Her shoulders were shaking, and Bram momentarily worried she was having a seizure before it dawned on him that she was weeping. He stood up so quickly that his chair tipped back, clattering to her hardwood floor, and then he was around the table, kneeling at her side, holding her. The tears were quiet, but came so furiously that they trickled down his neck and into his shirt. She couldn’t speak, just shake and weep. And then she dragged in a single breath, and it broke through: a wail that was absolutely heartbreaking and heartbroken. It was the cry of every mother on every shore as the slaver’s ship dipped below the horizon. It was every child that ever crouched over a car-struck dog. It was every parent who ever stood opposite a doctor who began her sentence with “I’m so sorry...”

But Lizzie was not grieving the daughters she would never have. Nor was she grieving the grandmother she’d lost. She was grieving for herself. Before Granny Gin’s fateful—if feckless—call, she’d thought she had another ten years to crack the code, to figure out how it was that some things, like those tardigrades, dodged death over and over again. She’d thought—in defiance of not just her damned brilliant, domineering matriarch, but of nature itself—that she could beat this thing, that she could save herself. And despite all odds against it, Lizzie’d been on track to discover something amazing; she’d worked hard since she was 15, knowing she only had twenty years to get it done.

And then Granny Gin screwed her out of half of that in an attempt to be kind.

Lizzie was the first person in human history to have to figure out how the hell to pre-grieve your own death not just once, but twice. There was no book on this in the Barnes & Noble Self Help section, no therapist with an evidence-based treatment option, no support group or Facebook group. Neither Dr. Oz nor Oprah would come to her rescue. Even Granny Gin was dead and gone, goddamn her.

Bram was it. And so he held her and hoped he’d figure out what to do next.

That night Lizzie went running, as she did most nights. Most folks indulged in a prolonged trot around the neighborhood and called that “running.” Lizzie was no trotter. Every night that the weather permitted she went to OSU’s outdoor track. And “weather permitting” meant “not a blinding monsoon.” Misty? She was there. Cold?

EXPIRATION DATE

She was there. As long as the track was clear, she was there.

She'd absolutely sprint all out for some period he wasn't clear on—it was either a time thing or a number of steps thing—then stop on a dime, drop, and do a push-up that finished with pulling her legs up under her chest and leaping straight into the air, then dropping down and doing another just like it, until her arms failed. As soon as she could rise, she did another sprint.

Repeat.

Until some switch popped in her head, and she was done for the day.

She did not know that Bram had followed her that night, and did not know that he followed her often after that. Although he understood why he followed the first night—he would never tell anyone, could not quite consciously articulate it even to himself, but he'd been worried she'd been going to kill herself—but he didn't understand why he followed after that. There was something compelling about the effort itself, about the purity of its fury. She ran and did those pushups like she could somehow punish the earth itself for continuing to spin.

One afternoon he asked Chet about it while they were playing Rainbow Six: Siege. Chet shook his head, eyes never leaving the screen. “She’s always been a runner. She competed in high school,” he stopped talking for a second, focused on sniping a series of troops as they tried to flee from concealment to legit cover, “she was training to do the Boston Marathon.” Another pause. Another man down. “But that’s clearly not to be.”

“Why?” Bram asked, eyes glued to the screen.

“You gotta qualify for those things, not just train—she’s just straight up out of time.”

“Then why’s she still training?”

A sigh. “I can’t tell you why Lizzie does what Lizzie does, Bram” he said. “I don’t think Lizzie can, either. God only knows why Lizzie does what she does,” then he added with a smirk, “And God’s dead.”

“Happens to the best of us, I guess,” Bram agreed, tossing a grenade into the room they were about to breach, and inadvertently killing the hostage they were to save.

Game over.



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