

EXPIRATION DATE

By David Erik Nelson



Chapter 6

“Why’d you want to know your expiration date?” Lizzie asked him one Saturday afternoon, apropos of nothing—but, of course, nothing was truly apropos of nothing any more. Every word, every gesture, every meal in their little brownstone was conceived and executed to the rhythm of the relentless tock of that deathwatch beetle Granny Gin had given them as a sort of engagement present.

They were sitting on their little Ikea sofa, Lizzie wrapped in a malformed throw some auntie had crocheted in unfortunate colors, Bram using his phone to listlessly scroll through Netflix on their TV. It had been a Bad Week for Lizzie—she’d dipped back into Depression, then all the way to Anger, and hadn’t gotten back up past Depression since.

Bram shrugged—and then, goaded by that relentless conqueror worm’s tick-tock himself—answered anyway:

“My dad died when I was eight. He . . .” Bram paused, searching for the least number of words to cover the most ground. “He had issues. I don’t want to go into it, but he wasn’t the best dad in the world. Not in a malicious way, just . . . he was messed up, and a lot of his energy had to go into just maintaining. It was hard for him.”

Lizzie nodded. She didn’t reach out and touch him, didn’t look pained to hear this—in short, she didn’t pity him, simply took in and acknowledged the information. Bram appreciated this more than he could possibly articulate.

“Anyway, Dad loved giving gifts. And it was great to get a gift from him—not only because it was one of the rare times that everyone was happy, but also because he was really good at giving gifts, he was really generous—given what we could afford—and really, really thoughtful. They were always just right gifts. He drove a tow truck for a living, and one night instead of him clomping in at 10pm it was a cop ringing the bell. Dad had been pulling a drunk out of a ditch, and a second drunk had roared down the on-ramp and crashed into his truck. Missed Dad by less than a foot.

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The cop on our doorstep had been on the scene, arresting Drunk #1 when Drunk #2 showed up. He was just pulling that dumbass unscathed from his Toyota when he realized Dad was on the ground, dead right there. Turned out it was a stroke: His blood pressure shot up in response to the near miss, and it popped a blood vessel in his neck. Doctor said that the vessel had probably been defective from birth. Dad had just turned 29. Six months later, when Mom finally got the nerve to clean out Dad's tool room, she found it."

Bram sniffled, smiling without feeling it.

"This sweet brand-new Natas Kaupas Crazy Cat complete." Lizzie squinted with incomprehension. "A skateboard," Bram added, "The whole deal: New deck, new World Industries 'Bean Cup' wheels, Indie trucks, Swiss bearings, and this dope fluorescent green grip tape and matching old-skool Powell-Peralta urethane rib bones. It was exactly the deck I'd wanted, even though I had never told him outright that it was—mostly because all that stuff was pretty expensive, especially with what dad could bring home. He'd been saving it for my birthday—'cause part of giving gifts is timing, right?—but he'd been killed three weeks before."

Bram paused, laughed a little, and felt his smile bend further, if sadder. "I still have that deck, by the way. It's out of style—those old decks are really wide, small nose, broad tail, shallow concave; they're harder to ride. But, you know, sentimental value trumps all. Anyway, point is: If he'd known he was gonna expire, he would have done it differently, given me the deck earlier, even if it would have been weird to give me an expensive thing like that out of the blue."

Bram thought for a moment, then nodded his head and finished: "I always want to do exactly what I would do if I knew I was gonna die that night, even if it isn't the ideal time to do it. Better to do what you can when you can than to let the chance slip by. What about you? Why'd you want to know?"

"I didn't," she said, staring into the middle distance. "Granny Gin just dropped it on me. She couldn't fathom why I wouldn't want to know."

Bram let out a low whistle. "That's . . . that's harsh. What about Chet, when did he find out?"

She focused on Bram again. "Never did. Baby brother, he got to choose."

They were quiet for a long time. "I didn't know you'd grown up poor," Lizzie finally said. She was super-duper middle class, and still carrying a lot of student debt, which they were no longer bothering to maintain. Bram had finished a degree in political theory debt-free.

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“Oh,” he shook his head, laughing. “Dad had an insane amount of life insurance.”

She stitched her brows again. “‘cause he loved giving gifts so much?”

Bram snorted. “Nope. His boss messed up the paperwork. Dad worked for this real mom-and-pop tow yard, and the dude who ran the place insisted on handling all the office admin himself, which he was always screwing up. Anyway, he got Dad this insane life insurance policy as a tack-on with the health insurance. It had a triple indemnity clause that paid off in a workplace-accident scenario. Mom was really good at managing money—she had to be to keep our house running with Dad earning peanuts—but it turned out she was also really good at investing, once she had money to invest. It’s grim as hell to say it, but I guess that was really his last gift: We got to be middle class in America at the dawn of the totally-boned 21st Century.”

She nodded twice, her mood reflective, then asked, “Do you have life insurance?”

Bram shook his head. “No. Who would I leave it to?”

“Your mom, I guess. To cover the costs of your funeral. They call it ‘burial insurance.’ Funerals start at ten grand and go up from there. A policy on a healthy young guy like you probably won’t be more than \$10 per month.”

Bram was nodding, “I guess that’s a good idea. You have it?”

“It’s tacked on with my health insurance at the university.”

“I’ll take care of it after dinner.” He said. It turned out to only be \$5 per month, and that was for the Premium Gold Plan—enough to easily cover an eco-friendly, completely organic Six Point Willow Coffin and a funeral with all the fixins.

The policy would have lapsed before Bram’s beneficiary had any use of it, but Bram had overdraft protection on both of his credit cards. The auto-billing just kept piling up, regardless of how far in the red he sank. They sent bills, and Bram just added them to the pile on the mantle above Lizzie’s non-functioning fireplace. There used to be a regular at the cafe, a contractor whose main hustle was changing locks and clearing out people’s abandoned stuff after foreclosure evictions. He told Bram once that almost every place he went into there was a pile of mortgage and collection notices, unopened. Bram had always assumed that was out of dread—too scared to open them and get the bad news, too afraid of the repercussions associated with just throwing out an OFFICIAL DOCUMENT—FINAL NOTICE!

But now Bram thought differently. Maybe, like him, the folks in those

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doomed mortgages had reached Acceptance and, with Disaster Time tick-tocking ever closer, just made a game of seeing how high the pile could get before sliding off onto the tiles.

Bram and Lizzie's own bill pile reached four inches before they abandoned their brownstone on Tuesday, October 10. It never tumbled, not until the entire brownstone did—but that wouldn't be for several weeks, when the building was struck by a shell fired from an Abrams tank stationed two blocks away in a last-ditch effort to contain Columbus, Ohio.

By then, Lizzie and Bram would have been dead for nearly a month.



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