

# EXPIRATION DATE

By David Erik Nelson



## Chapter 8

**On** the morning of October 9—the day before their mutual Expiration Date—Lizzie and Bram lounged in bed late, then had a leisurely lovey-dovey brunch of crepes with hand-whipped cream and overpriced imported strawberries, accompanied by absurdly expensive coffee. They'd been planning to split town around noon for Hocking Hills State Park, hike the trails, finally see Ash Cave, sleep in a “luxury log cabin,” and die somewhere pretty out in the woods.

But when they made it down to the street, they found not mid-day residential tranquility, but polite pandemonium. Their street was crammed with cars progressing at a crawl, and lined on each side with residents busily overburdening their Hyundais and Priuses and third-hand Volvos.

Bram sniffed the air. Smoke. But not the Norman Rockwell autumnal smells of wood-smoke and burning leaves. These fires smelled of plastic and metal and the weird chemicals meant to retard the spread of flames through people's homes.

There was a conspicuous lack of sirens. And the conspicuous lack of panic that comes with big crowds who've buttoned up their terror for fear of triggering a riot. It looked like moving day in a college town, except everyone was trying to keep an extra-low profile, giving the whole thing an eerie, no-eye-contact silence.

“I wonder,” Lizzie said behind him, “If Granny Gin failed to tell us something about the larger import of October 10, 2017.”

Bram strongly suspected this was the case. “Did she have many sample series from Columbus, Ohio?” he asked.

He turned to look at her and saw something on her face, a question trying to formulate itself just below the surface, something about how it was that Bram seemed to have this inside-baseball view of Granny Gin's work, including the lingo. But she never asked, because someone yelled at them from out in the street, as jovial as one of Santa's elves.

“Hey-hey!” They turned and saw Chet slide out from between the bumpers

## EXPIRATION DATE

of two closely parallel-parked cars while their owners scurried around, loading and lashing and not making conversation, then dance through a gap in the crawling one-way street traffic, earning himself only a single annoyed horn-toot. He wore a backpack stuffed to the gills with all sorts of odds and ends strapped to the outside: a steel travel mug, an umbrella, a rolled up sleeping pad, a bunch of bananas, a hammer and saw, a katana, a police-surplus megaphone. He was carrying a sagging pillowcase, all uncomfortable angles and odd jutting. Bram couldn't be certain, but he was fairly sure it was loaded with Magic: The Gathering deck boxes.

"Chet, are you nuts?" Lizzie asked, "You're wandering the streets with a goddamn ornamental katana strapped to your back?"

"One, this ain't ornamental; this is a legit katana, sis. Two, pro-tip, today of all days, if you're gonna hike across Columbus, I strongly suggest you have a legit katana strapped to your back. Joe and Jane Q. Public don't say a damn thing to a brother with a katana on his back in Columbus today; it's like I'm the Invisible Man." He paused, "H.G. Wells, not Ralph Ellison." He paused again. "Actually, sorta both, right? Anyway," he said over-casually, "I thought I might catch a ride out of town with y'all." Chet theatrically scanned the street. "Columbus totally sucks, you know?"

Bram expected Lizzie to say something, but for reasons he couldn't fathom she was without words. Finally he hazarded, "You know the date, Chet?"

"Yup."

"You really think it's a good idea to be in a car with us with the clock ticking like this?"

"Sure. It's your date, not mine."

"When's yours?"

"My natural death date? 2109, in the summertime."

Their jaws dropped.

"You're gonna live to be 102?" Bram asked.

"112," Lizzie and Chet said simultaneously, "But, no," Chet went on. "Not quite. According to Granny G, I won't be going out via natural causes. My correlated supertranslation number puts my actual death date in December of 2100."

"You're gonna be a hundred-something-year-old man and choke on a peanut?" Bram asked.

Chet nodded. "Messed up, but that's the law."

Bram nodded. "Some guys get all the luck."

Somewhere far off there was a series of six steady bangs. Bram wasn't a gun

## EXPIRATION DATE

guy, but he knew enough to know that it was probably too much to hope that it was some kid messing around with off-season cherry bombs.

“Maybe,” Chet said, “maybe not. Gotta lotta questions about what tomorrow might bring, m’man.”

Bram was about to respond, but was cut off by his phone blating and buzzing in his pocket. He dug it out as the blat-n-buzz rippled up and down the block. He glanced at his screen, his movements eerily mirrored all around him.

EMERGENCY ALERT: Chemical event in your area. Please shelter indoors and await instructions.

He looked up to see everyone out in the street pause, then redouble their efforts, hurriedly lashing boxes to roof racks, hissing at kids to leave the car and get in the damn car now!

“This is going to be the traffic jam to end all traffic jams,” Lizzie opined.

“I’m not a big fan of sitting in traffic,” Bram said. “And the AC in my Outback is FUBAR.”

“I’m not a big fan of whatever happens to whoever isn’t ‘sheltered indoors’ come nightfall,” Chet added. “Imma wager that my katana-based invisibility doesn’t work on cops.”

They went back upstairs, where Chet and Bram cooked up a gourmet chicken-pork ramen feast—something Chet had learned from a dude he’d split a hotel room with at GenCon. Incidentally, this was the same dude who’d sold him the katana.

While Bram and Chet cooked, Lizzie poked at her phone, periodically reporting about the purported “chemical event” and the prevailing Facebook and Twitter theories about whether it had happened or not.

“If it was fake—if there’s no chemical event—why bother?” Lizzie mused, annoyed. “It clearly didn’t succeed in keeping folks in; if anything, it made more of them hurry up to get stuck in that gridlock.”

Bram shimmied and tossed the wok-full of veggies and meat. “Misdirection,” he called over his shoulder. “Like in a magic trick. You know about the magic chopstick?”

“Nope,” Chet called out from the sink, where he was pouring the noodles into a colander.

“What?” Lizzie asked.

Bram set the wok back on the flame, cut the heat to simmer and poured in his broth. “Look,” he said, plucking a chopstick out of the cup of carry-out extras on the

## EXPIRATION DATE

kitchen counter, then turning to face them.

“This,” he said, “Is a magic chopstick. It makes stuff disappear, but it’s of limited utility. Either of you have a coin or something?” Lizzie was wearing running leggings; she didn’t even have pockets. But Chet came up with a quarter and an Alf pog.

“Alf is back?” Bram asked.

“In pog form,” Chet answered.

Bram smiled. “Simpsons . . . ?”

“Episode 132; ‘Bart Sells His Soul,’ m’man.”

“Classic.” Bram held out his hand, and accepted the pog and coin. “A pog and a quarter,” he explained, slowly closing his fingers into a fist around them. “Perfectly normal, not gimmicked. Now watch closely.”

He gently tapped the fist with his magic chopstick.

“One.” He said. “Now keep watching; keep me honest.”

He tapped again, harder.

“Two. Don’t let me be tricky. Watch carefully.”

He wound up, and then, quick as a whipcrack, whapped his fist a third time.

“THREE!” he called, springing his fingers open: The pog and quarter were still there. But the chopstick he’d been using as a magic wand was gone. He wagged the fingers of his empty hand for emphasis.

“Tada,” he said. “The magic chopstick, ladies and gentleman. Limited utility, on account all it can make disappear is itself.”

Chet snorted his appreciation and gave a slow clap, but Lizzie was legitimately bamboozled. “How in the . . . ?”

Bram whistled at her, then turned slightly and pointed at the side of his head. The magic chopstick was tucked behind his ear. He’d ditched it back there while winding up for his third tap, all the while encouraging them to closely watch his closed fist in order to ‘keep him honest.’

“Misdirection. It’s strategic distraction.” Bram returned to the stove, raising the heat under the wok. Chet started divvying up the noodles into large bowls. “But it isn’t just any old distraction; good misdirection uses your smarts against you.” Bram accepted a bowl of noodles from Chet. “It wasn’t enough to just have you two looking away from my chopstick for a second. You’re both really smart and really attentive. You’d catch me in a heartbeat. What I needed was to persuade you to focus those smarts and that formidable attention in the wrong place.” Bram ladled broth and

veggies and meat over the noodles and handed it to Lizzie.

“So the chemical event,” she said, accepting the bowl.

“It’s meant to distract us. From what?”

Bram shrugged. “No clue.”

“Wouldn’t it be easier to get up to no good if everyone actually returned to their homes, instead of gumming up the roadways?”

“No, because misdirection makes us our own worst enemies. The point was to gum up the streets with everyone who thinks they know what’s ‘really going on.’”

Chet nodded. “Neutralize everyone who isn’t given to ‘Cooperating with authorities,’” Chet bracketed the phrase in air quotes. “Stuck in a big ole traffic jam. While all the sheeple,” Chet added ominously, handing Bram another bowl, “go back to their straw houses and sit around not making trouble, poking at their phones, getting fat on fake news misdirection. And waiting for the wolf to come blow their house down.” Chet added archly.

Bram laughed, ladling up more soup. “I don’t know about that last bit—and you are mixing and matching your metaphors pretty freely—but the point is to split folks up into silos and keep them misdirected: Folks who listen to authorities stay in with their phones. The folks who don’t listen to authorities get stuck on their block running their cars out of gas.”

“So we’re sheeple, then?” Lizzie asked, gesturing to their bowls of soup, the fact that they were inside, and her phone.

Bram swapped Chet the steaming bowl of soup for the last bowl of noodles and served himself. “Yeah, but we’re sheeple with vision. We’ll hang back and move when the time is right.”

They went out onto the balcony with their bowls of soup and watched the police first come through in their regular uniforms, casually fanning out among the idling cars, tapping on windows, politely asking people to gather their necessities and perishables and exit the vehicles, even helping carry bags back up apartment steps. A few argued through sealed windows, but in general Bram observed, once someone acquiesced to rolling down the window an inch, it was basically just a matter of time. These were patient, persuasive cops.

More than a few motorists—mostly single, mostly men, mostly white—refused to even acknowledge the tapping. The cops eventually shrugged, drew an X on the windshield with that white soap those sneaker guys use to clean their kicks, and carried on to the next car. About an hour later, around the time Bram was

## EXPIRATION DATE

rummaging through the cupboards and mixing up “Tornadoes” (i.e., a finger from each liquor bottle he found, plus açai-blueberry juice and tiny umbrellas), the cops returned. This time, it was just a single trio in full, matte-black battle-rattle, helmets, black masks, riot armor, the works. They started at the head of the block. Bram heard Lizzie’s fork clatter into her bowl, splashing savory broth. One cop posted up at the front of the first occupied car, a knee pressed to the fender, tactical rifle aimed dead into the windshield. Another stepped crisply to the driver’s side and tapped on the window with the barrel of his tactical rifle (or her? Who could tell at that distance and in the tactical garb?). He or she waited 30 seconds, and then smashed the window to confetti with the butt of her gun as her remaining partner did likewise on the other side. Lizzie jumped to her feet, set her glass down on the balcony’s stone ledge, and went inside. Bram heard the living room TV come on, channels flick, the TV turn off.

The passenger-side cop ducked into the car—Chet, slurping noodles all the while, confidently announced that this was to unbuckle the seatbelt. The driver’s side cop then pulled the driver out through his window and unceremoniously dumped him onto the concrete. If the driver ran, they let him run. If he popped up to argue they tackled him, zip-tied his wrists and ankles, and left him bellowing on the asphalt. Anyone who left their vehicle in the meantime was allowed to run off.

Then on to the next occupied vehicle.

Rinse, repeat.

After just five such displays, all of the cars were abandoned and only two sovereign motorists were left hog-tied in the street. The trio of dark knights continued to the next block, muttering into the walkie-talkie handsets clipped to their shoulders. Soon thereafter a variety of private wreckers—no doubt on city contracts—and a single black-&-white showed up. The cops dragged away the two resistors and left. The tow trucks started towing.

“Added bonus,” Chet said, tipping his final bowl of noodles back so he could sip the broth. “All those folks who don’t cooperate with authorities: They’re stranded in Columbus now. Not to sound ominous or anything.”

Bram stood and went in to find Lizzie still sitting in the living room, in the dark, staring into the dark screen.

“So that’s all there is?” she said. “Last day on earth?”

“Nothing good on TV?”

“Nothing TV on TV; broadband is out.” She held up her phone, “Cell network

is out, too.”

“That seems bad.”

“It’s bad,” Chet said, slurping up the last of his broth. “Cell network, towers and whatever, aren’t on the regular power grid, plus they have their own back-up generators. The only time the entire network went down in this region, it was during that giant two-day blackout that stretched from Maine through Michigan, back when we were kids. And they put safeguards in place so that sort of outage couldn’t recur. Cell network and broadband are out because someone turned them off,” Chet said, “there’s either stuff going on in the wide-wide world they don’t want us to know about, or stuff going on around here they don’t want the wide-wide world to know about.”

“Or both,” Lizzie said flatly. “I’m going to bed.”

Bram set an alarm early—wouldn’t want to oversleep and wake up dead—and they turned in.

#

Bram woke to an absolutely pristine street—not just cleared of the abandoned cars blocking the roadway, but also all of the cars usually parked along both sides, and then street-swept and hosed down for good measure. Lizzie’s brownstone included a single parking space in the trash-strewn alley behind their building, and Bram was glad he’d parked in it the day before.

He made coffee, then roused Chet and Lizzie when the clear autumn sky started to pinken.

“C’mon,” he said to Lizzie, gently rubbing her nose, “Today is the first day of the rest of your life”—which is what he’d been saying to her for as long as they lived together. Only as it left his mouth did he realize how awful and cruel it might sound that day.

Thankfully, she smiled like a cat waking from a nap. “Yup,” she said, “Smells like coffee.”

“’cause it is. Let’s go while the getting is good. Chet’s already breaking a few eggs.”

“Can’t make omelettes otherwise,” she mumbled, sitting up and accepting the coffee cup. Bram stood at their bedroom window, surveying the clear streets in their ugly part of town. “Ya know, I doubt we can make it to the wilds of Hocking State Park, but we can at least make it out of Columbus; find someplace broad and grassy



to, you know.”

He turned to see Lizzie nodding. Chet was already calling them to breakfast.

They were fed and outside a few minutes before 7am. The street was still empty, but the foyers and front doors of all the other brownstones were crowded with tenants, like Black Friday shoppers waiting for the Best Buy doors to open. Bram thought again of the word Chet had used the night before: sheeple. But they didn't remind Bram of sheep. They reminded Bram of the dogs left behind at the Humane Society. Inevitably, his mind followed the analogy to its logical conclusion, and how things ended for all the unwanted dogs and cats that “didn't find their new families.”

He turned his mind away from this. Everyone cowering in their entryways, they'd be fine, he told himself. Everything was going to be fine.

They cut between the brownstones to the back alley. Bram got the Subaru warmed up while Chet and Lizzie piled in, Lizzie curling up in the back seat, again wrapped in her auntie's ugly afghan.

Once they got out of their immediate neighborhood they started seeing other cars, but no cops, and no congestion. The other drivers all seemed content to keep chugging along in an orderly fashion, keeping out of each others' way and scrupulously avoiding eye contact. In short order, Bram found himself on the verge of crossing the Scioto River on the Main Street Bridge.

He'd driven over it hundreds, if not thousands, of times, but today he was finally struck by how graceful it was, the concrete deck a frozen ribbon held aloft by the single, shallow steel arc angled overhead, supporting an orderly steel webwork—the ribcage of some great leviathan—dividing the broad pedestrian promenade from the roadway.

Traffic thickened as they crossed onto the bridge itself.

“Hunh,” Chet said. “I kinda thought this would be a bit more Escape from New York, right? Stealth gliders, armored cabs, Kurt Russell. This's been surprisingly smooth sailing, yo. What are the odds we'd slip out without a cock-up?”

“Boltzmann's brain,” Bram offered, eyes on the road so that they didn't have to be on the clock. “We live in a fundamentally unlikely universe. Sometimes things just go your way.” He was slowly accepting they weren't going to make it out of the city before his and Lizzie's Zero Hour. There was a really nice park just on the other side of the river, curled at the base of the bridge on the river's far shore, with rolling lawns and wide running paths. It was pretty. It was mellow. It would be the place he and Lizzie sat down on a riverside bench, leaned back in the sunshine, and quietly



## EXPIRATION DATE

died. Not perfect, not what they'd planned, but still nice—

“Hey!” Chet called out as he rummaged idly through the glovebox, “You’ve still got that card game?” He held up the family-friendly ice-breaker get-the-conversation-started card game that he’d left in the glovebox almost two years earlier, when Bram had driven Chet and Lizzie to their family reunion.

Chet riffled the cards, cut the deck, and read at random: “OK: If you could have any superpower—”

And then it happened. Or, more accurately, Bram realized that what had already been happening was happening. His eyes had been following something far up in the sky—something he took to be a lumpy, high flying party balloon, tossed by quixotic slipstreams. It was pale, and either shiny or luminous. All at once he realized that it wasn’t a small thing at a moderate distance, but something truly huge amazingly high in the sky and descending rapidly.

And it wasn’t alone.



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