

# Even Without Clocks

Fiction

Zvi Baranoff

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Abuelo, like a history professor, extrapolated on The Zone's relationship, or lack thereof, with Chicago, the USA, the rest of the world...and, the unlikely events that created a place found on no maps.

Abuelo pulled down a screen with a map of Chicago. "This is where I lived in the 1990s," he said, pointing with a broom handle. "By the end of the century, there was a bike collective here, an organic bakery here and a puppet troupe in a warehouse here."

"There were urban gardens here," he continued, "and squatters in here."

"Demonstrations usually began in this park, proceeding in this direction. The police would try to block off the marches before they got this far."

"At some point there would be a standoff. The cops formed a phalanx, a bottle would bounce off some cop's helmet or a window would crack somewhere. Clubs would swing, teargas canisters would fly. Crowds would either flee or fight. Sometimes they built barricades. That was the general pattern for decades."

We listened to recordings of old speeches and watched films of marches and riots spanning a quarter century.

There were calls for disbanding the police department, or at very least keeping cops out of The Zone. Some advocated for secession.

Rather than marching towards the cops, demonstrators declared parks and streets liberated and defended territory.

The police retaliated by clearing out occupied spaces. Cops attacked the parks, raided the squats, and trampled the gardens. A bottle would fly or a window would break and then they used batons as well as teargas. The frequency of demonstrations increased. Tensions grew. The crowds got larger and more adamant. The police became more brutal.

Those who lived in The Zone anticipated negotiations and compromise leading to increased autonomy. What came down from the Federales caught everyone off guard. Forever, it had been a bizarre ballet with discordant music. Without warning, the orchestra packed up and left. The dancers did not know what to do.

It was the Ides of March when The Zone was declared to be illegal. All businesses operating within The Zone were ordered to cease activities immediately. The government declared that those "without criminal intent" must vacate The Zone forthwith.

Electricity to The Zone was cut off. Mail and trash was discontinued. Water was briefly cut, but that required shutting down a line that served a third of Chicago, so it was soon back on.

Neighborhood meetings stretched into the early morning hours. A collective response was sought, but consensus was never quite reached.

The police established security checkpoints on the main streets. Cars were allowed out, with a screening for outstanding warrants. Then, barriers were placed on all the secondary streets. Soon after, the alleys were blocked. Boulders were placed on the bike paths.

While persistent individuals on foot found ways through the blockade, normal travel and exchange was squashed. The Zone was under quarantine, embargo, siege. People tried using the internet to reach the outside world. Within days, most of The Zone lost that connection. Some would wander with their phones held up in the air, trying to catch a signal near the checkpoints.

Police drones knocked phones from hands, smashing fingers as well as phones. After a few days, the electronic curtain solidified. Even those weak signals around the parameters disappeared. The Zone was cut off. Virtually no news seeped from The Zone. The only information that came in was from the police at the security checkpoints. Much of that information seemed tailored to cause panic.

Around that time, the Federal government instituted the Universal Cell Phone & Internet Bill of Rights. No law has ever been more mislabeled than this. On the one hand, it assured every American access to the internet, but it bound everyone to the web. The governmental presumption is that anyone disconnected for long from the web had died. Dead people don't have bank accounts, health insurance or Social Security. Essentially, anyone remaining in The Zone became dead to the world.

The population of The Zone rapidly dwindled. Those with commitments to jobs and families left. Those with deeper attachments in the neighborhood or with reasons to be disconnected from the outside such as outstanding warrants stayed. Things got really difficult, really quickly.

The Salvagers became key to survival in The Zone. They moved in and out of abandoned properties, determining what was useful. Salvagers oversaw deconstruction projects and coordinated smuggling operations that brought essentials into The Zone.

To be a Salvager took a level of gumption and willfulness that only the truly committed can maintain. Initially, the Salvagers were a working committee, primarily of squatters. The crews transformed into something closer to a guild or a fraternity.

"Let's go for a walk," Abuelo suggested.

Sure, why not? I looked around in case of mountain lions or other such. I shrugged my shoulders. I found my hat and coat.

Abuelo threw some fruit and bread and cheese into a shoulder bag and picked up his walking cane. We headed out into the pre-morning darkness.

The weather had turned moderate. The walk was not cold. We entered a stairwell of one of the taller buildings in The Zone. On the roof, there was a fine sheltered space with a lawn and trees and a view of the eastern horizon. Some other locals also found their way to this promontory. The sun rose in spectacular form. We ate breakfast on that rooftop.

"I have something to show you," Abuelo told me. He led me further through the trails of The Zone.

We tend to think of city spaces as crowded places, however, if houses are scaled down and roads, offices, commercial buildings, parking lots, trains and the like are eliminated, a city can be quite spacious and open.

That is the situation in The Zone. Probably three-quarters of the original buildings had been carefully deconstructed, with everything useful transformed. The cottage where I was recuperating was built entirely from repurposed materials.

We walked another short distance and came to what had been a plaza long ago. There was a building with a clock tower, but the face of the clock had been smashed. A pedestal stood unadorned in the center of the former plaza with neither statuary nor plaque.

"So," Abuelo began. "The more political folks met all day and all night. They argued and fought over ideology and policy. They strived to make decisions by consensus."

"In theory, that meant that everyone came to a common agreement. In practice, there were really few things anyone agreed about. No one liked to be told what to do. No one wanted authority over them. As far as making practical decisions, well..." He trailed off and sat quietly for a while.

Then, he continued his tale. "They abolished government, capitalism and money. All that was pretty simple since the government had abandoned The Zone. There was no business. Paper money had already been banned. We were cut off from electronic financial transactions. Those decisions had really already been made for us."

"They went onto do away with sexism, racism, ageism and every other 'ism' they could think of. Then, they took on the issue of time."

“There was a May Day celebration here in the plaza with music and speeches followed by the great debate about time.”

“Labor activists decried the old bosses and time clocks. The young and the old argued against being categorized by chronological age. Former prisoners did not want to do time. Anarchists claimed that time was oppressive. New Agers declared time an illusion. Some suggested that if we stopped measuring time, we could halt the aging process. Science fiction fans professed that by disconnecting from linear time, time traveling would be possible.”

“So, on that May Day, while we partied below, a yahoo with a sledgehammer climbed the tower and destroyed the clock. The next day, calendars, day planners, and clocks were piled up and set aflame. Over the next couple of days, several individuals lost their wristwatches to zealots. The Zone was declared free of time for perpetuity.”

“That was our last May Day in The Zone,” he said. “Without a calendar there are no holidays, birthdays, anniversaries, and no yahrzeit candles lit for you when you are gone.”

Abuelo balanced himself with his cane. “Somehow, even without clocks and calendars, we still age,” he said with resignation and a touch of sadness.

As we walked home, I asked Abuelo about the empty pedestal in the former plaza. “Oh,” he said. “The nihilists wanted to build a monument to nothing, and they did.”

Zvi Baranoff has a tenuous attachment to linear time and physical space. He lives in rural southern Oregon. He has two nearly finished novels, one from which this is excerpted. His writing is at his blog at [21stcenturybo-gatyr.blogspot.com](http://21stcenturybo-gatyr.blogspot.com)

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