

THE EIGHT PERCENT

I knew right away that I was one of the Eight Percent. I didn't know whether to feel deflated or relieved. In the end, it didn't matter.

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It's a generally accepted fact that eight percent of all the Death Box predictions are screwy. I don't mean it tells you something that's plausible but wrong, which would be awful, but that you get a death forecast that's plain nonsense. The most famous case was back when very few people were willing to try the Box, and all the predictions were numbered and celebrated. Prediction #103 was GIBBERING SALT MINE FLATULENCE. I remember thinking at the time that it would be cool—yeah, yeah, I know, but I was just a kid—if it somehow turned out to be true. But then the guy died three years later in a car crash.

Eventually some government agency started keeping track of all the predictions, even before it became so popular. There have been tens of millions by now, and though most of the people tested are still alive, there have been enough deaths for them to get a decent sample and figure how many come true. Most do, and they're almost always boring. "SMOKE INHALATION." "HEART ATTACK UPON HEARING BAD NEWS." "COMPLICATIONS FROM PANCREATIC CANCER." They say that 92% are accurate, and 8% are meaningless.

I remember watching the little display screen after I inserted my blood sample. It didn't take long—less than thirty seconds for most people. The first thing I saw was REFRIGERATOR. I immediately started to think of ways that a guy could get killed by a refrigerator, but a second later the word vanished and was replaced with DROWNING. Then FALL FROM A GREAT HEIGHT. Then SODA CAN TAB. What? Then SUFFOCATION. ALTRUISM. EXTREME COLD. INTERNAL HEMORRHAGE. HEATED ARGUMENT. BOREDOM. It was like I was getting the predictions for a whole bunch of different people, with some random words thrown in for fun. At least it stopped after those ten. And that last one. Boredom? Who the heck dies of boredom? The company clown standing over my shoulder chuckled when the readout went black.

“Congratulations,” he said, jotting down my ‘prediction.’ “Looks like you get a refund. Welcome to the Eight Percent.”

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I drove straight home from the local Prediction Center, sitting in traffic and wondering what to feel. My mind couldn't sort it out. I mean, yeah, I knew it was possible going in that the Box would let me down. I think part of me was secretly hoping for it. But in some sense I was an outcast for life, separated from the main bulk of humanity who were now all sharing a big kind of secret that no one would ever tell me. At the time I was already feeling like a pariah, as a guy in his early thirties with no family, not even a girlfriend. All my friends with kids—Christ, we had nothing to talk about anymore, unless I wanted to sit there hearing about diapers and spit-up and food allergies. I figured I'd finally go get my prediction, and then we'd have something in common again. That night, as I lay in bed, I wished the stupid box had stopped with REFRIGERATOR. Then I could call up Josh, my number one bud out of college, and tell him all about it. We'd get together and shoot the shit about how I'd get crushed by a fridge, or end up locked in a walk-in freezer somewhere, and we'd debate whether mine was worse than his (HEAD TRAUMA), and which was likely to happen first, all that crap that people with real predictions must talk about. I fell asleep dreaming about my refrigerator, and woke up with a headache.

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I called Josh anyway, after work the next evening. I had to talk it out. The phone rang about seven times before he picked up.

“Josh, buddy, how's it hanging?”

“Daniel, it's been a while. Can't talk long though... the kid's crying and won't sleep, and Josie's gonna need help with him any minute. What's up?”

“I used a Prediction Box today,” I said.

“You did? Finally? What’d you get?”

“I didn’t get. I’m one of the Eight Percent.”

“You... wait, hold on...”

I could hear him put down the phone, and through the speaker came the sound of his little boy wailing in the background. A few seconds went by.

“Daniel, sorry. I’ve got to go in about two minutes. Ethan just barfed all over my wife. But you said what? You’re in the Eight Percent?”

“Yeah.”

“Congratulations, Dan. Now you can breathe easy.”

“I don’t know. I guess. But I feel... I don’t know, punctured. Like I’m missing out, you know?”

“Dan, don’t think of it that way. Now you can go through life without a Prediction of Damocles hanging over you all the time. I joke about my head trauma, but it’s always in the back of my mind. Like every time I get out of the tub, am I going to slip and bash my head open? Just be happy and forget about it.”

“Yeah. Sure. But it’s just that... well, I’m not in the club. I thought I’d be in the club.”

Josh’s voice became serious. “Dan, there’s no club. We don’t sit around and talk about

our predictions or anything. Count your blessings, is my suggestion. Hell, you probably have a more interesting prediction than most of us. What was... wait, hold on.”

I heard his wife’s voice shrieking in the distance.

“Dan, I gotta go. Serious vomit emergency. Good to hear from you, though. We’ll catch up soon, and you can tell me all the details. Bye!”

I clicked off the phone and stared at it for a while. That had gone just about as well as I had figured.

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The next day was Saturday. I woke up early, paid some bills, then went to the climbing gym for my regular workout. I had thought my prediction might have been CLIMBING ACCIDENT and had been prepared for that, since everyone knows you can’t prevent your Box-given fate. Josh had asked me once if I would quit the sport if it was going to kill me, and I knew the answer had to be ‘no.’ I mean, think about it. If rock climbing was going to kill me either way, I’d rather die *doing it* than waiting around for some fluky, ironic death.

Most people had come to that kind of conclusion. There were all those stories about people who had tried to avoid PLANE CRASH by refusing to get on a plane, or HEART FAILURE by improving their diets, and they all died in the end, however the Box said they would. So in practice, the Box hadn’t really changed anything at all. Folks went about their business same as before. Some were always nervous, sure, like Josh, while others felt liberated, but life went on for everyone.

It occurred to me all of a sudden that there must be websites that talk about the Box, and about being part of the Eight Percent. I didn’t spend much time on-line back then—I was more interested in *doing* stuff, or working out, and besides, my dial-up in the old condo was brutal. But I spent the afternoon web-surfing, and found some surprising things. It turned out that there were a bunch of conspiracy theory websites out there that claimed even the Eight Percent predictions come true, somehow. One stated that the old woman who got TURBULENT VIRGIN DEATH-SHRIEK, but who actually died peacefully in

her sleep, was having a dream about being in a plane crash aboard a Virgin Atlantic flight, and it caused her to suffer a heart attack. DeathBoxTruth.org theorized about the teenager with FALCON EYE-GOUGE DUMP TRUCK, who died when he drunkenly drove his car into tree. They said he had gotten into an argument about a football game (involving the Atlanta Falcons, naturally—the kid lived in Marietta), and the other guy accidentally poked him in the eye. Then, when he drove home, he experienced blurry vision that made him think a sign by the road was an approaching dump truck. He panicked, veered off the road, and slammed straight into an oak tree. Of course there was no corroborating evidence for any of that, and the website was full of grammatical errors and bad flash animations that made it look like a crackpot's project.

One site even had a theory about GIBBERING SALT MINE FLATULENCE. The guy who died, according to EveryoneDies.com, was the passenger in a taxi that crashed. He farted, and the driver, a guy who was once an undocumented worker in a salt mine in Utah, had some old memory triggered by the smell of passed gas. That started him babbling about his old job, during which animated conversation he stopped paying attention to traffic lights. Again, no evidence, no interviews, just speculation, spelling mistakes, and lots of *comic sans*.

I also discovered that there were some message boards for Eight Percenters, and I poked around one that seemed less seedy than the others. A post from three days prior mentioned a get-together for 'the local 8P' that was happening the next day at a coffee shop in town. Really? There were meetings for people like me? Like a support group? It seemed beyond silly on its face. What would we talk about? "Hey, I got ALPHABET MORON TOASTER FEATHER." "Yeah? I'm the Russian alphabet backwards." "So... how about those Dodgers?" I had better things to do than go chat with a bunch of strangers about nonsense.

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Of course I broke down and went anyway. Figured it couldn't hurt. I told myself maybe I'd meet some cute chick with a totally whacked prediction, and we'd break the ice by talking about it, and I'd get her phone number out of the deal. But it looked instead like most people had the same reaction I did at first, or maybe no one ever read that message board, because there was only one guy there when I walked in.

He was sitting at the large table in the back, and had scrawled "8P" on an index card made into a little tent, so I wouldn't have to wander around asking about the meeting. He

was sipping water and nibbling on a bagel, and seemed surprised when I walked up and sat down across from him.

“I’m Daniel,” I said. I gestured at his index card. “Anyone else here?”

“No, just me. I’m Terry. Nice to meet you.”

We shook hands. Terry looked like he was either still in college or just out of it. Tall, gangly, mop-headed, vaguely stoner-ish. His hand was sweaty, or maybe it was condensation from his water glass, but either way it was gross.

“So,” I said. “How many people do you usually get at these things?”

He looked surprised at the question. “This is the first one,” he said. “So, one, I suppose.”

“Right. Did you have an agenda in mind? Or are we just here to swap FUBAR-ed predictions and have some drinks?”

He looked almost embarrassed. “I... I just wanted to have some people to share my ideas with. About us. About why there’s an Eight Percent.”

“Why? I didn’t think there was a ‘why.’ The Box screws up. Nothing’s perfect in this world, after all.”

“Don’t you think it’s strange?” he asked, leaning forward just a bit more than I was comfortable with. “When DeathCorp first announced the Box, and told the world that anyone could pay their fifty bucks and learn how they’d die, they claimed it was absolutely infallible.”

“Sure,” I said. “And they claimed cigarettes were healthy too. Either it was marketing hype, or they hadn’t gotten enough samples to be certain.”

“There’s another possibility,” said Terry, and he glanced around furtively, like he was about to divulge some big secret. Inwardly I was groaning at that point. I had been lured here by a conspiracy nut.

“Yeah?” I asked, humoring him. “What’s that?”

“What if it *was* perfect, at first?” he said in a near-whisper. “I’ve read that when they first tried to sell people on using the Box, no one tried it. It took them over a year just to get a hundred customers.”

“So?” God, I was already bored. If no one else showed, I would give the guy three more minutes, tops.

“But now, now everyone tries it. Millions of people, each paying their money. It’s practically a rite of passage for kids when they turn eighteen. And do you know why? Because when the Box was infallible, people were *too scared to use it*. Everyone is curious, sure, but nobody, deep down, wants to know how they die *unless they can prevent it*. But they can’t, so everyone chickened out.”

“You’re saying people don’t chicken out any more because the Box is sometimes wrong?”

“Exactly! If you know there’s a chance you’ll be spared the truth, it gives you some intellectual cover. The sensible part of your brain needs to know there’s that chance, in order for the curious part to get you to stick your finger in the slot and get your prediction. As soon as everyone knew about the Eight Percent, they all started using the Box. I think the company started introducing the errors on purpose in order to get people to pay their money.”

“Huh.” I still thought the guy was a conspiracy freak, but that actually made a kind of

sense to me. When I had gone in for my prediction, a part of me *had* hoped that I'd be among the Eight Percent. And when I found out, like I said, I was annoyed *and* relieved at the same time.

Having told me that much, Terry lost interest. Now that he had confided in me, passed on his pet theory, I had served my purpose. He glanced over my shoulder at the door a few times as I sat there, musing. Not wanting to seem rude, I gave him his three minutes, during which we exchanged some small talk and swapped predictions. He had gotten PI PARIS FLUGELHORN 23. No one else showed, so I wished him luck and went home.

Anyway, that was back in 2001. Twelve years ago. A year later I read on that message board that Terry had died during a robbery in Chicago, and I felt bad for him, but I was getting on with my life by then. I long ago put the whole thing out of my mind.

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This morning I took the high coast road to work like I always do. I have a good job and still no kids so I have this sweet little sports car—a vintage Mazda Miata that really hugs the corners. There's one spot where I always slow down though, since there's a speed trap set up about once a week, and it's gotten me a couple of times. That reminds me—I still haven't paid a parking ticket I got last month. There's the silver lining.

I slowed down, and on the side of the road I saw a woman crying next to a beat up Camry. I'm a nice guy, and she was pretty cute, so I pulled over behind her car and got out to ask her what was the matter. She didn't even notice me at first, what with all the sobbing, but eventually I got out of her that she had just thrown her platinum wedding band over the guard rail after fighting with her husband that morning. Then right away she regretted it, but she's not really that athletic, and even though she could see it on a little rocky shelf about fifteen feet down, there was no way she could get it back.

I peered over the guard rail. Yeah, I could see it too, glinting on a slab of red stone. It wasn't all that far from a precipice with a drop towards the bay, but the scramble down didn't seem too bad. I was in my mid-forties, but I was still rock-climbing on a regular basis. I didn't even think about it. I just said "I'll get it," and hopped the guard rail. It only took me about fifteen seconds of slow controlled slide, grabbing onto some scrubby plants for balance, to get down to where the ring was. Except that when I got there, it

wasn't a ring.

That's when I realized I was dead.

I had exactly enough time to say, out loud, "Oh shit!" before the whole shelf gave way and I dropped about twenty feet down. I had this crazy idea that some bush or tree might break my fall, but instead I fell into a pile of junked appliances that must have been dumped there years ago down from the road. I slammed into something, flat on my back, and felt a crazy sharp pain in my chest. For one surreal moment I was looking up out of some kind of big box, hearing the screams of that woman, and then the door slammed down, closing me in total darkness. I instinctively kicked at the lid, but for one thing it had sealed shut somehow, and for another it was a pretty feeble kick since moving made that pain in my chest feel like a knife-blade was jammed in there somewhere.

A few seconds later the force of my impact caused the refrigerator—yeah, I had it figured out by then—to topple off its ledge. It felt like I was falling for about two or three solid seconds before the splashdown. At that point that maybe one of my ribs was sticking through a lung – I was having trouble breathing and was coughing up some blood. I could feel that I was sinking slowly for a while, until the fridge touched down on the bottom of the bay with a gentle bump. The damn can tab that had been resting on the rock was still clenched in my fist, cutting my palm.

That was about two hours ago now. I've been hoping that the woman would have called 911 and that someone would be rescuing me soon, but who am I kidding? That goddamned Death Box! Was Terry wrong then? Or maybe the Box was programmed to sometimes give out answers that only *seemed* crazy, but were all destined to come true anyway?

I wonder if anyone else in the Eight Percent had similar feelings at the end. Did the Gibbering Salt Mine Flatulence guy have the same "you've got to be kidding me" reaction that I had, in that moment when he realized the Death Box was right after all? Had Terry felt it when he died in a tragic and mathematical flugelhorn accident? That the Eight Percent was nothing but a sucker punch?

It feels like I have some internal bleeding that's pretty bad, and I can't move my legs much. I can hear the fridge creaking like it's going to crack open at any moment, and the

air's running out.

And it's dark.

And it's cold.

And I'm bored.