# IMPACT

Alex Gatling had come to dread moments like this. He was sitting in a backstage dressing room, waiting to be called. That in itself was bad enough. Public appearances weren't his forte. It was part of the job now, though. With the fortune came the fame. About once every few weeks, he'd have to do one of these things – an award for this, an address to that. They'd trot him out on stage and he'd put on his nice fake smile, wave politely, or shake hands or read whatever was on the prompter. And the crowds ate it up. Everyone loved the chairman of DeathWatch. Or hated him. Sometimes both at the same time.

But that wasn't the worst part. The worst part was being in here alone, with nothing to distract him. At home, at the office, just about anywhere else, there were distractions. Always something to do. Something to occupy his mind. But here and now, in this quiet little room, there was nothing. Nothing to hold back the introspection. These were the worst times.

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DeathWatch started off as a joke and, combined with a series of lucky breaks (and, yes, quite a bit of hard work), turned into the monstrosity of a corporation it was now. Alex had been geeking out with Zach and Chloe, a couple fellow Statistics undergrads, in the common room of his dorm. The conversation shifted from topic to topic, off on tangents, sometimes looping back on itself – the way conversations tend to go when clever people with too much time on their hands get together. Someone – Alex couldn't remember who – started going on about the Machine of Death. Zach. It was probably Zach. His uncle Reg was president of a startup, Fate-O-Tronix, that built Machines. A lot of companies were getting into the Machine of Death business at the time. Most of them went bankrupt within a few months. Uncle Reg was doing OK so far. So, Zach was going on about the Machines and Alex piped up with, "Hey, wouldn't it be cool to pull the data from the Machines and do a bit of number crunching?" Within a week, they'd set up deathwatch.com and made a deal with Reg to get the raw data from his Fate-O-Tron Machines in exchange for a piece of the ad revenue from the website.

That's how it all started. The website was wildly popular. Everyone wanted to see the death stats. Sure, most of them were pretty boring: cardiovascular 30%, infectious disease 20%, and so on. The most popular feature, though, was Weird Death Of The Day. In among all the boring crap you'd get things like "GOLDFISH" and "SPRAY CHEESE". Alex was good at sifting through the crap to find the best ones, which he posted on the WDOTD page. That brought in a lot of traffic. Endless speculation in the comments section about how you might die from *this* or what sort of person might get *that*. A lot of traffic, a lot of ad revenue.

And then Chloe used her connections with a medical equipment company to get a supply of blood test units, which Reg then incorporated into his Fate-O-Trons, along with a cheap GPS board. That allowed them to pull location, gender, approximate age and, to a limited extent, race and correlate that with cause of death. That's when things really took off. They now had the sort of statistical data the CDC put out but years before it did. Everybody wanted to get their hands on the data. Insurance companies especially. If you knew X% of 16-year-olds were (eventually) going to die in a car accident or Y% of the people currently living in Undertow SC were going to die in a hurricane, it was a lot easier to set your rates. The cash was rolling in. By the time anyone else thought to get in on the game, DeathWatch LLC had signed deals with most of the major Machine manufacturers for exclusive rights to their raw data. Fate-O-Tronix had bought out the patents on the blood test units, then turned around and licensed the technology to the other Machine manufacturers. It wasn't long before 95% of the world's Machines were funneling mortality stats to DeathWatch.

That was years ago. The deathwatch.com domain was now the corporate site. The Weird Death Of The Day page had spun off into its own site. Still made money but it wasn't their main line of business anymore. They'd eventually bought out Fate-O-Tronix, renamed it eFate and set it up as a semi-autonomous division, with Chloe at the helm. Zach cashed out around the same time and now spent most of his time and money collecting vintage motorcycles and supermodels. The motorcycles were vintage; the supermodels, anything but. Zach's uncle Reg? He pulled the cancer card.

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An intern knocked on the door, popped her head in and said, "Twenty minutes, Mr. Gatling." Twenty minutes. Twenty minutes with nothing but his own thoughts. This must be what hell would be like …if you believed in hell, which he didn't. Who was it that said, "Hell is an eternity with your friends"? Sartre? Somebody. No, hell is an hour with your own thoughts. *Especially mine*.

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Things started going badly a few years ago. Oh, the company was fine. Financially, everything was just peachy. Sunshine, rainbows and cotton candy. The problem was the data.
Alex still poked around in the raw data, looking for interesting patterns. Most of the statistical work for DeathWatch was now done by computers, sifting through the data and categorizing it into manageable chunks. Teams of data analysts pored over the results and made occasional adjustments to the algorithms but no one really looked at the raw data anymore. No one but Alex.

It wasn't part of his job, of course. He did it out of idle curiosity, at least at first. Now, though, it had become an obsession. He'd first noticed something was wrong, what, 10 years ago. That long? The auto accident numbers were creeping up. That's what the compiled stats said, at least. Alex poked around in the raw data, trying to find an anomaly that would explain it. The numbers should be declining, after all. Safety features on top of safety features on top of safety features. It didn't take long to find the culprit. The categorization subsystem had added a phrase to the auto collision category: "IMPACT". Of course, "impact" could mean any number of things – the Machines were inexplicably perverse in their diagnoses sometimes – but the heuristics of the subsystem decided, based on the frequency of occurrence, age distribution, and this and that, that the most likely category was auto collision. The system made a judgment call.

Alex, on the other hand, called bullshit. He pulled all the raw data related to “IMPACT” and started crunching numbers. Grouped by location, gender or race it was pretty much evenly distributed. That in itself was interesting. Whatever “IMPACT” was, it didn’t discriminate. Age, though, told another story. The older you were, the less likely you’d pull the “IMPACT” card. No one over 50 had it. At age 40, there was a fraction of a percent. Over 1% at 30 years. Up to 18% for 20-year-olds. And so on.

Alex plotted it on a graph and stared at it. A gently tapering curve of percentage versus age. What was that? He’d seen it before. Looked like a decay curve. Decay of what, though? What was more likely to kill the young? What did old people never do? Lots of things, of course. And it wasn’t just old people. Hell, 50 wasn’t that old. Not anymore. Well, one thing that people did less as they got older was live longer. A 20-year-old could be expected to live another 50 years but it was still pretty rare for a 50-year-old to get another 50. *Fine, let’s match the curve to some actuarial data*. And there it was. Seventy years. The curve fit nearly perfectly with the percentage of people who would live another 70 years. Could be a coincidence – there were probably other explanations – but to Alex’s eyes it looked like everyone alive in 70 years was going to die of the same cause.

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“Five minutes, Mr. Gatling.”

And that was ten years ago. Sixty left. He’d checked and rechecked the numbers over the years as new data came available, watched the percentages creep up, became more convinced. He played with the numbers and it looked like *one particular thing* was going to kill 95% of everyone alive sixty years from now …plus or minus 5%. And if it was going to kill everyone, it meant nothing else would have a chance to. So, everyone dying of the same thing at the same time. *Sounds like doomsday to me*. People had been predicting doomsday since... well, pretty much since there were people.

He never mentioned it to anyone. At first he didn’t want to come off as a crazy; there were shareholders to think of, after all. And he could be wrong. As he became more convinced, though, he realized he just couldn’t do it. He couldn’t be the one to tell the world its days were numbered.

Someone else would figure it out soon enough. It was only a matter of time. The percentages were rising. The current batch of 20-year-olds were up to 55%. And since the system was labeling that 55% as auto accident, there were going to be a lot of twenty-somethings complaining about insurance premiums pretty soon. Someone *had* to have noticed. Someone was bound to say something soon. And then what? Panic? Anarchy? Alex had no idea what would happen.

One thing he did know was he wouldn’t live to see this “IMPACT” thing. No, he wasn’t going to live long enough. For one thing, he was unlikely to live to the ripe old age of 108. And anyway – he pulled a worn card from his wallet and looked at the words “GUNSHOT WOUND” printed on it – he was destined for a different fate.

Yeah, the world would find out soon enough. But no one needed to know quite yet. It wouldn’t make a bit of difference. And they were happier not knowing. At least he knew *he* would’ve felt better not knowing. Give them just a bit longer. A little more time.

The intern was back. Time to greet the masses.

Alex studied his reflection in the mirror for a moment, then put on his nice fake smile.
“Showtime.”