

DeathDefy

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Twenty-four hours remaining. The weather was deteriorating, heavy rain coming in thick gusts on an Atlantic gale, and far out at sea, an unhealthy orange glow. Andrew shuffled uncomfortably, struck suddenly by a mental picture of himself tossed in the waves, lost and forgotten. His life was lonely, empty, quiet, but he did not, he realised, want to die. If – when – he got home, he would devote his energy to finding meaning, and love, in his life. He would do better. Dismissing the image, he pressed his back against his rocky shelter, waiting.

Bring it on, DeathDefy.

In his mid-forties, Andrew had never truly been a digital native, but he was still young enough to enjoy experimenting with digital tools. Was it really only three years since he had scoured the app stores for something to help improve his health? When DeathDefy popped up, its expensive graphics on top of the finest, most novel artificial intelligence, he was immediately captivated by its promise to analyse his personal data and determine his current lifespan. By extension, it would also tell him what lifestyle changes would be necessary to extend that span.

DeathDefy targeted the growing market of men like him. No longer young, maybe the grateful survivor of a close medical call, a little reluctant to engage in healthy behaviours but equally reluctant to contemplate the likelihood of spending his latter years disabled, medicated or in pain. Unlike similar apps, however, this one used artificial intelligence to harvest and interpret vast amounts of data which might have an impact on his health. Hospital budget plans, A&E waiting times, government policies and preferences, illness survival rates across the nation, extreme climate events, heatwaves and freezes, and probably more. All of this, mixed in with very personal individual health data, led to the claim that DeathDefy could predict not just the rough age range in which a person's demise would occur, but the exact date.

It was a bold claim. Ludicrous, in fact, and it was this absurdity that had given him confidence. Such pinpoint predictive power was simply not possible. He would treat it as a guideline, a way to focus his mind and motivate him to improve.

Download. Install. Complete. He tapped. *Welcome to DeathDefy!*

The welcome screen faded, to be replaced by a dense array of data fields. Name, age, blood group, postcode, height, weight, gender, family setup, existing health diagnoses, diet, exercise, hobbies, a series of psychological profiling questionnaires focusing on depression, anxiety, attitude to risk, mental acuity, memory, impulsivity, and other traits he barely understood. Andrew completed the information in as much detail as he could before hitting Submit, curiosity now outweighing scepticism. The spinning wheel revolved for several seconds before presenting him with its conclusion.

Hi Andrew, your DeathDefy date is:

19th June 2027

Tap here for insights!

Despite his cynicism Andrew was shocked. The date was, what, barely three years away? Putting him at forty-eight when his predicted death arrived. Without consciously admitting it, he had been assuming – hoping for – a date in the region of 2067, which would make him a comfortable and reasonable eighty-eight.

He immediately logged out and logged back in again, re-entering the data far more carefully. Obviously he'd made some silly error, inverted a date, tapped yes when he meant no, or left a crucial field blank. The result was no different. Nineteenth June 2027. He tried again, this time creating a perfect fake profile – regular exercise, clean eating, no past illness or injury. Same date. A fourth attempt, creating the profile of a heavy smoker and drinker, thirty years older and with multiple serious and chronic conditions. This time a different date: 3rd August 2026, making this fictitious self seventy-seven and desperately sick. A reasonable estimate, which suggested that the software did work, and was generating this 2027 date based on *something* about him. He made two more attempts to re-enter his data, slightly tweaking the truth in favour of both good and bad outcomes, but the DeathDefy date remained stubbornly set on June nineteenth, 2027.

What information had he inadvertently given it? What terrible thing could it possibly have inferred about him from his biodata? What horror was simmering in his cells, even now, waiting for its chance to break out, proliferate, and kill him?

Wait, DeathDefy also provided information about how he could change this date. He tapped *Recommendations*. The spinning wheel again, hinting at the extensive computation going on behind the scenes, the deep thought of the AI engine weighing and balancing. Finally, a result: *No insights at this time*.

This time, the absurdity was almost a relief. Clearly DeathDefy was a waste of time. It made no sense, was perhaps not even a finished product, and definitely not tested. A beta version with bugs everywhere.

Exasperated, he closed the app and long pressed the icon until the Uninstall option came up. He tapped it firmly and then again to Confirm.

Gone.

The wash of relief he felt seemed disproportionate, and he took a breath and stepped away from his phone. A cup of tea later and the whole episode seemed ridiculous, just another piece of junk software which happened to hit a predictable nerve in a man with a mid-life health crisis. He would make do without it.

Andrew joined a gym, went for a check-up with his GP and overhauled his diet. Less alcohol, fewer carbs, more cooking from scratch. He deleted his social media accounts and sold his television, a relief to be away from the endless diet of political carnage and human conflict that blighted each day. His health stabilised and his fitness improved. He felt good, began to venture out more. First, local walks, then longer hikes, camping trips and hill walking. He began to appreciate beautiful scenery and the natural environment. He took pride in his newly firm muscles and energy levels and spent more than he could afford on health monitors and outdoor equipment.

One day, a text message:

Hi Andrew! Your DeathyDefy date is one year away.

Tap here for insights!

What? His chief emotion was exasperation, although that didn't entirely mask the anxious jolt in his stomach, since it was exactly two years later. But wait, he'd deleted the wretched

thing, hadn't he? He scrolled through his apps but couldn't find DeathDefy. He double, triple checked. It was definitely not there.

Another glitch. Damn software developers. Give 'em an inch and they take a mile. They'd kept his personal data and were now bombarding him with nonsense. He pressed the delete option on the message and watched it vanish.

Six months later, another message.

Hi Andrew, your DeathDefy date is six months away.

Tap here for insights!

Of all the things he hated about the app, the thing he had come to hate most was the way the messages had developed a life of their own, with no apparent connection to any network or database. He also hated the sinking of his stomach when he read the message. He hated the way he had never forgotten his DeathDefy date, as if it had some power over him, as if there were any possible merit to its prediction. He ruminated unhappily on all the connections the AI engine might be making in the background. If someone of his age were statistically likely to develop a certain complaint, could there be an algorithm to determine the length of time a man of his personality traits would wait before presenting at a doctor? Some way to predict the test results, likely diagnosis, effect of lifestyle, impact of NHS cuts, wait for treatment, prognosis, complications?

Of course not. Delete. Although the anxiety lingered.

Without inspecting his motivations too closely, Andrew put himself through a series of privately funded medical tests and scans, telling himself it was just the sensible thing to do. All clear. With terminal disease seeming increasingly unlikely, he found himself beginning to avoid certain higher risk activities, but was able to justify these to himself for other reasons. Why would anyone want to climb a mountain when it was overrun with tourists? Who swam in the sea these days, with all the effluent horrors, not to mention migrating sharks? He stayed home in the evenings because of the prohibitive cost of going out, of course, and limited social contact in case any of his few friends lured him into dangerously drunken revelry. He declined a promotion which would have meant more air travel. He sold his car.

A third message, and this time he was almost expecting it.

Hi Andrew, your DeathDefy date is one month away.

Tap here for insights!

He stared at it, feeling cornered, persecuted. Then an emotional switch flipped. Enough. He would not be cowed by this ridiculous piece of nonsense. Shame at his fear, and anger with his timidity swirled through him, mutating into defiance. Let the stupid thing run its course, let it be stuck on that random date. He would not be.

To prove a point, he tapped on Insights. This action might, perhaps, complete a loop and prevent further messages. The link clicked through to another screen:

Hi Andrew, we have ONE insight for you.

He tapped again.

Insight 1: Hi Andrew. It is important to tidy up.

That was it? No diet or exercise advice, no further action required. Disgusted, he switched his phone off completely and set it aside for a full ten minutes before switching it back on. The malevolent imp of a message was gone.

Andrew's mood of resistance drew strength from this latest outrage. Well, to Hell with it. He would not tidy up anything. In fact, quite the opposite. Since his DeathDefy date had never wavered, one might infer that he would not die earlier, and was protected in some way from whatever awaited him a month down the line.

It was time to provoke his fate. If his life was going to run out on June nineteenth, 2027, just four weeks away, he would enjoy every remaining moment. In fact, he would go a bit crazy, take risks, live dangerously, collect every experience he could. In that moment, Andrew leapt forcefully out of his cautious, timid life, begging – demanding – that this rigid, unyielding doom finally present itself. He partied and clubbed, dabbled in drugs and walked home late at night. He spent money recklessly on a succession of glossy-haired women and took up wild camping in treacherous lands; he walked in front of buses and stood on the edge of train platforms. Once, he picked a fight in a bar, but that resulted in a broken nose which was painful and limited his activity for a few days, and though it healed well he decided not to risk direct physical injury again.

One week to go. He felt well, and despite his wild few weeks, was physically intact. Although he had paid no attention to his financial and legal affairs and had tidied up nothing, his extravagant living had depleted his wealth to a point where little tidying up would be required. He would go, he decided, to a remote island where he could wait out DeathDefy. Somewhere benign, empty, quiet.

Long haul flights were out of the question, so five days later, after a series of uneventful train journeys, a couple of taxis, one ferry, a tiny rowing boat and a long walk, Andrew found himself on the rise of a small uninhabited Hebridean island rising steeply up from the rainswept north Atlantic. All around him stretched acres of tough, wiry grass clinging to ancient rock as heavy swell crashed on the stony shoreline under a low grey sky, the entire region oblivious to the high sun of midsummer on the mainland. He found a level plateau sheltered by a rocky outcrop and set up a small tent and a camping chair, content to meet his appointed hour in chilly, desolate isolation. If he survived, as the rational part of him fully expected to do, he would have enjoyed a bracing visit to a ruggedly beautiful place. He would make his way home and no-one would ever know of the nagging fear that had never fully left him since DeathDefy had dwindled his horizon to just three more years of life. If he did not survive, well, no-one would be inconvenienced.

So it was that three years after he had installed DeathDefy, here he was, in the midst of the howling storm, with six hours remaining to him. A deep calm came over him. Of course the whole thing was nonsense. How could an app, even one using next-gen AI, possibly know something so individual, so inherently unpredictable and multifactorial as the date of anyone's death? However broad and diverse its reach, however extensive the filaments of its information, it was simply not conceivable that any tool could state with confidence the precise moment when anyone, let alone he, Andrew, would cease to be.

Waves crashed on the beach below him and the light faded into a queasy yellow-grey. Disturbed from his reverie by a slash of rain, Andrew peered into the distance, and frowned. The ocean was shimmering. The waves had flattened and multiplied, short and close-packed, as if the whole world was vibrating. Deep down, a heavy rumbling, so low in pitch he felt rather than heard it. It intensified, creating in him a heavy nausea, and – was that the rain, or was everything he could see – blurred?

Then, suddenly, the ocean out to the west split in two. A deep gulf appeared in the waves, sucking and roaring as the waters parted, biblical in its ferocity and scale. The rift travelled rapidly towards his island and out to sea, expanding dramatically, a terrible abyss before the water poured back into it. Still the rumble, louder now, shaking the whole island. With a dreadful wrenching, the island itself began to tear in half, rock, undisturbed since the last ice age, shattered and exposed by devastating forces, tumbling into the sea. Andrew huddled in his flimsy tent, terrified and confused, while the world roared and groaned around him.

On the ground, a final message glowed on his phone.

Hi Andrew, your DeathDefy date is today! It is important to tidy up!

DeathDefy. An app plugged in to government policy and preference, to meteorological and climate data, global conflict, population growth, human consumption and destruction, medical research, pollution levels, deforestation, the mental health of world leaders. Able to predict tipping points, catastrophic weather events, and by extension, it turned out, the end of days. It was not, Andrew realised, his own end that DeathDefy had predicted, but that of an entire civilisation, and therefore, unavoidably, him. Across countries and continents, earthquakes swallowed cities and hurricanes ripped up fields and forests. Temperatures soared and plummeted, icebergs crashed and waters rose. A huge reset was underway, a massive dieback, as a sick planet fought back against the chronic infection of humanity.

As Andrew stared at the message, he could only agree. It is important to remove the debris, clear space for renewal, shake up the old system. All things must end. As true for an individual as it is for a home, a business, a government. A world. It is important to tidy up.