

Life Expectancy: A Novel

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With his bestselling blend of nail-biting intensity, daring artistry, and storytelling magic, Dean Koontz returns with an emotional roller coaster of a tale filled with enough twists, turns, shocks, and surprises for ten ordinary novels. Here is the story of five days in the life of an ordinary man born to an extraordinary legacy—a story that will challenge the way you look at good and evil, life and death, and everything in between.

Jimmy Tock comes into the world on the very night his grandfather leaves it. As a violent storm rages outside the hospital, Rudy Tock spends long hours walking the corridors between the expectant fathers' waiting room and his dying father's bedside. It's a strange vigil made all the stranger when, at the very height of the storm's fury, Josef Tock suddenly sits up in bed and speaks coherently for the first and last time since his stroke.

What he says before he dies is that there will be five dark days in the life of his grandson—five dates whose terrible events Jimmy will have to prepare himself to face. The first is to occur in his twentieth year; the second in his twenty-third year; the third in his twenty-eighth; the fourth in his twenty-ninth; the fifth in his thirtieth.


Rudy is all too ready to discount his father's last words as a dying man's delusional rambling. But then he discovers that Josef also predicted the time of his grandson's birth to the minute, as well as his exact height and weight, and the fact that Jimmy would be born with syndactyly—the unexplained anomaly of fused digits—on his left foot. Suddenly the old man's predictions take on a chilling significance.

What terrifying events await Jimmy on these five dark days? What nightmares will he face? What challenges must he survive? As the novel unfolds, picking up Jimmy's story at each of these crisis points, the path he must follow will defy every expectation. And with each crisis he faces, he will move closer to a fate he could never have imagined. For who Jimmy Tock is and what he must accomplish on the five days when his world turns is a mystery as dangerous as it is wondrous—a struggle against an evil so dark and pervasive, only the most extraordinary of human spirits can shine through.

Dean Koontz, the author of many #1 New York Times bestsellers, lives with his wife, Gerda, and the enduring spirit of their golden retriever, Trixie, in southern California.

Chapter One

On the night that I was born, my paternal grand-father, Josef Tock, made ten predictions that shaped my life. Then he died in the very minute that my mother gave birth to me.

Josef had never previously engaged in fortune-telling. He was a pastry chef. He made  clairs and lemon tarts, not predictions.

Some lives, conducted with grace, are beautiful arcs bridging this world to eternity. I am thirty years old and can't for certain see the course of my life, but rather than a graceful arc, my passage seems to be a herky-jerky line from one crisis to another.

I am a lummoX, by which I do not mean stupid, only that I am biggish for my size and not always aware of where my feet are going.

This truth is not offered in a spirit of self-deprecation or even humility. Apparently, being a lummoX is part of my charm, an almost winsome trait, as you will see.

No doubt I have now raised in your mind the question of what I intend to imply by "biggish for my size." Autobiography is proving to be a trickier task than I first imagined.

I am not as tall as people seem to think I am, in fact not tall at all by the standards of professional-or even of high school-basketball. I am neither plump nor as buff as an iron-pumping fitness fanatic. At most I am somewhat husky.

Yet men taller and heavier than I am often call me "big guy." My nickname in school was Moose. From childhood, I have heard people joke about how astronomical our grocery bills must be.

The disconnect between my true size and many people's perception of my dimensions has always mystified me.

My wife, who is the linchpin of my life, claims that I have a presence much bigger than my physique. She says that people measure me by the impression I make on them.

I find this notion ludicrous. It is bullshit born of love.

If sometimes I make an outsized impression on people, it's as likely as not because I fell on them. Or stepped on their feet.

In Arizona, there is a place where a dropped ball appears to roll uphill in defiance of gravity. In truth, this effect is a trick of perspective in which elements of a highly unusual landscape conspire to deceive the eye.

I suspect I am a similar freak of nature. Perhaps light reflects oddly from me or bends around me in a singular fashion, so I appear to be more of a hulk than I am.

On the night I was born in Snow County Hospital, in the community of Snow Village, Colorado, my grandfather told a nurse that I would be twenty inches long and weigh eight pounds ten ounces.

The nurse was startled by this prediction not because eight pounds ten is a huge newborn-many are larger-and not because my grandfather was a pastry chef who suddenly began acting as though he were a crystal-ball gazer. Four days previously he had suffered a massive stroke that left him paralyzed on his right side and unable to speak; yet from his bed in the intensive care unit, he began making prognostications in a clear voice, without slur or hesitation.

He also told her that I would be born at 10:46 p.m. and that I would suffer from syndactyly.

That is a word difficult to pronounce before a stroke, let alone after one.

Syndactyly-as the observing nurse explained to my father-is a congenital defect in which two or more fingers or toes are joined. In serious cases, the bones of adjacent digits are fused to such an extent that two fingers share a single nail.

Multiple surgeries are required to correct such a condition and to ensure that the afflicted child will grow into an adult capable of giving the F-you finger to anyone who sufficiently annoys him.

In my case, the trouble was toes. Two were fused on the left foot, three on the right.

My mother, Madelaine-whom my father affectionately calls Maddy or sometimes the Mad One-insists that they considered forgoing the surgery and, instead, christening me Flipper.

Flipper was the name of a dolphin that once starred in a hit TV show-not surprisingly titled Flipper-in the late 1960s. My mother describes the program as "delightfully, wonderfully, hilariously stupid." It went off the air a few years before I was born.

Flipper, a male, was played by a trained dolphin named Suzi. This was most likely the first instance of transvestism on television. Actually, that's not the right word because transvestism is a male dressing as a female for sexual gratification. Besides, Suzi-alias Flipper-didn't wear clothes.

So it was a program in which the female star always appeared nude and was sufficiently butch to pass for a male.

Just two nights ago at dinner, over one of my mother's infamous cheese-and-broccoli pies, she asked rhetorically if it was any wonder that such a dire collapse in broadcast standards, begun with Flipper, should lead to the boring freak-show shock that is contemporary television.

Playing her game, my father said, "It actually began with Lassie. In every show, she was nude, too."

"Lassie was always played by male dogs," my mother replied. "There you go," Dad said, his point made.

I escaped being named Flipper when successful surgeries restored my toes to the normal condition. In my case, the fusion involved only skin, not bones. The separation was a relatively simple procedure. Nevertheless, on that uncommonly stormy night, my grandfather's prediction of syndactyly proved true.

If I had been born on a night of unremarkable weather, family legend would have transformed it into an eerie calm, every leaf motionless in breathless air, night birds silent with expectation. The Tock family has a proud history of self-dramatization.

Even allowing for exaggeration, the storm must have been violent enough to shake the Colorado mountains to their rocky foundations. The heavens cracked and flashed as if celestial armies were at war. Still in the womb, I remained unaware of all the thunderclaps. And once born, I was probably distracted by my strange feet.

This was August 9, 1974, the day Richard Nixon resigned as President of the United States.

Nixon's fall has no more to do with me than the fact that John Denver's "Annie's Song" was the number-one record in the country at the time. I mention it only to provide historical perspective. Nixon or no Nixon, what I find most important about August 9, 1974, is my birth—and my grandfather's predictions. My sense of perspective has an egocentric taint.

Perhaps more clearly than if I had been there, because of vivid pictures painted by numerous family stories of that night, I can see my father, Rudy Tock, walking back and forth from one end of County Hospital to the other, between the maternity ward and the ICU, between joy at the prospect of his son's pending arrival and grief over his beloved father's quickening slide into death. z With blue vinyl-tile floor, pale-green wainscoting, pink walls, a yellow ceiling, and orange-and-white stork-patterned drapes, the expectant-fathers' lounge churned with the negative energy of color overload. It would have served well as the nervous-making set for a nightmare about a children's-show host who led a secret life as an ax murderer.

The chain-smoking clown didn't improve the ambience.

Rudy stood birth watch with only one other man, not a local but a performer with the circus that was playing a one-week engagement in a meadow at the Halloway Farm. He called himself Beezo. Curiously, this proved not to be his clown name but one that he'd been born with: Konrad Beezo.

Some say there is no such thing as destiny, that what happens just happens, without purpose or meaning. Konrad's surname would argue otherwise.

Beezo was married to Natalie, a trapeze artist and a member of a renowned aerialist family that qualified as circus royalty.

Neither of Natalie's parents, none of her brothers and sisters, and none of her high-flying cousins had accompanied Beezo to the hospital. This was a performance night, and as always the show must go on.

Evidently the aerialists kept their distance also because they had not approved of one of their kind taking a clown for a husband. Every subculture and ethnicity has its objects of bigotry.

As Beezo waited nervously for his wife to deliver, he muttered unkind judgments of his in-laws. "Self-satisfied," he called them, and "devious." The clown's perpetual glower, rough voice, and bitterness made Rudy uncomfortable.

Angry words plumed from him in exhalations of sour smoke: "duplicitous" and "scheming" and, poetically for a clown, "blithe spirits of the air, but treacherous when the ground is under them."

Beezo was not in full costume. Furthermore, his stage clothes were in the Emmett Kelly sad-faced tradition rather than the bright polka-dot plumage of the average Ringling Brothers clown. He cut a strange figure nonetheless.

A bright plaid patch blazed across the seat of his baggy brown suit. The sleeves of his jacket were comically short. In one lapel bloomed a fake flower the diameter of a bread plate.

Before racing to the hospital with his wife, he had traded clown shoes for sneakers and had taken off his big round red rubber nose. White greasepaint still encircled his eyes, however, and his cheeks remained heavily rouged, and he wore a rumpled porkpie hat.

Beezo's bloodshot eyes shone as scarlet as his painted cheeks, perhaps because of the acrid smoke wreathing his head, although Rudy suspected that strong drink might be involved as well.

In those days, smoking was permitted everywhere, even in many hospital waiting rooms. Expectant fathers traditionally gave out cigars by way of celebration.

When not at his dying father's bedside, poor Rudy should have been able to take refuge in that lounge. His grief should have been mitigated by the joy of his pending parenthood.

Instead, both Maddy and Natalie were long in labor. Each time that Rudy returned from the ICU, waiting for him was the glowering, muttering, bloody-eyed clown, burning through pack after pack of unfiltered Lucky Strikes.

As drumrolls of thunder shook the heavens, as reflections of lightning shuddered through the windows, Beezo made a stage of the maternity ward lounge. Restlessly circling the blue vinyl floor, from pink wall to pink wall, he smoked and fumed.

"Do you believe that snakes can fly, Rudy Tock? Of course you don't. But snakes can fly. I've seen them high above the center ring. They're well paid and applauded, these cobras, these diamondbacks, these copperheads, these hateful vipers."

Poor Rudy responded to this vituperative rant with murmured consolation, clucks of the tongue, and sympathetic nods. He didn't want to encourage Beezo, but he sensed that a failure to commiserate would make him a target for the clown's anger.

Pausing at a storm-washed window, his painted face further patinated by the lightning-cast patterns of the streaming raindrops on the glass, Beezo said, "Which are you having, Rudy Tock—a son or daughter?"

Beezo consistently addressed Rudy by his first and last names, as if the two were one: Rudytock.

"They have a new ultrasound scanner here," Rudy replied, "so they could tell us whether it's a boy or girl, but we don't want to know. We just care is the baby healthy, and it is."

Beezo's posture straightened, and he raised his head, thrusting his face toward the window as if to bask in the pulsing storm light. "I don't need ultrasound to tell me what I know. Natalie is giving me a son. Now the Beezo name won't die when I do. I'll call him Punchinello, after one of the first and greatest of clowns."

Other Books

Exploring the Health State of a Population by Dynamic Modeling Methods. This book introduces and applies the stochastic modeling techniques and the first exit time theory in demography through describing the theory related to the health state of a population and the introduced health state function. The book provides the derivation and classification of the human development stages. The data fitting techniques and related programs are also presented. Many new and old terms are explored and quantitatively estimated, especially the health state or "vitality" of a population, the deterioration and related functions, as well as healthy life expectancy. The book provides the appropriate comparative applications and statistics as connecting tools accompanied by the existing literature, and as such it will be a valuable source to demographers, health scientists, statisticians, economists and sociologists.

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