



Faithless Elector

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EXCERPTS, prologue & Ch. 2

“I see my opportunity and I take it.”
George Washington Plunkitt, Tammany Hall

ELECTION NIGHT

November 9th, 2016: Wichita 3:54 a.m.

Five televisions, each tuned to different channels painted the penthouse suite at the Ambassador Hotel in flickering light, the shifts on the screens reflecting in the eyes of three men anxiously watching. As the votes of one state after another came in, each man would glance furtively over his shoulder toward the nearest bedroom, its door open, darkened as though no one were in it.

“It’s been a dead heat,” said one of the anchors. “The Electoral College vote and the popular vote were both evenly split between Redmond and Christopher all the way to the Pacific Coast Time Zone.”

“The polls have been closed in Illinois for seven hours now,” said another anchor. “Right now James Christopher leads, but if Illinois’ twenty Electoral College votes go to Diane Redmond, she will win by four votes. If Illinois goes to Christopher, then he wins by a full forty-seven votes. This could be a squeaker, like the 2000 election. I wonder if anyone is asleep tonight.”

Just after four in the morning, Central Standard Time, the final network announced a winner: “With the last precincts reporting, we can now say that Diane Redmond has been elected the first female president of the United States, with a presumed Electoral College Vote of 271 to 267. The margin of victory is just four—that’s one electoral vote less than those separating Bush and Gore in 2000, when Bush won the Electoral College vote, but Gore won the popular vote.”

The only one of the three men on the couch who hadn't yet poured himself a fresh drink now stood up to do so; and as he did, he muted the final television. Exhausted, backs to the screens, the three men leaned on the bar, staring at anything but one another. None hazarded a glance toward the darkened bedroom.

Finally, one of the men went over to the gaggle of remotes by the couch and ceremoniously turned off the televisions, as in an earlier, simpler time, he might have put out the candles before retiring to bed.

"Well," said the man holding the remotes, "that's it. It's over."

"The hell it is," said a voice from the threshold of the bedroom.

* * * * *

(Chapter 2)

December 5, 2016

Matthew Yamashita was one of the first out the lecture hall as Professor Calder finished, with his reminder of the reading due for the following lecture.

He rode quickly over to the basement rooms he had been assigned for his survey center in the student union building. Both his students were at work.

"OK, where are we?" he asked as he strode into the room, throwing his book bag on one chair and his jacket onto another.

"Gettin' there," said the more communicative of the two.

Matthew grabbed the nearest pile of surveys. Each field on the survey was assigned a numeric value. The first field showed the level of contact and was assigned a number: "1" meant the interview had been completed; "2" meant it had been started but not completed; and "3" meant No Response.

Matthew rifled through the first stack and then the second, seeing "1" at the top of each protocol. "Great," he said, "great. Full contact."

"I suppose we should code all these dead ones as threes, for No Response, right?"

"I guess so," said Matthew. "This has been bugging me since I read your email. How many dead Electors do you have?"

The student shrugged without looking up. Although the work-study student was intelligent, his absolute lack of social grace or interpersonal skill belied his abilities. He never looked anyone in the eye, but rather cast a peripatetic gaze so quickly it made his body sway slightly on the rare occasions that he spoke. He was large, pimpled and sweated to excess. The exertion of merely sitting caused him to wheeze and huff as though he had run a long distance.

"In most of the cases, we've got the alternate anyway," said the student.

"Good," said Matthew. "But how many?"

"Five," said the student.

"Five of the people we tried to contact are dead?"

"Seven," said the other student, sitting across the table from the first one. He handed Matthew the phone sheet he had just finished working on. "Five from him and two from me."

"That's weird. Seven people?"

"People die," the first student shrugged. "Seven out of 300 million people is not weird." He stuffed a chocolate bar into his mouth.

“Yeah,” Matthew shrugged and went back to his own work. He put the dead Elector surveys aside in one pile and began coding the others into his computer.

“I’m pretty much done,” said the pimpled one.

“OK,” said Matthew, “start by filling in as much as you can for the dead ones and then continue with this second pile, while I work on the first. We’ll merge the tables when you’re done.”

As Matthew worked through the morning, the number of dead Electors kept bothering him. It was not, after all, seven out of 300 million US citizens, it was seven out of 1,076, the number of surveys he had done. And that number represented twice the number of Electors: 538 Democrat plus 538 Republican.

At about 1:30 in the afternoon, Matthew felt he needed a break to do some work on the dead Electors. He thought about going to his office, but worried he might have to field questions from students, so he walked over to the Government Documents section of the library, to work in peace.

He opened his laptop and called up his data on the Electors before logging onto the Census Bureau’s Vital Statistics. Once there, he looked up Mortality Rates. The crude death rate in the US was 9 per thousand.

“Damn,” he thought, crestfallen. “So here I am thinking something strange is happening and it turns out my seven people dead out of a thousand isn’t significant; isn’t even above the expected, the average.”

Matthew shook his head at himself. “Damn. I’m always doing stuff like this. I have two fewer deaths than would be expected. And Winter is probably the worst time of...” A thought occurred to him: 9 deaths per thousand was for the whole year. He didn’t get the lists until mid-October.

His thoughts rushed: “This is December 5th,” he said to himself. “I wouldn’t have received the Electors’ names at all if they’d been dead earlier. All of these people died between mid-October and the end of November--six weeks.” He paused, his thoughts running far ahead of what he knew. He told himself to slow down.

“Okay,” he said, beginning again, if nine per thousand are expected to die within a year...”

He scribbled a few calculations in his notebook and looked back at his computer screen for a demographic search of the full and partial respondents. Though he could guess the sex of the dead Electors based on their first names, their race could not be determined by first or last names, though he noted that none of them had Chinese, Southeast Asian or Japanese names. He sighed as he looked at it: even in death Asians were underrepresented.

The seven dead, based on his educated guess coding, divided by sex almost exactly as the living ones had: four were male, three female. Though it was an intellectual leap that someone like Calder might call into question, Matthew decided to assume that the seven dead could be regarded as a faithful random sampling, as merely a miniature demographic snapshot of all the other Electors.

On his laptop screen, not all the columns could be seen at once. Beginning on the left, the first column contained a unique number for each Elector who had responded. The columns that followed were Sex, Race, Age range, Income, Level of Education, the responses to the questions, State in which they voted, and Party. Each column contained only numbers.

As he looked between his screen and the Vital Statistics data, trying to find some means of comparing his data, he became frustrated that he could not see everything. He tried the 'hide' feature, which concealed a whole row or column from view without changing or deleting it, but he found that it was worse to have something hidden than merely out of view. There was no census data on whether one's party affiliation had anything to do with one's life expectancy, so he allowed the column containing party affiliation to remain out of view.

The census site had a list of mortality rates arranged by level of education. Matthew sorted his respondents and found that the overwhelming majority had at least attained a two-year degree. When he looked back through the book, the death rate for those with some college degree was four per thousand annually. For his two-month period, that meant 0.67 deaths expected.

He searched by the age group 45 to 55, into which 74 per cent of the Electors fell. The annual mortality rate was still four deaths expected per thousand. The next page gave deaths by accidents. Matthew remembered that his work-study assistant had said four of the Electors had died in accidents. The age group 40 to 45 yielded only 0.033 expected deaths by accident.

Matthew paused. In his mind he heard Professor Calder's voice saying, "There has to be some other connection." Matthew nodded as though Calder were there in the room with him: "You'll earn your money, and your reputation as a scholar, by finding that connection no one else thinks to look for."

Matthew rolled his shoulders to relieve some of the tension he felt and applied himself again to the task--only this time, he attempted to disprove the idea that there was any significance to the deaths.

An hour and a half later, he sat back, staring blankly at his computer screen. For his two-month period, no matter how he ran the numbers for a given group, less than one death was expected. Matthew had seven deaths – unexpected - and certainly unexplained.

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The sequel, *Dark Network*, is due out in September.



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