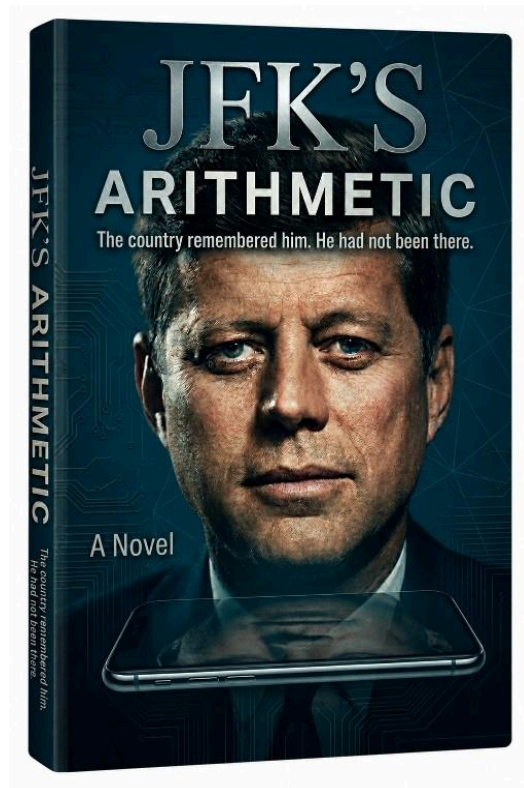


JFK's Arithmetic

Draft 13



December

The drive to Bethesda took thirty-eight minutes. She did not turn on the radio. She had not turned on the radio in eleven days.

The call had come at 4:14. She had said yes and ended it and put on her coat and gone down to the garage. She had not told her assistant where she was going. Her assistant had not asked.

She showed her credential at the gate. The guard waved her through. She parked where she had parked the last three times. The cold was in her lungs by the second breath. She had forgotten her gloves.

The men on the door wore suits. They knew her. One said good evening. She did not answer. He had been on the door each of the previous times. He had said good evening each of the previous times.

She rode the elevator alone. She got off at four.

Halpern was waiting at the door at the end. He had a chart in his hand. He had not looked at it.

He said, "*Helen.*"

"*How long?*"

"He will not wake up."

She nodded once. He had said softer versions of this on each of the three previous visits. The softer versions were gone.

"Days."

"Six. Nine. I would not say a number out loud to anyone but you."

"The device?"

"Out Tuesday. It did what it was asked to do. It was asked to do the wrong thing. The damage was done in the first ninety seconds, before the team reached him."

"By whom?"

"That is not my question, Helen. That is yours."

She nodded again. She walked past him into the room.

The man on the bed was forty-three years old. He had been her principal for eleven months. He had won an election six weeks before. The country had watched him walk out onto a stage in Chicago at one in the morning and thank his wife and his mother and the Speaker of the House. The country had not seen him since.

The country thought it had. Three pieces of footage had surfaced in the past nine days. A hotel lobby near Dupont. A coffee shop in Georgetown. The Mall, on a Sunday morning. The man in the footage was the right age and the right height. The man in the footage was not the man on the bed. Two news desks had run the footage as evidence of the President's continued recovery. A third had run a still and quoted a press-shop sentence about the city's smaller routines. A fourth had asked questions. The questions had been answered. The questions had not been printed.

She stood at the foot of the bed. She said his name once, quietly. The machines moved. The face did not.

She stayed eleven minutes. She had not sat down in this room since the second visit. When she left she closed the door behind her.

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She walked back the way she had come. The nurses' station was empty. She passed the elevator. There was a wing at the end of the corridor she had not walked into on any of the previous three visits. She walked into it now.

She had known about him for nineteen days. She had not come to look.

The doctors had called him an anomaly. The men from Langley had called him a custody problem. The press shop, when they had quietly been shown the security tapes from Dupont and Georgetown and the Mall, had called him providence. Helen had not called him anything.

He was here for observation and security. The observation was medical. The security was the city.

The door at the end of the wing was open six inches. A man was standing at the window with his back to the door. He was wearing a dark suit, the kind men had stopped wearing well, and a white shirt, and he was shorter than she would have thought. She had not known what she would have thought until the proportions were wrong.

He turned.

She did not move.

He looked at her for a moment. His face was the face. Not a likeness. The face. Without the years that should have been in it. Without the wound.

He nodded to her, the small civil nod a man raised to acknowledge a woman in a doorway gives when he has not been introduced. Then he turned back to the window.

She stepped back. She pulled the door to where it had been. She walked back down the corridor. She rode the elevator down. She crossed the asphalt. She got into her car.

She sat in the driver's seat with her hands on the wheel.

She did not start the engine for a long time.

When she did, she did not turn on the radio.

January

The first device they gave him was not the nuclear football.

It was the phone.

The phone lay face down on the table in the second-floor sitting room, black and silent and narrower than a cigarette case. It was heavier than it looked. He had learned this because the chief of staff had placed it in his hand and he had nearly dropped it.

He had been awake for thirty-one hours. He had been briefed by six men and two women whose names he had written down in the first hour and then stopped writing down in the second, because the names belonged to an order of events he had not yet accepted. The names were real. The room was real. The house was real. The rest of it had the quality of something staged too carefully to be trusted.

The chief of staff sat across from him. She had removed her jacket. There was a pen in her hand and a legal pad on her knee, although she had not written anything on it in twenty minutes. Her name was Helen Rourke. She had told him this three times. She was forty-eight years old. She had been his chief of staff for eleven months. He had met her that morning.

Rourke said, "It will open for your face."

He looked at her.

"*My face.*"

"*Yes, sir.*"

He looked at the phone.

He picked it up.

The glass lit.

For one second he saw himself reflected in it. His own face. Pale from fatigue. Younger than the men who had briefed him expected him to be and older than he had been yesterday. Then the screen changed. A white circle opened. A small lock turned.

The machine had accepted him.

This disturbed him more than he let the room see.

A photograph appeared. Small colored squares were arranged across it in rows. A man at a podium in shirtsleeves, one hand raised, the other resting on the lectern. A crowd blurred behind him. The man was smiling. The man was himself.

He did not remember the suit. He did not remember the podium. He did not remember the crowd.

"*What is this photograph,*" he asked.

"Des Moines. September. Two months before the election."

"*I was not in Des Moines in September.*"

"No, sir."

"*The man in the photograph was?*"

"Yes."

He kept looking at it. The man in the photograph had his smile. Not the one for family. Not the one for women. The political one. The one that took more discipline than people thought because the face had to look as if discipline had nothing to do with it. Whoever had made the photograph had known the smile.

"*Is it false,*" he said.

"*Not in the usual sense.*"

He waited.

"*The event occurred. The crowd was there. The network footage exists. The archive is consistent. People remember watching it. People in that crowd remember being in that crowd.*"

"*I was not there.*"

"No."

"*Then it is false.*"

She looked at him for a moment. She decided not to correct him.

"Yes, sir," she said. "*It is false.*"

He looked back at the phone. The little colored squares were arranged in rows. Some of them carried numbers in red circles. Twelve. Forty-one. Three hundred and eight. He touched one by accident and the screen changed.

A list of messages appeared.

Helen Rourke. Re: Rust Belt numbers.

Tom Alvarez. Call with Speaker moved to 3.

M. Srinivasan. Draft remarks for tomorrow.

An unknown number. ***You did great last night, Jack. Dad would have loved it.***

He stared at the last one.

"Who is that?"

Rourke leaned forward just enough to see.

"Caroline's grandson."

He did not move.

"She thinks I am her cousin?"

"Her cousin once removed. Yes."

"She has met me?"

"Many times."

"No."

Rourke did not answer.

He set the phone down. The screen remained lit. The message remained there.

You did great last night, Jack. Dad would have loved it.

He looked at the words for a long time.

"My son," he said.

Rourke said nothing.

"My son had a son?"

"Yes."

"And the son had children."

"Yes."

"And the country thinks I am one of them?"

"Yes."

He nodded once. It was not agreement. It was only a way to place the fact somewhere inside the room.

"What was his name?"

"John."

"My son."

"Yes."

He had known this already. They had told him at ten in the morning. Still, the name landed differently when it came from the phone.

He picked it up again. The screen had gone dark. It opened when he looked at it.

He did not like that.

He touched the wrong square again. A camera opened. His own face appeared on the screen, held in the small black mirror of the device. Behind him, Rourke sat in the chair with the legal pad on her knee.

"This is live?"

"Yes."

"Every one of these has a camera."

"Yes."

"How many are there?"

"In the country?"

"Yes."

"More than people."

He looked at her.

"More active phones than people. Not all of them with service. But yes. More devices than citizens."

He turned the camera toward the window. The curtains were drawn. The camera saw the curtains.

"And they carry them."

"Yes."

"Into bedrooms."

"Yes."

"Into voting places."

"Often."

"Into churches."

"Yes."

He closed the camera. He had meant to close it. The fact that the phone obeyed him gave him no comfort.

Another square had a red triangle. He touched it. A video opened.

The man on the screen was himself.

This version was standing on a stage before a blue curtain. There was a lectern with a campaign sign on it. The sign read KENNEDY 2024. The crowd was chanting something. The sound was small and tinny from the phone's speaker.

The man on the screen raised both hands.

The crowd quieted.

"*My fellow Americans,*" the man said.

Kennedy set the phone down on the table but did not stop the video.

The voice continued. It was his voice. Not a good imitation. The Boston flattened by schooling. The Harvard polish. The Hyannis undertow that came out when he was tired or angry or reaching for music. Whoever had made the voice had understood where it lived.

He listened for ten seconds.

"*I did not say that.*"

"*No.*"

"*Who wrote it?*"

"*Matthews, mostly. With revisions from speechwriting.*"

"*Who spoke it?*"

Rourke looked at the phone.

"*That depends on which layer you mean.*"

He turned to her.

"*The footage exists. The speech exists. The event exists. The country remembers you giving it. The file does not have a seam.*"

"*A seam...*"

"*A place where the false part can be separated from the rest.*"

The man on the screen had reached an applause line. The crowd rose. The phone shook slightly on the table from the vibration of its own sound.

Kennedy touched the screen. The video stopped.

He looked at the frozen image. His face. Mouth open. Hand extended. Caught at the exact point where the gesture turned from argument into performance.

"*This is what they elected?*"

"*Yes.*"

"*Not me...*"

Rourke did not answer.

He said, "*How did you make them remember.*"

"*I did not make them remember.*"

"*The people who did.*"

"That group was small."

"How?"

She looked down at the legal pad. There was nothing written on it.

"Sir."

"I asked how."

She put the pen down.

"The record was changed. People checked it. Then they checked each other. Disagreement started sounding like illness."

He watched her.

"People trust the archive because everyone else trusts the archive."

"And the archive was changed..."

"Yes."

"Everywhere."

"Everywhere that mattered."

He almost laughed. It did not become laughter.

"In my day we would have needed editors. Publishers. Station managers. Wire services. Party men. Priests, in certain cities."

"Yes."

"And now?"

She did not answer immediately.

"Now the machine does it."

"No, sir."

He looked up.

"The machine helps. People do most of it themselves."

That was the first thing she had said since he woke in this house that frightened him in a way he could name.

He picked up the phone again.

The paused video filled the screen. Below it were numbers. Views. Likes. Comments. Shares. He did not know the conventions yet, but the hierarchy was obvious. Counts, arranged as proof. The speech had been watched 18.7 million times. There were comments beneath it, moving as he touched the glass.

He read the first one.

This is the moment I knew he was the one.

The next.

His grandfather would be proud.

The next.

There is something wrong with him. Watch his eyes.

The next.

Not saying clone but also not not saying clone.

The next.

They're using the face because the bloodline polls well.

Kennedy stopped scrolling.

"Who are these people?"

"Citizens."

"All of them?"

"Some. Not all."

"Which are not."

"We do not always know."

He read the last comment again.

They're using the face because the bloodline polls well.

He handed the phone to her. She did not take it.

"I would like to know who selected these for me."

"No one selected them for you."

"They are on the device."

"Yes."

"They appeared when I opened the video."

"Yes."

"Then someone selected them."

"The system selected them."

"What system?"

"The platform's ranking system."

"Who edits it?"

"No one, sir, in the sense you mean."

"There is always an editor."

"Not here."

"That is not possible."

"It is possible. The editing function has been distributed across the system itself. There are moderators, but they intervene after the system has already decided."

"Then there is a censor."

"Sometimes."

"Who commands them?"

"That depends on the size of the account, the public visibility of the content, whether reporters are asking about it, and whether Congress is watching."

He looked at her for a long moment.

"That is not a chain of command."

"No."

"What is it?"

She looked at the phone.

"An ecosystem."

He disliked the word.

An ecosystem was a pond. A marsh. A forest. A place where life arranged itself according to appetite and accident. What sat in his hand was not a forest. It had shareholders. It had counsel. It had offices. It had men and women who went home at night after deciding what they had not decided.

"What does it want?" he said, almost more to himself than to her.

"Retention."

After a pause. "Meaning?"

"For you to keep looking, Sir."

He looked down at the phone. The video had resumed without sound. He had not touched it. The man who was not him was waving to a crowd that remembered him.

"For how long?"

"As long as possible."

"And it chooses whatever makes that happen?"

"Yes."

"Whether true or false?"

"It does not know true or false. It knows what keeps people watching."

He thought of newspapers. He thought of Hearst. He thought of Luce. He thought of the wire reports from Saigon and Berlin and Havana. He thought of the men who had lied to him in rooms with maps. None of this was new. All of it was new.

Propaganda had always had an author. Even when the author was hidden, the author existed. A state. A party. A campaign. A priest. A publisher. A man with a checkbook and a theory of the world. There was comfort in an author, even a hostile one, because an author had intention and intention could be read.

This thing had no intention in the old sense.

It had appetite.

He set the phone down.

"*The word most people use is algorithm,*" Rourke said.

He looked at the phone. The word was ugly in his mind. Too clean. Too Greek. Too satisfied with itself. It sounded like something a mathematician would say while leaving the room before the consequences arrived.

"*Algorithm,*" he said.

"Yes."

He said it again, silently, and found no purchase in it.

The screen was still awake. His invented self stood before the invented memory of a crowd that had actually been there. Below him, the comments continued to move. The people were still speaking to one another beneath the frozen record of a thing that had happened and had not happened.

"No," he said.

Rourke waited.

"*Arithmetic is better.*"

She looked at him.

"Sir?"

"*Arithmetic. Addition and subtraction. What rises. What falls. What is counted. What is not counted. Who is shown to whom. How many times. In what order. At what hour. With which photograph beside it. With which lie adjacent to which truth.*"

He touched the phone once, lightly, with his index finger.

"*This is not thought,*" he said. "*It is arithmetic wearing the clothes of thought.*"

Rourke did not write it down.

The phone dimmed. Then it lit again. A new notification appeared.

BREAKING: PRESIDENT KENNEDY APPROVAL HOLDS STEADY AFTER HEALTH QUESTIONS

He read it.

"*Health questions,*" he said.

"There was a clip this morning. Of you. Stumbling. Not real."

"Who made it?"

"We do not know yet."

"But you will."

"Perhaps."

"And then?"

"That depends."

He smiled then. Not because anything was funny.

"That depends," he said.

The phone offered another story below the first. A different outlet. Same photograph. Different headline.

QUESTIONS GROW OVER KENNEDY FITNESS AFTER VIRAL CLIP

Below that, a third.

THEY SAID IT WAS FAKE. WATCH THE ORIGINAL AND DECIDE FOR YOURSELF.

The third one had more comments than the first two.

He understood that before she explained it. He understood it with the part of him that had counted delegates, ward bosses, column inches, minutes on television, ethnic voting blocs, weather in Cook County. The arithmetic had changed. The instinct had not. Men went where the crowd was. The difference was that now the crowd was made visible second by second and the visibility itself moved the crowd.

He handed the phone back to her.

This time she took it.

"I do not want that in my bedroom," he said.

"No, sir."

"I do not want it in any room where I am thinking."

"That will be difficult."

"I did not say it would be easy."

"No, sir."

She turned the screen off and placed the phone face down on the table.

The room felt larger with the glass dark. Not safe. Only larger.

He looked at Rourke. She looked tired now. Not less competent. Only more human. He had been watching her all day and had not permitted himself to think of her as human because human beings could become sympathetic and sympathy was dangerous in an emergency. But she was human. She had

been carrying his false life for nearly a year. She had been carrying him since morning. She had not asked to be forgiven for either.

"Who knows," he said.

"The full truth. Nine people. Twelve if we include medical."

"How many believe the false thing?"

"The country."

He looked at the phone.

"The country," he said.

"Yes."

He stood slowly. His back objected. He did not touch the chair for balance because she was watching and because the country, whatever else had happened to it, still required certain performances from a man in this house.

He walked to the window and parted the curtain. The South Lawn was dark. Beyond it, Washington glowed in pieces. He could see the Monument. It had not changed and therefore had changed most violently of all.

He let the curtain fall. The phone buzzed once on the table. Neither of them moved.

He turned back to her.

"Tomorrow," he said, "you will begin again. You will tell me what the country thinks I know. You will tell me what I am meant to remember. You will tell me what I have said. And when I ask who decided any of it."

She looked at him.

"You will not say ecosystem."

For the first time since he had met her, she almost smiled.

"No, sir."

"What will you say."

She looked at the phone. Then at him.

"Arithmetic."

He looked at her for another moment. Then he looked back toward the window.

"That will do," he said.

The phone buzzed again.

The room held.

Neither of them picked it up.