

**FRANCHISE** by Issac Asimov (5700 words)

*It was a frightening thing to happen to a person; the responsibility was just too great. But Norman Muller couldn't back out. Multivac had chosen him, and the entire nation waited . . .*



Linda, aged 10, was the only one of the family who seemed to enjoy being awake. Norman Muller could hear her now through his own drugged, unhealthy coma. (He had finally managed to fall asleep an hour earlier but even then it was more like exhaustion than sleep.) She was at his bedside now, shaking him.

"Daddy, Daddy, wake up. Wake up!" .He suppressed a groan. "All right, Linda." "But, Daddy~ there's more policemen around than any time! . Police cars and everything!" 3 Norman Muller gave up and r~se blearily to his elbows. The day was beginning. It was faintly stirring toward dawn outside, the germ of a miserable gray that looked about as miserably gray as he felt. He could hear Sarah, his wife, shuffling about breakfast duties in the kitchen. His father-in-law, Matthew, was hawking strenuously in the bathroom.

No doubt Agent Handley was ready and waiting for him. This was the day. Election day! To begin with, it had been like every other year. Maybe a little worse, because it was a Presidential year, but no worse than other Presidential years if it came to that. The politicians spoke about the guh-reat electorate and the vast electuh-ronic intelligence that was its servant. The press analyzed the situation with industrial computers (the New York Times and the St. Louis Post-Dispatch had their own computers) and were full of little hints as to what would be forthcoming. Commentators and columnists pin-pointed the crucial state and county in happy contradiction to one another.

The first hint that it would not be like every other year, was when Sarah Muller said to her husband on the evening of October 4 (with Election Day exactly a month off), "Cantwell Johnson says that Indiana will be the state this year. He's the fourth one. Just think, our state this time." Matthew Hortenweiler took his fleshy face from behind the paper, stared dourly at his daughter and growled, "Those fellows are paid to tell lies. Don't listen to them."

"Four of them, Father," said Sarah, mildly. "They all say Indiana."

"Indiana is a key state, Matthew," said Nonnan, just as mildly, "on account of the Hawkins-Smith Act and this mess in Indianapolis. It-"

Matthew twisted his old face alarmingly and rasped out, "No one says Bloomington or Monroe County, do they?"

"Well-" said Norman.

Linda, whose little point-chin 4 face had been shifting from one speaker to the next, said pipingly, "You going to be voting this year, Daddy?" Nonnan smiled gently and said, "I don't think so, dear."

But this was in the gradually growing excitement of an October in a Presidential Election Year and Sarah had led a quiet life with dreams for her companions. She said, longingly, "Wouldn't that be wonderful, though?" "If I voted?"

Norman Muller had a small, blonde mustache that had given him a debonair quality in the young Sarah's eyes, but which, with gradual graying, had declined merely to lack of distinction. His forehead bore deepening lines born of uncertainty and, in general, he had never seduced his clerkly soul with the thought that he was either born great or would under any circumstances achieve greatness. He had a wife, a job and a little girl and except under extraordinary conditions of elation or depression was inclined to consider that to be an adequate bargain struck with life. So he was a little embarrassed and more than a little uneasy at the direction his wife's thoughts were taking.

"Actually, my dear," he said, "there are two hundred million people in the country, and with odds like that, I don't think we ought to waste our time wondering about it." His wife said, "Why, Norman, it's no such thing like two hundred million and you know it. In the first place, only

people between 20 and 60 are eligible and it's always men, so that puts it down to ~~~ be fifty million to one.

Then, if it's really Indiana, then it's about one and a quarter million to one. You wouldn't want me to bet in a horse race against those odds, now, would you? Let's have supper." Matthew muttered from behind his newspaper, "Damned foolishness."

Linda asked again, "You going to be voting this year, Daddy?" Norman shook his head and they all adjourned to the dining room. By October 20, Sarah's excitement was rising rapidly. Over the coffee, she announced that Mrs. Schultz, having a cousin who was the secretary of an Assemblyman, said that all the "smart money" was on Indiana. "She says President Villers is even going to make a speech at Indianapolis."

Norman Muller, who had had a hard day at the store, nudged the statement with a raising of eyebrows and let it go at that.

Matthew Hortenweiler, who was chronically dissatisfied with Washington, said, "If Villers makes a speech in Indiana, that means he thinks Multivac will pick Arizona. He wouldn't have the guts to go closer, the mushhead."

Sarah, who ignored her father whenever she could decently do so, said, "I don't know why they don't announce the state as soon as they can, and then the county and so on. Then the people who were eliminated could relax."

If they did anything like that," pointed out Norman, "the politicians would follow the announcements like vultures. By the time it was narrowed down to a township, you'd have a Congressman or two at every street-corner."

Matthew narrowed his eyes and brushed angrily at his sparse, gray hair, "They're vultures, anyhow. Listen-" Sarah murmured, "Now, Father-" Matthew's voice rumbled over her protest without as much as a stumble or hitch. "Listen, I was around when they set up Multivac. It would end partisan politics, they said. No more voter's money wasted on campaigns. No more grinning nobodies high-pressured and advertising-campaigned into Congress or the White House. So what happens? More campaigning than ever, only now they do it blind. They'll send guys to Indiana on account of the Hawkins-Smith Act and other guys to California in case it's the Joe Hammer situation that turns crucial. I say, wipe out all that nonsense. Back to the good, old-"

Linda asked, suddenly, "Don't you want Daddy to vote this year, Grandpa?" Matthew glared at the young girl. "Never you mind now." He turned back to Nonnan and Sarah. "There was a time I voted. Marched right up to the polling booth, stuck my fist on the levers and voted. There was nothing to it. I just said: This fellow's my man and I'm voting for him. That's the way it should be." Linda said excitedly, "You voted, Grandpa? You really did?" Sarah leaned forward quickly to quiet what might easily become an incongruous story drifting about the neighborhood. "It's nothing, Linda. Grandpa doesn't really mean voted. When he was a little boy, they had

something they called voting. Everyone did that kind of voting, Grandpa, too, but it wasn't really voting."

Matthew roared, "It wasn't when I was a little boy. I was 22 and I voted for Langley and it was real voting. My vote didn't count for much, maybe, but it was as good as anyone else's. Anyone else's. And no Multivac to--"

Norman interposed. "All right, Linda, time for bed. And stop asking questions about voting. When you grow up, you'll understand all about it." He kissed her with antiseptic gentleness and she moved reluctantly out of range under maternal prodding and a promise that she might watch the bedside video till 9: 15, if she was prompt about the bathing ritual. Linda said, "Grandpa," and stood with her chin down and her hands behind her back until his newspaper lowered itself to the point where shaggy eyebrows and eyes, nested in fine wrinkles, showed themselves. It was Friday, October 31.

He said, "Yes?" Linda came closer and put both her forearms on one of the old man's knees so that he had to discard his newspaper altogether.

She said, "Grandpa, did you really once vote?" He said, "You heard me say I did, didn't you? Do you think I tell fibs?"

"N-no, but Mamma says everybody voted then."

"So they did." "But how could they? How could everybody vote?"

Matthew stared at her solemnly, then lifted her and put her on his knee. He even moderated the tonal qualities of his voice. He said, "You see, Linda, till about forty years ago, everybody always voted. Say we wanted to decide who was to be the new President of the United States. The Democrats and Republicans would both nominate someone and everybody would say who they wanted. When Election Day was over, they would count how many people wanted the Democrat and how many wanted the Republican. Whoever had more votes was elected. You see?"

Linda nodded and said, "How did all the people know who to vote for? Did Multivac tell them?" Matthew's eyebrows hunched down and he looked severe. "They just used their own judgment, girl." She edged away from him and he lowered his voice again, "I'm not angry at you, Linda. But, you see, sometimes it took all night to count what everyone said and people were impatient. So they invented special machines which could look at the first few votes and compare them with the votes from the same places in previous years. That way the machine could compute how the total vote would be and who would be elected. You see?"

She nodded. "Like Multivac." "The first computers were much smaller than Multivac. But the machines grew bigger and they could tell how the election would go from fewer and fewer votes. Then, at last, they built Multivac and it can tell from just one voter."

Linda smiled at having reached a familiar part of the story and said, "That's nice."

Matthew frowned and said, "No, it's not nice. I don't want a machine telling me how I would have voted just because some joker in Milwaukee says he's against higher tariffs. Maybe I want to vote cockeyed just for the pleasure of it. Maybe I don't want to vote. Maybe-"

But Linda had wriggled from his knee and was beating a retreat. She met her mother at the door. Her mother, who was still wearing her coat and had not even had time to remove her hat, said breathlessly, "Run along, Linda. Don't get in mother's way." Then she said to Matthew as she lifted her hat from her head and patted her hair back into place, "I've been at Agatha's." Matthew stared at her censoriously and did not even dignify that piece of information with a grunt as he groped for his newspaper. Sarah said, as she unbuttoned her coat, "Guess what she said?"

Matthew flattened out his newspaper for reading purposes with a sharp crackle and said, "Don't much care." Sarah said, "Now, Father-" But she had no time for anger. The news had to be told and Matthew was the only recipient handy. So she went on, "Agatha's Joe is a policeman, you know, and he says a whole truckload of secret service men came into Bloomington last night." "They're not after me." "Don't you see, Father? Secret service agents, and it's almost election time. In Bloomington!" "Maybe they're after a bank robber."

"There hasn't been a bank robbery in town in ages ... Father, you're hopeless." She stalked away. Nor did Norman Muller receive the news with noticeably greater excitement. "Now, Sarah, how did Agatha's Joe know they were secret service agents," he asked, calmly. "They wouldn't go around with identification cards pasted on their foreheads."

But by next evening, with November a day old, she could say triumphantly, "It's just everyone in Bloomington that's waiting for someone local to be the voter. The Bloomington News as much as said so on video."

Nonnan stirred uneasily. He couldn't deny it, and his heart was sinking. If Bloomington was really to be hit by Multivac's lightning, it would mean newspapermen, video shows, tourists, all sorts of-strange upset. Norman liked the quiet routine of his life and the distant stir of politics was getting uncomfortably close. He said, "It's all rumor. Nothing more."

"You wait and see, then. You just wait and see." As things turned out, there was very little time to wait, for the door-bell rang insistently, and when Nonnan Muller opened it and said, "Yes?" a tall, grave-faced man said, "Are you Nonnan Muller?" Nonnan said, "Yes," again, but in a strange dying voice. It was not difficult to see from the stranger's bearing that he was one carrying authority and the nature of his errand suddenly became as inevitably obvious as it had, until the moment before, been unthinkably impossible. The man presented credentials, stepped into the house, closed the door behind him and said ritualistically, "Mr. Nonnan Muller, it is necessary for me to inform you on the behalf of the President of the United States that you have been chosen to represent the American electorate on Tuesday, November 4, 2008."

Norman Muller managed, with difficulty, to walk unaided to his chair. He sat there, white-faced and almost insensible, while Sarah brought water, slapped his hands in panic and moaned to her husband between clenched teeth, "Don't be sick, Norman. Don't be sick. They'll pick someone else." When Nonnan could manage to talk, he whispered, "I'm sorry, sir."

The secret service agent had removed his coat, unbuttoned his jacket and was sitting at ease on the couch. "It's all right," he said, and the mark of officialdom seemed to have vanished with the formal announcement and leave him simply a large and rather friendly man. "This is the sixth time I've made the announcement and I've seen all kinds of reactions. Not one of them was the kind you see on the video. You know what I mean? A holy, dedicated look, and a character who says: 'It will be a great privilege to serve my country.' That sort of stuff." The agent laughed comfortingly.

Sarah's accompanying laugh held a trace of shrill hysteria. The agent said, "Now you're going to have me with you for a while. My name is Phil Handley. I'd appreciate it if you call me Phil. Mr. Muller can't leave the house any more till Election Day. You'll have to inform the department store that he's sick, Mrs. Muller. You can go about your business for a while but you'll have to agree not to say a word about this. Right, Mrs. Muller?"

Sarah nodded vigorously. "No, sir. Not a word." "All right. But, Mrs. Muller," Handley looked grave, "we're not kidding now. Go out only if you must and you'll be followed when you do. I'm sorry but that's the way we must operate." "Followed?" "It won't be obvious. Don't worry. And it's only for two days till the formal announcement to the nation is made. Your daughter-

"She's in bed," said Sarah, hastily. "Good. She'll have to be told I'm a relative or friend staying with the family. If she does find out the truth, she'll have to be kept in the house. Your father had better stay in the house in any case."

"He won't like that," said Sarah.

"Can't be helped. Now, since you have no others living with you-

"You know all about us, apparently," whispered Norman. "Quite a bit," agreed Handley. "In any case, those are all my instructions to you for the moment. I'll try to co-operate as much as I can and be as little of a nuisance as possible. The government will pay for my maintenance so I won't be an expense to you. I'll be relieved each night by someone who will sit up in this room, so there will be no problem about sleeping accommodations. Now, Mr. Muller-" "Sir?" "You can call me Phil," said the agent again. "The purpose of the two days preliminary to formal announcement is to get you used to your position. We prefer to have you face Multivac in as normal a state of mind as possible. Just relax and try to feel this is all in a day's work. Okay?"

"Okay," said Nonnan, and then shook his head violently. "But I don't want the responsibility. Why me?" "All right," said Handley, "Let's get that straight to begin with. Multivac weighs all sorts of known factors, billions of them. One factor isn't known, though, and won't be known for a long

time. That's the reaction pattern of the human mind. All Americans are subjected to molding pressure of what other Americans do and say, to the things that are done to him and the things he does to others. Any American can be brought to Multivac to have the bent of his mind surveyed. From that the bent of all other minds in the country can be estimated. Some Americans are better for the purpose than others at some given time, depending upon the happenings of that year. Multivac picked you as most representative this year. Not the smartest, or the strongest, or the luckiest, but just the most representative. Now we don't question Multivac, do we?"

"Couldn't it make a mistake?" asked Nonnan. Sarah, who listened impatiently, interrupted to say, "Don't listen to him, sir. He's just nervous, you know. Actually, he's very well-read and he always follows politics very closely."

Handley said, "Multivac makes the decisions, Mrs. Muller. It picked your husband."

"But does it know everything?" insisted Nonnan, wildly. "Can't it have made a mistake?"

"Yes, it can. There's no point in not being frank. In 1993, a selected Voter died of a stroke two hours before it was time for him to be notified. Multivac didn't predict that; it couldn't. A Voter might be mentally unstable, morally unsuitable, or, for that matter, disloyal. Multivac can't know everything about everybody until he's fed all the data there is. That's why alternate selections are always held in readiness. I don't think we'll be using one this time. You're in good health, Mr. Muller, and you've been carefully investigated. You qualify."

Norman buried his face in his hands and sat motionless.

"By tomorrow morning, sir," said Sarah, "he'll be perfectly all right. He just has to get used to it, that's all."

"Of course," said Handley.

In the privacy of their bedchamber, Sarah Muller expressed herself in stronger fashion. The burden of her lecture was, "So get hold of yourself, Norman. You're trying to throwaway the chance of a lifetime."

Norman whispered, desperately, "It frightens me, Sarah. The whole thing."

"For goodness sake, why? What's there to it but answering a question or two?"

"The responsibility is too great. I couldn't face it."

"What responsibility? There isn't any. Multivac picked you. It's Multivac's responsibility. Everyone knows that."

Norman sat up in bed in a sudden access of rebellion and anguish. "Everyone is supposed to know that. But they don't. They-"

"Lower your voice," hissed Sarah, icily. "They'll hear you downtown."

"They don't," said Norman, declining quickly to a whisper. "When they talk about the Ridgely administration of 1988, do they say that Ridgely was corrupt and the nation was foolish to elect him? Do they say he won them over with pie-in-the-sky promises and racist baloney? No! They talk about the 'goddam MacComber vote' as though Humphrey MacComber was the only man who had anything to do with it because he faced Multivac. I've said it myself, only now I think, the poor guy was just a truck-farmer who didn't ask to be picked. Why was it his fault more than anyone else's? Now his name is a curse."

"You're just being childish," said Sarah.

"I'm being sensible. I tell you, Sarah, I won't accept. They can't make me vote if I don't want to. I'll say I'm sick. I'll say-"

But Sarah had had enough. "Now you listen to me," she whispered in a cold fury. "You don't have only yourself to think about. You know what it means to be Voter of the Year. A Presidential year at that. It means publicity and fame and, maybe, buckets of money-"

"And then I go back to being a clerk."

"You will not. You'll have a branch managership at the least if you have any brains at all, and you will have, because I'll tell you what to do. You control the kind of publicity. If you play your cards right, you can force Kennell Stores, Inc. into a tight contract and an escalator clause in connection with your salary and a decent pension plan."

"That's not the point in being the Voter, Sarah."

"That will be your point. If you don't owe anything to yourself or to me--I'm not asking for myself--you owe something to Linda." Nonnan groaned. "Well, don't you?" snapped Sarah.

"Yes, dear," murmured Nonnan.

On November 3, the official announcement was made and it was too late for Nonnan to back out even if he had been able to find the courage to make the attempt. Their house was sealed off. Secret service agents made their appearance in the open, blocking off all approach.

At first the telephone rang incessantly, but Philip Handley with an engagingly apologetic smile took all calls. Eventually, the exchange shunted all calls directly to the police station. Norman imagined that in that way, he was spared not only the bubbling (and envious?) congratulations of friends, but also the egregious pressure of salesmen scenting a prospect and the designing



smoothness of politicians from all over the nation. Perhaps even death threats from the inevitable cranks. Newspapers were forbidden to the house now in order to keep out weighted pressure and television was gently but firmly disconnected, over Linda's loud protests. Matthew growled and stayed in his room; Linda, after the first flurry of excitement, sulked and whined because she could not leave the house; Sarah divided her time between preparation of meals for the present and plans for the future; and Norman's depression lived and fed upon itself.

And the morning of Tuesday, November 4, 2008, came at last and it was Election Day. It was an early breakfast, but only Norman Muller ate, and that mechanically. Even a shower and shave had not succeeded in either restoring him to reality or removing his own conviction that he was as grimy without as he felt grimy within. Handley's friendly voice did its best to shed some normality over the gray and unfriendly dawn. (The weather prediction had been for a cloudy day with prospects of rain before noon.)

Handley said, "We'll keep this house insulated till Mr. Muller is back, but after that we'll be off your necks." The secret service agent was in full uniform now, including side-arms in heavily brassed holsters.

"You've been no trouble at all, Mr. Handley," simpered Sarah.

Nonnan drank through two cups of black coffee, wiped his lips with a napkin, stood up and said, haggardly, "I'm ready."

Handley stood up, too, "Very well, sir. And thank you, Mrs. Muller, for your very kind hospitality."

The armored car purred down empty streets. They were empty even for that hour of the morning. Handley indicated that and said, "They always shift traffic away from the line of drive ever since the attempted bombing that nearly ruined the Leverett election of '92." When the car stopped, Norman was helped out by the always °polite Handley into an underground drive whose walls were lined with soldiers at attention. He was led into a brightly lit room, in which three white-uniformed men greeted him smilingly. Nonnan said, sharply, "But this is the hospital?"

"There's no significance to that," said Handley, at once. "It's just that the hospital has the necessary facilities."

"Well, what do I do?" Handley nodded. One of the three men in white advanced and said, "I'll take over now, agent." Handley saluted in an off-hand manner and left the room. The man in white said, "Won't you sit down, Mr. Muller? I'm John Paulson, Senior Computer. These are Samson Levine and Peter Dorogobuzh, my assistants." Norman numbly shook hands all around. Paulson was a man of middle height with a soft face that seemed used to smiling and a very obvious toupee. He wore plastic rimmed glasses of an old-fashioned cut, and he lit a cigarette as he talked. (Norman refused his offer of one.)

Paulson said, "In the first place, Mr. Muller, I want you to know we are in no hurry. We want you to stay with us all day if necessary, just so that you get used to your surroundings and get over any thought you might have that there is anything unusual in this, anything clinical, if you know what I mean."

"It's all right," said Norman. "I'd just as soon this were over."

"I understand your feelings. Still, we want you to know exactly what's going on. In the first place, Multivac isn't here."

"It isn't?" Somehow through all his depression, he had still looked forward to seeing Multivac. They said it was half a mile long and three stories high, that fifty technicians walked the corridors within its structure continuously. It was one of the wonders of the world.

Paulson smiled. "No. It's not portable, you know. It's located underground, in fact, and very few people know exactly where. You can understand that, since it is our greatest natural resource. Believe me, elections aren't the only thing it's used for." Norman thought he was being deliberately chatty, but found himself intrigued all the same.

"I thought I'd see it. I'd like to." "I'm sure of that. But it takes a Presidential order and even then it has to be countersigned by Security. However, we are plugged into Multivac right here by beam transmission. What Multivac says can be interpreted here and what we say is beamed directly to Multivac, so in a sense we're in its presence." Norman looked about. The machines within the room were all meaningless to him.

"Now let me explain, Mr. Muller," Paulson went on. "Multivac already has most of the information it needs to decide all the elections, national, state and local. It needs only to check certain imponderable attitudes of mind and it will use you for that. We can't predict what questions it will ask, but they may not make much sense to you, or even to us. It may ask you how you feel about garbage-disposal in your town; whether you favor central incinerators. It might ask you whether you have a doctor of your own or whether you make use of National Medicine, Inc. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir." "Whatever it asks, you answer in your own words in any way you please. If you feel you must explain quite a bit, do so. Talk an hour, if necessary." "Yes, sir." "Now, one more thing. We will have to make use of some simple devices which will automatically record your blood pressure, heart beat, skin conductivity and brain wave pattern while you speak. The machinery will seem formidable, but it's all absolutely painless. You won't even know it's going on. So don't worry about it." The other two technicians were already busying themselves with smooth-gleaming apparatus on oiled wheels.

Norman said, "Is that to check on whether I'm lying or not?" "Not at all, Mr. Muller. There's no question of lying. It's only a matter of emotional intensity. If the machine asks you your opinion of your child's school, you may say, 'I think it is overcrowded.' Those are only words. From the

way your brain and heart and hormones and sweat glands work, Multivac can judge exactly how intensely you feel about the matter. It will understand your feelings better than you yourself."

"I never heard of this," said Norman. "No, I'm sure you didn't. Most of the details of Multivac's workings are top secret. For instance, when you leave, you will be asked to sign a paper swearing that you will never reveal the nature of the questions you were asked, the nature of your responses, what was done, or how it was done. The less is known about the Multivac, the less chance of attempted outside pressures upon the men who service it." He smiled, grimly, "Our lives are hard enough as it is."

Norman nodded. "I understand."

"And now would you like anything to eat or drink?"

"No. Nothing right now." "Do you have any questions?" Norman shook his head.

"Then you tell us when you're ready."

"I'm ready right now."

"You're certain there's nothing else you want to ask?"

"Quite." Paulson nodded, and raised his hand in a gesture to the others. They advanced with their frightening equipment and Nonnan Muller felt his breath come a little more quickly and his heart beat more rapidly as he watched.

The ordeal lasted nearly three hours, with one short break for coffee and an embarrassing session with a chamber-pot. During all this time, Nonnan Muller remained encased in machinery. He was bone-weary at the close. He thought sardonically that his promise to reveal nothing of what had passed would be an easy one to keep. Already the questions were a hazy mish-mash in his mind. Somehow he had thought Multivac would speak in a sepulchral, superhuman voice, resonant and echoing, but that, he now decided, was just an idea he had from seeing too many television shows. The truth was distressingly undramatic. The questions were slips of a kind of metallic foil patterned with numerous punctures. A second machine converted the pattern into words and Paulson read the words to Norman, then gave him the question and let him read it for himself.

Nonnan's answers were taken down by a recording machine, played back to Norman for confirmation, with emendations and added remarks also taken down. All that was fed into a pattern-making instrument and that, in turn, was radiated to Multivac. The one question Nonnan could remember at the moment was an incongruously gossipy: "What do you think of the price of eggs?" He had answered, blankly, "I don't know the price of eggs."

Now it was over, and gently they removed the electrodes from various portions of his body, unwrapped the pulsating band from his upper arm, and moved the machinery away. He stood up, drew a deep, shuddering breath and said, "Is that all? Am I through?"

"Not quite," Paulson hurried to him, smiling in reassuring fashion. "We'll have to ask you to stay another hour."

"Why?" asked Nonnan, sharply.

"It will take that long for Multivac to weave the new data into the trillions of items it has. Thousands of elections are concerned, you know. It's very complicated. And it may be that an odd contest here or there, a comptrollership in Phoenix, Arizona, or some council seat in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, may be in doubt. In that case, Multivac may be compelled to ask you a deciding question or two."

"No," said Nonnan. "I won't go through this again."

"It probably won't happen," Paulson said, soothingly. "It rarely does. But just in case, you'll have to stay." A touch of steel, just a touch, entered his voice. "You have no choice, you know. You must." Nonnan sat down wearily. He shrugged.

Paulson said, "We can't let you read a newspaper, but if you'd care for a murder mystery, or if you'd like to play chess, or if there's anything we can do for you to help pass the time, I wish you'd mention it."

"It's all right. I'll just wait."

They ushered him into a small room just next to the one in which he had been questioned. He let himself sink into a plastic covered annchair and closed his eyes. As well as he could, he must wait out this final hour. He sat perfectly still and slowly the tension left him. His breathing grew less ragged and he could clasp his hands without being quite so conscious of the trembling of his fingers. Maybe there would be no questions. Maybe it was all over. If it were over, then the next thing would be torchlight processions and invitations to speak at all sorts of functions. The Voter of the Year! He, Nonnan Muller, ordinary clerk of a small department store in Bloomington, Indiana, who had neither been born great nor achieved greatness would be in the extraordinary position of having had greatness thrust upon him. The historians would speak soberly of the Muller Election of 2008. That would be its name, the Muller Election! The publicity, the better job, the flash flood of money that interested Sarah so much, occupied only a corner of his mind. It would all be welcome, of course. He couldn't refuse it. But at the moment something else was beginning to concern him. A latent patriotism was stirring. After all, he was representing the entire electorate. He was the focal point for them. He was, in his own person, for this one day, all of America!

The door opened, snapping him to open-eyed attention. For a moment, his stomach constricted. No more questions! But Paulson was smiling.

"That will be all, Mr. Muller."

"No more questions, sir?"

"None needed. Everything was quite clearcut. You will be escorted back to your home and then you will be a private citizen once more. Or as much so as the public will allow."

"Thank you. Thank you." Norman flushed and said, "I wonder -Who was elected?" Paulson shook his head. "That will have to wait for the official announcement. The rules are quite strict. We can't even tell you. You understand."

"Of course. Yes." Norman felt embarrassed.

"The Secret Service will have the necessary papers for you to sign."

"Yes." Suddenly, Norman Muller felt proud. It was on him now in full strength. He was proud. In this imperfect world, the sovereign citizens of the first and greatest Electronic Democracy had, through Norman Muller (through him!) exercised once again its free, untrammelled franchise.