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Jim and Josie Fensittzer consider temptation

Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—In a stamped envelope with no return address, I received a telephone transcript this week. I think I'm supposed to leak it.

Caller: Good evening. Is this Mr. Fensittzer?

Jim: Jim'll do. Who's this?

Mathus: Mr. Fensittzer, my name is Polly Mathus. I'm the president of Polls-R-Us. We do political research. I have just discovered something that could make you very rich. Has any other consultant called you?

Jim: Nope. What kind of poles are you selling? We could use one for the flag if the price is right.

Mathus: Jim, can you put your wife, Josie, on the phone? This concerns her, too.

Jim: Sure. [He yells.] Hey Josie, pick up the kitchen phone.

Josie: Hello.

Mathus: Mrs. Fensittzer, I have information that could make you very rich.

Josie: Jimmie, hang up! This is a scam.

Mathus: Please. Hear me out. I own a political consulting business in Washington, D.C. We've worked for both Republicans and Democrats over the years. I like to think that we are impartial. This year I decided to work for the public interest and not hire on with either party, neither of which offered me a contract because of my integrity. I've determined that the election will come down to your two votes. How you go, so goes America.

Josie: You're nuts. Jim and I are just normal American nobodies. Two jobs, two kids, two cars, two mortgages, two bankruptcies, two votes. Why us?

Mathus: It's an algorithm.

Jim: What's an Al Goreism?

Mathus: That's not that shabby.

Jim: What's not that shabby?

Mathus: An algorithm is a set of rules that you put into a computer program. It defines a sequence of computations that...sort of take input data and turn them into output data.

Josie: Is that like throwing darta at balloona?

Mathus: That's good.

Jim: What's good? Is balloona a pasta? I like the kind with an "i" at the end. You know—ravioli, linguini.

Josie: Right.

Mathus: My algorithm has identified the Fensitzers as the two votes that will determine the next President. Obama and Romney will tie without you. Your votes are worth...millions, IF you both vote the same way.

Jim: I'm leaning toward staying home, and Romney is my second choice. Josie likes Obama, but not by much over neither one.

Mathus: You can't split your vote.

Josie: What happens if we both vote for one candidate?

Mathus: I can promise you at least \$25 million from my business. But you have to tell me which candidate will get both of your votes before the election.

Josie: What happens if we don't vote at all.

Mathus: They'll tie, and it will end up in court or maybe the House. No one wants that uncertainty. No one wants another Florida recount.

Josie: Jimmie, she's only going to give us the money if we both vote for either Romney or Obama.

Jim: With \$25 million, I could get a really smart phone. Like an Einstein.

Mathus: It doesn't matter to me who wins.

Josie: I smell a dead fish in this pot of gold.

Jim: It could be the cat food under the counter.

Mathus: I'm not buying your votes, and you're not selling them. I'm not trying to get you to vote for one candidate over the other. That's your choice as Americans. All I'm asking is for both of you to vote the same way and share that information with me just as you'd share it with family, friends or a local newspaper.

Jim: With \$25 million, I could get a 37-inch TV.

Josie: What would you do with our information?

Mathus: I'd make an election forecast to certain individuals. That would prove that my algorithm worked. I'd make a fortune in the future.

Jim: When would I get paid?

Mathus: After the election, not before. For tax purposes, I would carry you as self-employed consultants. Don't forget that you need to pay tax on this income.

Josie: I think somebody's behind you. Who?

Jim: You can't see anybody behind her. We're on the phone.

Josie: Jimmie, use your head.

Jim: I am. It's counting money before I spend it.

Mathus: I'm not fronting for anybody. I don't care who wins. All I care about is knowing who it is before it happens. I am completely neutral about everything.

Jim: Sounds like you're on the uppy-up to me. With \$25 million, I could get a propane grill for the deck.

Josie: You could get a long jail sentence.

Mathus: For what? I'm not paying to influence your vote. I just want you to tell me which guy you'll both support. The choice is yours.

Josie: But we have to agree on a candidate. THAT'S what you're buying.

Jim: With \$25 million, I could start a hedge fund. No more rusty old hand clippers for me. I could hire a gardener.

Mathus: Even two. With electric trimmers.

Jim: Rich people would invest with me, because I'd be rich, too.

Josie: If we have to vote the same, one of us is selling his or her vote.

Jim: With \$25 million, I could get a divorce.

Josie: But you'd only end up with a few million after taxes and legal fees.

Jim: That's outrageous! I'm in favor of taxing somebody else.

Mathus: You have a lot of company.

Jim: C'mon Josie, I'll vote for Obama even though he was born in Kenya to a Mao-Mao terrorist and an American fruit loop.

Josie: If you do, I'll vote for Romney.

Jim: Okay. I'll vote for Romney, too.

Josie: Then, I'll vote for Obama.

Jim: Honey, let's start thinking of ourselves as Team Fensittzer. Twenty-five million! You could quit pushing paper. I could quit hauling it out to the trash truck eight hours a day. The kids would have college. We could retire. We could move out of this dump. We could get out of debt. We could live like...like people.

Josie: ...maybe, you're right. It's one stupid vote. Okay, you vote for Obama.

Jim: Well, now. Why don't you vote for Romney?

Josie: I don't like him.

Jim: Well, I don't like Obama.

Josie: Then we're stuck. Ms. Mathus, your algorithm isn't...predictive.

Mathus: I cannot believe this! What kind of Americans are you?

Jim: The ordinary kind.

Josie: Real stupid.
Jim: Dumb as a pot.
Josie: That's post, sweetie, not pot.
Jim: Pots are dumber than posts in my book.
Mathus: Let's leave it this way, folks. I'll send you a contract. I'll give you two weeks to sign it. Otherwise, I'll figure out something else. [Rings off.]

Josie: Jim?
Jim: If we can get \$25 million from her, I'll bet we can get \$50 million from somebody else.
Josie: I figured that's what you were thinking.
Jim: We'll vote for the candidate whose supporters give us the most money.
Josie: Isn't it wonderful that political speech is free, and we can sell it at the same time.

* * *

When they try to auction their votes, they'll hit a stone wall. No one will believe them. When they come back to me, it'll be \$10,000 for both. It won't even pay off their credit cards. (Signed) Polly Mathus, President of Polls-R-Us.

* * *

Footnote: I've determined that this transcript could be true or false. It also could be a little true and a lot false or a lot true and a little false. In any case, because I am a journalist with standards that defy description, I will not leak it. Nor will I reveal its source, which has mystified me for many years.

Curtis Seltzer is a land consultant, columnist and author of **How To Be a DIRT-SMART Buyer of Country Property**, available at www.curtis-seltzer.com where his columns are posted. His latest books -- **Snowy Mountain Breakdown**, **Land Matters** and **Blue Grass Notes** -- are available through his website.

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