

First Klue

by Barry R. Taylor

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“Have you ever noticed,” Morgan said one morning, “how many people in our unit have names beginning with K?”

“That so?” Brandon replied. He was sitting in the big chair behind his desk, studying the ceiling. Brandon was a solid, thirtyish man whose impending baldness was already evident.

“Let’s see, there’s Kelly, and Kyle and – who else?”

“Karen,” said Logan. “Everyone forgets Karen.” He was lounging in one of the visitor’s chairs, beside Morgan. The three office friends were hanging out in Brandon’s office, putting off going back to work. They pursued that goal diligently.

“Right, Karen. So quiet, she’s easy to overlook. Anyway, that’s only three. How many of us are there?”

“Ten,” said Morgan. “Or we should be ten. We’re short a section head at the moment, so nine.”

“Three out of nine. Is that so odd?”

“And those are all pretty common names,” Logan added.

Morgan said, “It’s still a tad unusual, don’t you think? A third of the unit? There are hundreds of common names that don’t begin with K.”

“Are we including support staff?” Logan wondered. “That would give us Kendra, the admin assist.”

Brandon frowned. “Which one is Kendra?”

“Fairly tall. Blonde, glasses.”

“Ah, right. So now we have four K-names out of what . . . twelve in all?”

Morgan said: “Which means fully one third of our unit has names beginning with K. Out of all those other names. And twenty-five other letters of the alphabet. We’re special. We’re the K-9 unit. At least until the new section head gets here.”

“I’m not quite ready to sell T-shirts,” Logan replied. “Come on, lots of people are named Karen or Kendra or whatever. I know three guys named Kyle. I owe two of them money.”

“Logan is right,” Brandon said, “as unlikely as that sounds. There’s nothing remarkable about having a few Kyles and Kellys on staff. Now if we had a Kandelarra or a Kaligula – with a K – that would be special.”

Morgan was not to be put off. “All I’m saying is that it’s statistically unusual, that many K-names in one small group. It’s an outlier from expectations. I mean, in a random sample of the population, how many people have names beginning with K?”

“I’ll tell you,” said Brandon. “I have no idea.”

“I’ll bet it’s more than you think,” put in Logan.

Morgan glanced at her watch. “I have to go. I have a meeting with Kelly, five minutes ago.” She bounced to her feet. “That’s Kelly with a K”. She disappeared out the door.

A few days later, Morgan appeared at the open door of the lunch room, laptop in hand. “Hey guys, take a look at this,” she cried. Morgan was curly haired and petite. She read paperback books about robots and space travel. Brandon and Logan looked up from, respectively, a complicated, three-layer sandwich and a ready-to-eat product amenable to microwave heating.

“What’s up?” said Brandon.

“Remember we were talking about how many people in our unit have names beginning with K?”

Logan said, “Yes, of course. You think it’s a statistical anomaly. I think it’s a coincidence. That’s with a C.” Logan was an athletic young man with an aquiline face that made him look older than he was.

Morgan marched in with the air of one about to share a discovery. “Well, it is a statistical anomaly, as it turns out,” she declared, sitting down. “Remember, we weren’t sure how common K-names are, so we couldn’t judge the likelihood of a swarm of them.” She pointed to her computer, where a long list of names scrolled down the screen. “Look here. This website gives the two hundred most popular first names for boys and girls born in any given decade. Based on birth registrations. I used the 1990s, when most of us were born.”

“And?” said Brandon.

“Only three male names make the list: Kyle, Kevin and Kenneth. But for girls there are twenty-four names, like Kayla, Kelsey, Kimberley, Kristen, Kirsten, Kara, and like a dozen variants on the name Kathleen.”

“Kristen and Kirsten,” Brandon remarked. “Impossible to tell apart.”

“One of them should be illegal,” Logan agreed.

Morgan waved her hands. “Listen, listen. From this list we can estimate the probability of a given person in our age group being named with a K. For women, it’s twenty-four names out of two hundred, or 12%. For men, three names out of two hundred or 1.5%. The combined probability for both sexes is twenty-seven out of four hundred, which is about 7%.”

Logan objected. “That’s not enough. We still don’t know the relative popularity of each name. What if half the girls were named Kimberley?”

“They aren’t,” Morgan said flatly. “The K names are scattered all over the list. Stop fussing and listen up. If seven per cent of adults have a name starting with K, then a workplace of twelve random people should have 0.8 K-names, on average, sliding up to 1.4 if they are all women. So maybe one person, or none. Two at most. But we have four! *Five times* the expected number! You see, our unit is special. We attract K names.”

“Perhaps they’re the most K-pable,” said Logan. He emphasized the first letter.

“Very droll. I think there is some sort of rarity selection going on. Maybe Human Resources subconsciously favours hires who have low frequency names.”

Logan again: “I’ve heard of mothers who give their daughters odd names so they’ll stand out against the competition. You know, like Suzie without the E, or Cindy with two Ys. Depressing to think that might actually work.”

Brandon said, “Morgan, how much time have you spent on this?”

She shrugged. “The alternative is doing the work I get paid for.”

A shadow appeared at the door. Bill was there: middle-aged, portly, and, reluctantly, acting section head. “Chop-chop everybody,” he announced, “down to the conference room to meet the new work term students. Let’s make them feel welcome.” He trudged away.

Brandon said, “Anybody know how many students we have this year?”

Morgan said, “I think there’s three. Bill said there were four but one switched out at the last minute.”

“Are any of them cute?” Logan wondered. Morgan rolled her eyes.

“Let’s go see,” said Brandon, rising. He stuffed a bite of sandwich in his mouth before heading out of the room.

“Morgan, you’re over-reacting,” Brandon said, about an hour later. He was leaning on the front of his desk, watching his co-worker pace back and forth across the small office.

“This is getting creepy,” Morgan insisted. “What are the chances that two of our three work-term students would have names beginning with K? Katelyn and Kiera. I mean, literally, what is the chance of that? We can’t keep saying this is coincidence. Now we have, what, fifteen people all told, among whom six have names beginning with K.”

“Seven”, Logan said. He strode into the office, grinning. “You know Shauna, the other admin assistant?”

“The older one?”

“That’s right. Turns out Shauna is her middle name. She’s American, from down south somewhere. Her first name is Katrina. She stopped using it in high school after a certain hurricane.”

“Ohmygod,” Morgan blurted. “This is so weird.”

“It’s not weird, it’s distinctive,” Logan declared. He plopped down in his usual chair. “Like you said, we’re special. We’re the K-crew. The Land of K. The . . . whatever.”

“The Special K’s” Brandon offered.

“Hey, I like that one.”

“Guys, we have seven K-names – seven! – in a group where statistically we should have one, or two at the most. That’s way at the end of the bell curve, isn’t it?”

No, I don’t think it is,” said Brandon, suddenly serious. “You’re overlooking repeated sampling. Right? The probability of any given group of fifteen, like us, having a whole raft of K-names is vanishingly small, certainly. But we’re only one group out of . . . how many? Hundreds? Thousands? Random chance has ample opportunity to come up with something unlikely somewhere. Maybe there’s an insurance company in Hartford where most of the employees are left-handed. Or a restaurant in Cairo where everyone is name Abdul. It just so happens that the unexpected concentration of K-names happened here.”

“I suppose,” Morgan murmured. She didn’t seem convinced.

“Now if one our cute new students, Katelyn or Kiera, were from Kingston, that would be weird,” Logan suggested. “Or Kamloops.”

“Or even Kemptville,” Brandon added.

“Kennetcook”

“Kelly’s Cove”

“All right guys, that’s enough,” said Morgan, with a sigh. “I still say there is something unnatural about all this. I understand what you say about random chance but . . . now it’s like we’re *accumulating* K-names. We’re drawing them in.”

Logan said, “Maybe it’s a kurse.”

“All right, go ahead and make fun, but – wait a minute! What did you say?”

“I was making a lame joke. Don’t get your k-nickers in a k-not.”

“You spelled curse with a K.”

“What? No I didn’t. Come on, I said it out loud, how could you know?”

“But I can tell! You said kurse, not curse. They should sound alike, but you definitely inserted a K. I heard it. How is that even possible?”

Brandon said, “Morgan, maybe you’re taking this a little too seriously.”

“Yet I definitely heard – ”

“Excuse me?” said a new voice. A young man with an air of uncertainty was hovering at the door.

“Yes, can I help you?” Brandon replied. “Oh, you’re one of our new work-term students, aren’t you. Welcome aboard.”

Logan said, “Come on in. We’re harmless. Mostly.”

“Uhm, thank you,” said the newcomer. He glanced at the name on the door. “I think I’ve been assigned to . . . your group?”

Brandon said, “Well, excellent, excellent.” He extended a hand. “I’m Brandon. These are my friends, and yours, Morgan and Logan. And you’re . . . Carl, is that right?”

The student shook hands all around. “Yes, that’s me,” he said. “But I spell my name with a K. I’m Karl with a K.”

He stopped. He looked around at the trio of surprised faces. “It’s . . . German?” he said.

“Hear me out,” Morgan pleaded, early the next week. She was walking down the corridor with Logan and Brandon. Their destination was the conference room, there to meet the new section head.

“I’ve been thinking about this. The concentration of K-names in our group is far too high to dismiss as a statistical anomaly. It’s unnaturally high. If it’s too much to attribute to random chance, then there must be a reason for it. There has to be some physical mechanism producing the K-cluster. I think we can rule out selection bias, because the people in our group were hired over several years, and the work-term students are chosen by an entirely different process. Even if someone in HR, for example, were actively trying to increase the number of K-names in the unit, I don’t see how they could do it.”

Logan and Brandon exchanged a look. The latter said, “Morgan – ”

“Wait, wait, I haven’t finished yet. If there is no internal means by which K-names are accumulating, then the mechanism has to be external. Some force outside the unit, outside the organization, which is somehow warping probabilities. Like loaded dice. You see?”

“Oh look, here’s an intern,” said Logan. “Hi Kiera, how are you doing? Need any help?”

Morgan ignored him, and her. “What if,” she said darkly, “this unnatural concentration of K-names is a vanguard of something larger? What if it’s a visible indicator of a more general change in . . . well in the universe, which we can’t perceive because we’re inside it? What if we’re all slipping into an alternate reality?”

“You mean alternative reality,” Brandon said, didactically. “Morgan, it is possible to consume too much science fiction.”

“Science fiction is fiction based on science,” she shot back. “It imagines possible futures so that we can be prepared for them. If our universe is warping or changing in some way, it would be good to be prepared.”

“We should also be prepared to meet our new boss,” said Brandon. “Anybody know who he is? Or she?”

“His name is Anderson,” says Logan. “I bumped into him earlier. Seems like a nice fellow.”

“What’s his first name?” Morgan demanded. The three had arrived at the conference room. Most of their colleagues were already there.

“I don’t remember,” Logan said. “It’s Norman or Nolan, something like that. Sorry for your theory.”

“I’m honestly relieved,” Morgan said, taking her seat. “What is that on the television?”

The TV screen at the front of the room was showing a dozen attractive, identically dressed, Asian girls dancing energetically to pulsing lights. The sound was turned down.

“Brandon laughed. “Why that’s K-pop music of course. One of the interns likes to watch it while she works. Cute, aren’t they.”

Morgan stared at the screen. “Why haven’t I heard of this?”

“Because you spend your spare time buried in books,” Logan replied. “K-pop is one of the biggest music segments in the world. The ‘pop’ stands for popular.”

“And it starts with K,” Morgan murmured.

“Of course it does. They’re from South Korea.” Somebody turned the TV off.

Bill stood up and called for attention. “Thanks for coming out, everyone. I’m very pleased – and I don’t mind saying, a bit relieved – to introduce our new section head. He comes to us from Frederickton and he has both the background and the experience to lead a unit like ours. Let’s hope he also has the patience. Please welcome Mr. Nolan Anderson.”

The room applauded. A handsome, square-faced man stood up as Bill sat down. He was wearing a crisp shirt and a tie, which, were it not for Bill, would have made him unique.

“Thanks, Bill for that kind introduction,” he began. “For the record, my name isn’t Nolan. That’s a common mistake. You can call me Knowlton.”

“I’m sorry, what did you say?” Morgan blurted from halfway down the conference table. “Knowlton? Your name is Knowlton?” Everyone turned to look at her.

“That’s right,” Anderson replied, smiling. “The K is silent. My goodness, miss, are you all right? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

“What if I’m right?” Morgan demanded, late the next day. “What if all these K-names are the first stages of a transition into an alternate reality? Shouldn’t we at least consider the possibility?” She and Logan were in Brandon’s office again, he sitting, she pacing nervously. Brandon was sitting behind his desk.

Brandon said, “Morgan, come on. There is no such thing as an alternate – an alternative– reality. This one is the one we’re stuck with. Sure we have a lot of K-names in our group, but that hardly means the world is cracking up. You’re overlooking simpler explanations.”

“Such as?” she challenged.

“Coincidence,” said Logan. “At the end of the day, simple coincidence. There is no need to be so concerned.”

Morgan was wide-eyed. “You pronounced that with a K. I heard it.”

“What? Coincidence? Well it does start with . . . wait a minute, how do you spell ‘coincidence’ ”?

Morgan shook her head. “It’s getting worse. The reality shift is advancing. I see it everywhere.”

“Everywhere?”

She stopped pacing long enough to give him a hard look. “I called tech support for a problem with my computer. They sent over a fellow named – wait for it – Kay. Just Kay.”

“The letter K?”

“No, not quite. K-A-Y. Kay. When was the last time you heard that name?”

“One of the knights in the legend of King Arthur was named Kay,” said Logan. “At least in the Disney version. Don’t ask me why I remember that.”

“That was two thousand years ago! Right now K is popping up everywhere. Did you know there’s a new bistro on Spring Garden Road? It’s called Kaleb’s Korner Kitchen – all spelled with Ks. It’s not even on a corner. The last time I bought groceries the check-out clerk was named Kirk and his supervisor was Kerry. My new hairdresser is Kaylee. Karina and Kenny just moved in to the apartment across from mine. The newest members of my yoga class are Krystal, Krista and Kristine – those aren’t even spelled right!”

Brandon said, “All right, all right, let’s consider this. Seriously. I’ll concede that that frequency of names starting with K is peculiar. But how can a superfluity of Ks herald a wholesale shift in reality?”

“K names are only the beginning,” his co-worker charged. “I think the spoken word itself is changing. We are entering a reality where the frequencies of English letters are not the same as they were. Somewhere in the history of this reality, K replaced the hard C sound in words like

Code, Coincidence, Concern. Instead of being a rare letter for special situations, K is a common letter, used everywhere. Especially in names.”

Brandon digested this. “That would require only a small tweak in the history of English, wouldn’t it? The new reality would be otherwise identical to the old. We can switch out K for hard C without difficulty.”

She shook her head. “I think K is only the beginning. If the English alphabet can change fundamentally without anyone noticing, then what’s to stop other changes? The same external force, whatever it may be, is still impinging on us, continuing to reshape reality like a hand pressing on a balloon. The structure of reality will warp and twist, bit by bit, more and more until . . . who knows where it could end? Will we even recognize the new world?”

“Chaos,” said Logan, “ but spelled differently.”

Brandon shook his head. “This still sounds a bit kweer.”

Morgan gasped. “What, what did you say?”

“Sorry, I meant kweer in the original sense. Odd, peculiar, strange.”

“But . . . but you said it with a . . . with a K.”

“I did?”

Morgan was becoming alarmed. She said, “There’s a new ATM in the lobby. It’s called Kwik Kash.” She spelled it out.

“Now K is replacing Q?” Logan wondered. “If ducks start saying ‘kwack’, that raises all sorts of new kquestions.”

It took a few seconds for Morgan to realized Logan was teasing her. She let out a great sigh. “All right, all right, I can understand why you’re sceptical. It’s a lot to imagine. But all this just seems so weird.”

Brandon said, “Maybe you’re noticing a high prevalence of K because you’re looking for it. You’ve become hyper-aware of K. I’m sure you don’t have an opinion on the frequency of D, or F.”

“I suppose,” Morgan conceded. “But K is everywhere.” She was the sceptical one now.

“Let’s think of the next few weeks as an experiment,” Brandon said. “A test of your hypothesis. If reality is warping as you propose, then sooner or later the changes in our perception will become too great to ignore. Other oddities should arise, outside of K-names and komely kollege ko-op students.”

Morgan started to say something, but he pressed on. “On the other hand, if it is all coincidence, magnified by selection bias, then life should go on pretty much as before, indefinitely. We’ll know for sure soon enough, right?”

He was obviously trying to placate here. “I guess that’s true,” Morgan allowed. “There must come a point where the transformation would be obvious.”

Brandon looked at his watch. “Close enough to quitting time,” he said. “Come on, I’ll walk you to the bus stop.”

“Thanks. Hold on a minute while I get my jacket.” The weather had turned cool.

“I’m out of here too,” said Logan, rising. “I’ll see you two tomorrow, ‘K? – I mean, all right?” Grinning, he left the room.

Five minutes later, jacket on and carry-all over her shoulder, Morgan stepped out into the brisk fall air. “You catch the bus up on Roby Street?” Brandon asked as they descended the front steps.

“That’s right. By the university.”

“Oh, well then, it’s only a couple of blocks up Kirkland. Let’s go.”

“Kirkland? This is Coburg street.”

He laughed. “No, it’s Kirkland now. Don’t you remember they changed it last year? Turns out there’s another Coburg street in Dartmouth. Confused the hell out of the cab drivers.”

“Why Kirkland though? Don’t you see, it’s yet another –”

“Relax, will you. It doesn’t mean anything.”

“But why – ”

She stopped, looking about. They had arrived at an intersection. At the end of the workday the street was busy. People were pouring out of the offices up the street. In the other direction a steady stream of university students was heading home after classes.

Everyone was wearing a hat. The men sported classic, wide-brimmed fedoras as if they had walked out of a black and white movie. The women favoured bonnets and berets, or broad-brimmed hats that matched their handbags. Some were wearing woolen cloche hats like 1920s flappers. Even the students were wearing hats, though the girls had not abandoned sweatshirts and leggings. No one was wearing a ball cap.

There wasn't a bare head to be seen except Morgan's own. She watched a construction worker pull off his hard hat, replace it with a blue and black trilby, then stroll away, lunchbox in hand. A woman wearing a fancy hat with a red rose on the brim stopped to adjust her young daughter's bonnet, which had slipped in the wind.

"Ohmygod," murmured Morgan, still staring. "Brandon, look, look. I was right. Reality is changing again. Everyone is wearing a hat!"

"Of course everyone is wearing a hat," Brandon replied. He paused to put on his own hat, a brown homburg with a long red feather. "After all, it is Oktober."

