

December 8, 2003
New Hampshire

Early this morning I caught an Amtrak into the deep swirl of the election: the last Democratic-primary debate.

I arrived here in Durham, New Hampshire, with no plans, no car, and no place to stay. I guess I figured that someone in the press fraternity would let me crash on the floor of his deluxe hotel suite. But the other members of the press don't want anything to do with me. They can smell my panic. They keep turning their backs on me or stepping away to talk to someone else. I don't have an expense account, just an advance from my publisher. The only chance I'll make any money on this thing is if I can spend less than my advance covering the election, which is no chance at all.

I came out here to cover an election, and suddenly I don't know if there's anything left to cover. What happened to John Kerry the front-runner and little Howard Dean biting at his ankles? And what about Joseph Lieberman? Lieberman stayed out of the race until Gore had announced that he wouldn't run. Now the man Lieberman considered his friend has gone on record as backing Howard Dean. Lieberman must feel like a plane overhead just cracked in half and dumped fifty tons of shit on his campaign bus. How does a person recover from that?

I called my friend Shaila in D.C. to find out how Gore's endorsement looks from the nation's capital.

"I wonder what he's getting out of it," she said.

"Maybe he wants to be VP again."

Shaila laughed at my little joke and said, "The *New York Times* conjectured that Gore is courting the progressive vote.

On The Bus

*Stephen Elliott Trails The Candidates
On The Road To The Nomination*

It wasn't even 7 A.M. when Al Gore announced he's endorsing Howard Dean. With Dean so far in the lead, his bus is the one everyone wants to be on. It's always more fun hanging out with a winner. But I feel pulled toward John Kerry right now, who has rented a bus called the Real Deal Express — if his creditors haven't put a boot on it already. I know it will be a long, slow death bus, filled with bitter journalists assigned to follow a losing candidate. But I'm curious. I want to know what an imploding campaign looks like. I know if I were Kerry, I would party like there's no tomorrow.

Stephen Elliott, whose fiction and nonfiction have appeared in The Sun for ten years, has written a book about the 2004 presidential campaign titled Looking Forward to It, or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the American Electoral Process. While writing the book, Elliott published his rough drafts in an e-mail newsletter. These are some of his dispatches from the Iowa caucus and the New Hampshire primary. The book is due out from Picador in October.

—Ed.

Gore knows Dean's a loser, and Gore wants to be able to run as a progressive against Hillary in 2008."

I ventured my own theory. "What if Gore is backing Dean because he really believes in Dean? What if he is backing Dean for no other reason than personal integrity?"

It took a few minutes for Shaila to stop laughing.

"So, let me get this straight," I said. "You would sooner believe that Al Gore is backing a candidate he secretly hopes will lose than you would believe that Al Gore would make a decision free of political motivation."

Pause. "Yes. Wouldn't you?"

"I need more hope than that," I told her.

At the debate, the unasked question seemed to be who was willing to bow out first so that a single candidate could mount a legitimate challenge to Howard Dean's thick-necked juggernaut. Most of the candidates were visibly pissed off by Gore's endorsement. You could see them thinking, *Fuck fat fucking Al Gore.*

I can't blame John Kerry for being angry. He was supposed to win this thing. Kerry said the election isn't over until the



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votes are counted, which sounds good but simply isn't true. Everybody knows the election is over long before then.

John Edwards's response to every question was that he is an outsider, but his hairstyle doesn't match this outsider image. Somewhere in the first forty-five minutes of the debate, I realized that Edwards is not the dark horse I thought he was after seeing him dazzle a town-hall meeting in Concord, New Hampshire, back in July. It might have been when John Kerry said, "I love John Edwards," that I lost faith. Every time Edwards said he was an outsider, I heard John Kerry in my head saying, *I love you*.

Edwards: I am very much an outsider.

Kerry: *I love you*.

Edwards: I have not spent my whole life in politics, like most of these folks.

Kerry: *I love you, man.*

Edwards: The question is: Who is in the best position to change what's going on in Washington: people who've spent most of their life in politics, or somebody who's been fighting these people all his life?

Kerry: *I love you so much. I'm so completely into you.*

December 13

Iowa

I've been with the Kerry campaign in Iowa for two days now. I'm pretending to be "embedded." When you're embedded in the campaign, they arrange for your meals, transportation, rooms, and airfare — but they also take your credit-card number and bill you for everything. The only way I could afford it would be to tell MasterCard that my card was stolen.

The big news today is that Saddam Hussein has been captured. I imagine he'll be hauled out wearing a diaper and a bonnet while Bush sneers, "Who's the big, bad dictator now?" Kerry is downstairs giving a press conference. You just know that Kerry is going to grab for the middle and say that, although Saddam's capture is good news, it doesn't mean that we should be acting alone in Iraq.

Today I rode on the official Kerry campaign bus. First we went to a hospital, where Kerry unveiled his healthcare plan before a hundred people. Thirty of those hundred were from the bus, and many of the others looked like hospital workers with nothing better to do. Then we went to a firemen's union

hall, where the buffet table was loaded with seven-layer salad, sandwiches, baked beans, and free beer.

"We're not supposed to eat from the buffet," Nedra Pickler of the Associated Press told me. "You don't want to be compromised."

"I don't mind being compromised," I said, loading up my plate. "I like being compromised. I'm a compromiseaholic."

I like John Kerry, though I didn't want to. It's hard not to like someone you've met face to face, because most people are decent underneath it all. But then I see Kerry on TV, and I dislike him all over again. One day he implies that, if he were president, we wouldn't be in Iraq. The next day he suggests that if he were president, we might have caught Saddam earlier. And he never finishes a speech without taking some dig at Howard Dean. You can feel the room heating up as he talks about Bush: how the president tricked him and other senators into voting to authorize force in Iraq by promising to include other nations and the UN. But then Kerry will finish with "And Howard Dean was also in favor of going to Iraq." And the air goes out of the room.

I want to shake him and say, "Hey, man, you're acting like a jealous lover. Be your own man, for Christ's sake. You're running for president, not for governor of Vermont."

But Kerry is stuck. He just can't believe that little bastard from Vermont is going to get the nomination. Kerry was the chosen one. He was presumptive. Now he's requesting an endorsement from the *Boston Globe*, his hometown newspaper. And they may not give it to him.

December 15

The Real Deal Express has been replaced by the Death Bus: a slow ride across the frozen plain, the windows slick with the Iowa winter, the driver's bony fingers curled around the steering wheel. A thin band of light from the streetlamps illuminates the candidate's suit coat as he jokes with his supporters. They ask him about his service in Vietnam, what he eats for breakfast, how he keeps going, day in, day out. (None of them completes the thought: "When your campaign is dead as hell.")

Kerry has the record: He fought in Vietnam, was a hero, and then came back to oppose the war. He led the investigation into the Iran-Contra affair, led the movement to normalize relations with Vietnam, and exposed the CIA's involvement in drug trafficking and its connection to Panamanian dictator Manuel Noriega. He did all the right things, with diplomacy, and then he voted in favor of a resolution authorizing troops in Iraq.

December 19

I've made arrangements to join back up with the Howard Dean campaign. I've been apprised that I won't actually be on the bus with Dean. I'll be in a press van that trails behind the campaign bus. Dean is big-time now. I've always thought of Dean as a compromise candidate, but since I'm over thirty, I'm willing to compromise. If I weren't willing to compromise,



I would probably vote for Dennis Kucinich.

To understand Dennis Kucinich, you have to know about Cleveland. Several decades ago, the city was trying to privatize its electric utilities. Kucinich ran for mayor on a platform of keeping the electric company public, which would save the taxpayers money. He was twenty-six years old, and he won.

But then the big boys stepped in and said he had to privatize the electrical system or they were going to cancel Cleveland's credit. Imagine: a city with no credit. Everyone in both parties told him he had no choice. But he held his ground. It was political suicide. The banks canceled Cleveland's credit, and for the remainder of his term Kucinich had to run the city on a cash basis. Cleveland held on to its electric utility, but Kucinich wouldn't be able to get elected again for fifteen years.

"Those were hard years," Kucinich says, and you can tell he means it. All he wanted in life was to hold public office.

Fifteen years later Cleveland's municipal electric utility was a success story. Kucinich was vindicated. He won a seat in Congress that he still holds today.

I met Kucinich yesterday at Cornell College, outside of Iowa City. The peace walkers were there, five people who are walking across the country in support of his candidacy. One of them, an emaciated young man with a beard, gave a short speech about hope and stars and enlightenment. There were close to a hundred people in attendance. A woman screamed from the balcony about immigrants' rights and clapped loudly when Kucinich repeated her position with a little more restraint.

I was surprised there were no other members of the press traveling with Kucinich. ABC apparently pulled its full-time reporter after Kucinich chastised Ted Koppel at the debate in Durham, New Hampshire. (He told him to stop focusing on money and polls and start focusing on the issues.) I climbed into the van with Kucinich, and we went from Mount Vernon to Moline to Davenport to some factory on the edge of a cornfield where they build municipal-vehicle tracking systems, whatever those are. Then it was on to a bookstore, a library, and finally a house party where a young girl played the accordion and sixty people sang "The Dennis Kucinich Polka."

Kucinich can give a speech off the cuff with the timing

of a spoken-word poet. He's got nothing to lose from working without a script because the mainstream media have already written him off. Why cover a candidate who's going to lose? Kucinich will tell you that's a self-fulfilling prophecy, and maybe it is, but it doesn't give him any more of a chance. Kucinich refers to the media as the "Great Mentioner," and you can tell it personally offends him that he's not mentioned. I feel the same way when newspapers don't review my books. There's nothing worse than being ignored.

At one point during the day, a man asked Kucinich about his policy for drug addicts and then interrupted Dennis's answer with remarks like "That's me" and "You got that right." This is always a problem for far-left candidates: people show up at their events who are crazy, lonely, and starved for attention. Drug addicts, witches, congressional candidates — they all want to talk about their own issues. And because the leftists are so afraid to offend, nobody says, "Hey, shut the fuck up, you crazy bastard." You can bet that's what someone would say at a Bush rally — or at a John Edwards rally, for that matter. Jennifer Palmieri, Edwards's press secretary, would throw a full-body tackle on the junkie before the networks could reposition their cameras. And everyone would pretend nothing had happened.

On the issues, Kucinich is the only candidate (besides Carol Moseley Braun and Al Sharpton) who's in favor of universal healthcare, as opposed to universal health *insurance* — an important distinction. I mean, why give all this money to the insurance companies? How do insurance companies make a profit? By not providing healthcare. And Kucinich is also the only candidate suggesting we leave Iraq within ninety days.

I definitely had a homoerotic moment with Kucinich last night in the van. As I said, there was no one else traveling with his campaign. (Meanwhile, all the major news outlets have assigned ten press people to cover John Kerry, who's polling even with Kucinich in many states.) I spent ten hours sitting next to Kucinich in the van. If you want to get to know a candidate, that's the way to do it, with your knees touching. At first we were a little cold toward each other. After all, I'd once called him a "kook" in print and made fun of his veganism. Ironically enough, our moment of connection came during a conversation about diets. I told him I drank too much coffee and

had been eating a hamburger a day for the last week. He said he used to drink six cans of Pepsi a day, but then he became a vegan to impress a girl.

"I do things to impress girls, too!" I said.

At the next-to-last stop of the day, one of his supporters showed up with a home-cooked vegan meal, which Kucinich insisted on splitting with me. It was late, and I was tired and feeling a little emotional after listening to his stump speech about peace and love all day. While forking sweet potatoes onto my plate, Dennis talked about transcendent moments. "Your whole life can change in one moment," he said. "That's what people are looking for. They spend their entire lives searching for that." I didn't realize how dehydrated I was until he handed me a bottle of spring water. The stars outside were so brilliant it looked as if the night sky might explode. I thought I would cry. He said he was running for president because of the war, because war is wrong. "We need to think about reparations for all the innocent victims."

I thought, *Look at the telephone lines between Des Moines and Davenport. Look at America. Just look at it. Would we shed an American tear for the innocent victims of the bombings? When the collateral damage is counted, will it touch our patriotic hearts? Radio Iowa, can you hear me?*

It was the best food I'd ever eaten. By the time Dennis was splitting his vegan apple pie with me, we were friends.

"You're more in touch with your humanity than the other journalists," he said.

He had no idea.

I won't lie and say we didn't hug in the lobby of the hotel. We did. And I realized that I had been compromised. Eating from the Kerry buffet was nothing. Kucinich split his meal with me. I loved the guy.

But not in my most deluded moments did I think he could win.

(end of excerpt)



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