

# **Campaign Journal**

**Rachel Mason**

**The John Edwards fundraiser is being held at the Attitash Grand Summit Hotel in Bartlett, New Hampshire.** This is my first real political event. The Carroll County Democrats are hosting a dinner in this rustic, newly constructed ski lodge of a building where the service people are white. The off-season deadness of the empty hallways makes the hotel feel ominous. The writer Will Blythe is covering the campaign and has invited me along to make drawings for his story.

The Democratic Party members who have come out are a jovial group. They seem aware of their impact on politics in New Hampshire. After a half hour of drinks, they are ushered into the main dining room. Violets and mini-American flags stick out



of centerpieces. In the middle of the room there is a makeshift stage with an American flag and a microphone stand, cordoned off like a boxing rink by velvet ropes.

A bald jowly man with a pair of oversized reading glasses held on by a neck strap introduces a Grover Cleveland impersonator who turns out to be George Cleveland, the actual great-grandson of the former president.

When Senator Edwards enters the room there is the instant buzz of his celebrity. He steps into the rink and spins around and around holding the microphone while his California hair gently rises and falls.



At the end of his speech he goes from person to person shaking hands and making eye contact. His aides follow closely on either side. They seem to be in their early twenties, wearing khaki slacks, navy blue jackets and

very serious expressions. As they whisper in his ear, I imagine they are giving him the background information on each person he is about to meet.

I introduce myself to the heir and impersonator of President Cleveland to tell him that I went to Grover Cleveland High School in Reseda, California. He has never heard of it.

It turns out there is another one of President Cleveland's grandsons in the room. He is much older than the impersonator and happens to be seated at the same table but they don't seem to acknowledge one another. The older grandson has such intense eyes they appear to shoot blue fire straight out of their sockets, like the pipes of a Bunson burner. He tells me that a scandalous

affair led to the great age gap between them.

Edwards says, " We need to get our country to be patriotic about something other than war."

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**At the "Take Back America" Forum in Washington, D.C. Governor Bill Richardson reaches into the audience to shake hands and someone asks for an autograph.**



I realize that I have my pen and sketchbook with me. Impulsively, I hold out the page with a sketch I had made of him and he signs it.

I am not sure what has led me to do this. I want him to see the picture I made of him and I want him to sign it. His signature on my drawing makes our meeting in this seemingly fictional world real.

I show drawings to other candidates.

Senator Barack Obama says, "Hey, you've got talent. You've got skill and thanks for not making my ears big!"

I run to catch Dennis Kucinich in the hallway walking briskly with his aides on either side. I show him the sketch but he continues past me. Suddenly, he stops, turns around and walks back. He takes my pen and silently signs his name, drawing a peace sign under his signature. It doesn't turn out right. It looks like a pie chart divided into three. He re-works it and then outlines it several times but it still looks wrong. His aides seem to get frustrated at how long it takes for him to get it right.

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**Missiles and tanks blend with satellite dishes and media vans sprouting antennae on the great lawn of the Citadel in South Carolina.**

Military personnel, Secret Servicemen and camera crews mill around. Bloggers and local TV anchors sit on benches with their cameras trained on themselves talking into their laptops amid the decommissioned military equipment-turned lawn sculpture.

\* \* \*

When the cue is given, I go with the other photographers to have our cameras inspected by bomb-sniffing dogs before we go in to do the “spray,” the exclusive moment we have to shoot the candidates. The photographers are dressed in black with gear hanging off their necks like great kingly jewels.

\* \* \*

We wait at the base of the stage for the candidates to step from the wings. Now they are before us, in precise television choreography. For two minutes, we stand silently face to face. The audience is behind us. The only sound in the room is the cameras clicking. The candidates silently point, wave and smile. They shake hands, pat backs, shift their weight and pretend to laugh.



I have the feeling that I'm making eye-contact with Mike Gravel. He points, winks and waves. I wonder if this is what it's like when you see them waving and pointing at people from the

stage. Are they really waving to someone they know? I almost can't help thinking he must recognize me because he's looking right at me and smiling so big, but where would he know me from?

\* \* \*



In the spin room, Joe Biden seems agitated. He snaps at the young man who is trying to put the wire earpiece in his ear, "Get the goddamn thing in there already!!" When the spiral device is installed, he steps up onto the platform where a tripod and lights are

aimed at him. He stands still, eye to eye with the square lens until given the cue. Then his silhouette is instantly animated like a marionette, pointing up and down, shaking his fists. His silver hair is combed slick back but at the base of his neck, unfurling over his collar an unkempt fringe appears to rebel against it.

When he steps down, I'd like to meet him, but I am afraid it might aggravate him. So I miss my chance and he is gone.

\* \* \*

**I am in the overflow room at the Council on Foreign Relations in New York.**

The journalists who don't make it onto the main list are excluded from the room where the press conference is held and are moved into a parlor with windows that look out onto 68<sup>th</sup> Street and Park Avenue. We watch John Edwards through a televised feed at the head of the room. The flat screen monitor is framed by luxuriously long drapes. Above it hangs a chandelier.

Journalists scattered around linen-covered tables begin to fall asleep. Three reporters from a Japanese news team are seated to my right. They manage to stay focused for most of the candidate's speech but eventually their pens drop and even they slump down in their chairs.



While everyone is dozing, I walk through the building. I take pictures of the rooms in this famous house, home to the ancestral elite of New York. The parlor, the library and the dining room are furnished in dark woods. Before the main corridor

that leads to the Peterson Hall-the room where the candidate is speaking- there are black and white photographs of historical figures who had previously walked through these very halls-- Yassir Arafat, Fidel Castro, Richard Nixon. I photograph these photographs.

\* \* \*



**At the CNN Republican debate in New Hampshire, I am in the room with photographers.**

I have my big camera with me. It used to be my Dad's. Its small compared to the ones the professionals have with their amazingly long lenses.

We are standing at the front of the stage. Rudolph Giuliani and John McCain are across from me. I take pictures of the nine candidates squished together

in a tight line. Then I stop and look at them directly. I may never see them again like this.

I stop crouching and the camerawoman next to me whispers, "Get down, you're in my shot!" I realize that I am not meant for

this job, because I don't care about taking a good picture and I hate being in this throng of elbowing assholes. I tell her that I don't care about the picture. She looks at me and then says, "Well, you should."

\* \* \*

**After waiting in a long line in the rain, I am seated in the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem** between a young professional white guy and a friendly, middle-aged black woman who is giggling and naming dignitaries as they take their seats, saying "Oh, look who's here." She tells me she is a long time member of the church and is involved in civic and church activities in Harlem.

This is called a "homecoming event." It is the week of Hillary's 60<sup>th</sup> birthday and the choir sings Happy Birthday. The event is hosted by Bill Clinton and Charles Rangel, the Democratic Chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee.

Bill Clinton is introduced as "the last legitimately elected President of the United States." He stands at the pulpit and says, "Rangel did everything but pass the plate!" He acknowledges nearly every elected official in attendance. When he misses one, the name is thrown out to him. "Meeks," he says. "I can't ignore him. He even supported my trade policy."

The New York City politicians give short punchy speeches. Bronx Borough president Adolfo Carrion reminds the audience that even though the gathering is for Hillary, it is important to note that a black man is also running for president. There is applause for Barack Obama. A black woman seated nearby turns to her sons and whispers loudly, "Don't clap, don't clap!"

I am trying to draw the pose that the Clintons strike on the stage. They sit with their legs crossed toward each other, their feet almost touching. She wears dainty pointed heels, he all-American black loafers. His jacket is a bright royal blue and hers is turquoise.

When the speeches end, the choir sings and the crowd surges forward to meet the candidate and her husband. I have a drawing of Hillary ready in my hands. Now she is in front of me. She is petite. I am looking down at her.

This perspective changes everything. The drawing that I hope allows me a moment of contact now seems like an imposition. As part of the mob engulfing her, I am no different from anyone else shoving something in her face. A personal encounter that makes us both real people can't possibly happen here.



\* \* \*

**Barack Obama's event in New York is on the same night as John Edwards'.** We take a cab from one to the next and walk into a scene that looks like a corporate singles party. Everyone is in casual business attire and seems to have a fraternal affiliation. The main act is Ben Harper. A Statue of Liberty is positioned at the front of the stage. The backdrop is an American flag.



Mr. Obama enters and gives Mr. Harper a fratty hug and a macho two-handclasp shake. The candidate continually points to the Statue of Liberty which is near him--so close, in fact, that he and the statue are the same size. His voice sounds beautiful in the room.

At one point during the speech, I turn around and see several young couples making out. I wonder if they just met at this campaign event.

Afterwards, I go to have a closer look at the Statue of Liberty and ask Obama's staff where they found it.

"A prop shop," I am told.

You can see the faux bronzing clearly and I understand now why it's so out of scale -- the Statue is supposed to be placed in the background.

Thank you:

Inger Lise-McMilan, Will Blythe,  
Mom, Dad, John Knuth, J. Reto, Marcia Aerni,  
all the 2008 Presidential Candidates

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