

The Rove Reversal

by J.M. Kearns

A dispatch from the satirical trenches offers a chilling new theory of how we got where we are today.¹

Part 1: Two Operatives Seize the Road: July 5th, 2008

As he pulled out of the last rest stop before Waco, his rental car full of Al Gore's overpriced gas, Dick Cheney felt a cold shiver somewhere near his pacemaker. Dubya was just a few miles ahead, and soon the plan would be in motion. The weirdest plan Cheney had ever signed on to.

I can still change my mind, he muttered. He liked to think of himself as the Terminator ever since they'd installed the device — sometimes he even fantasized that they'd given him a stainless steel heart — but at this moment fear was seeping into him. He turned up the oldies station. The Monkees were rocking the dry Texas morning, and he replaced the Mickey Dolenz vocal with his own. "Take the last train to Waco," he sang quietly. A guy who was almost Vice President shouldn't sing too loud.

Interstate 35 slouched into Waco, and it was Outskirts USA. The big chains — Home Depot, McDonald's, Wal-Mart — made Cheney feel like there was hope. The corporations stood strong, defending the American landscape against the unplanned and the unexpected. They were there to back him up, and they would still be there when this operation was complete.

He looked at the map Lynne had printed for him yesterday in Georgetown. His turnoff was Highway 396. It had been hard to say goodbye to her, on July 4 of all days. He couldn't tell her why he was going; all he could say was, "I *will* see you again." She had caught something in those words — his face, as always, gave nothing away — and had started to cry.

Now Cheney saw 396, leading into Beverly Hills. Trust Dubya. First he loses his ranch in a bitter divorce, and then he ends up in Beverly Hills, *Waco*. Cheney followed the street names, and suddenly the house was right in front of him, a dirty, vinyl-sided bungalow with a Winnebago in the driveway. George had said he was about to go on a trip, and Cheney had said, "Don't. Wait till I get there."

If he calls me Quasimodo, I'll blast that grin right off his face. Cheney found Bush's nicknames more than annoying, especially that one. He hadn't brought much on this trip — if there ever was a case of "you can't take it with you," this was it — but he did have his shotgun in the trunk.

As he got out of his car and kicked aside some spent firecrackers, a surly honk came from the Winnebago. He could see a frowning redhead inside, her face as ruddy as her hair. He knocked on the front door of the house, and it opened right away — Dubya in a Stars and Stripes Speedo and flip-flops, like another piece of debris from Independence Day. He looked a little paunchy and totally unready for a road trip.

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“Big Time,” Bush said, using one of his better nicknames. “Darn AC is on the fritz. C’mon in.”

He looked Cheney over. “Nice suit. That lobbying workin’ for you?” Then the light caught Cheney’s face, and the Bush grin faded. “Boy, that guy did a number on you! I thought he only got your arm. I may have to call you the Phantom now. Opera Guy.”

“That won’t be necessary,” Cheney said. His friend Harry Whittington had hit him instead of a quail. Corrective surgery was planned, but for now he had a nasty pellet tattoo on the left side of his face, and Harry was doing time. Alcohol had been involved, and Cheney regretted his pal’s plight, but he couldn’t very well intercede. Justice had to be done.

“Don’t you have a cleaning lady?” Cheney said.

“Red doesn’t believe in that.”

“Then she better do the cleaning herself.”

“She’s been on strike. Because of me cancelling our trip. We were supposed to be on the way to Branson today.”

Cheney stared at Bush until he looked away. “That dog won’t hunt. Where is your gear? I need you ready to go now.”

“I *am* ready. Keep your pantyhose on.”

Bush went upstairs, and Cheney waited in the hall.

A TV blared in the living room, Katie Couric interviewing President Gore and the First Lady. A “special interview” — one of those fawning displays of reverence the liberals love. Couric peered at Gore, her eyes like coins. “As we move into the last July of your second term, I want to look back at how it all started — your victory in 2000,” she said. “It’s been called a landslide. Both houses of Congress, too. What was the key?”

“Well, there were many.” Gore turned to Tipper, and she squeezed his hand.

Cheney felt a surge in his gullet. “But I have to say that it didn’t hurt to have one of the best campaigners in modern history in my corner: a guy named Bill Clinton.”

Couric nodded and said, “Then there was stopping the 8/11 plot, which I’ll get to in part two of our interview, to be aired tomorrow. You’ve expressed your wish to set the record straight, once and for all. For me, Mr. President, the next big moment — the one that really set the tone for your first term — was your State of the Union address in 2002, now called the Pound of Prevention speech. How did that come about?”

To Cheney’s annoyance, Gore beamed broadly. “You know, Katie, it was my daughter Kristin who came up with that phrase. After we arrested the would-be hijackers on 8/11, and then processed all the information that came with them, I had a light bulb moment when I realized that the old adage is all too true in our time: *an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.*”

“It’s cheaper to prevent something than to deal with it after it happens,” Couric said in her eager student manner.

“Exactly . . . and if you let it happen, it may be too late, as with global warming. What I realized was that we should be in the *prevention* business, the White House and Congress. Our country was on a whole bunch of slippery slopes, heading toward disasters that would be very difficult and expensive to reverse. We were discussing this at dinner one night when Kristin said, ‘What we need is a *pound* of prevention.’ And there it was, the banner for our first term.”

“So out of that came the US Infrastructure Act and the CO₂ Act . . . ”

“And the Honest Accounting Law. That was our trifecta.”

“Honest accounting meant that the Social Security obligations had to be counted?”

“Yes, Katie, so we could see how deep a hole we were digging. It was pretty deep. But our continued fiscal prosperity has enabled us to climb out. Social Security will be solvent by 2015.”

“You’ve been called a ‘tax and spend’ liberal, Mr. President. But your answer has been, better than a ‘don’t tax and spend anyway’ conservative.”

Gore chuckled and so did Tipper. Cheney considered the impact a shotgun blast would have on the TV.

“I would describe some *Republicans* that way, Katie. I don’t think true conservatives want fiscal irresponsibility any more than liberals do. The bipartisan goal should be to pay as we go, and the tax playing field should not favour the rich. We couldn’t have reduced the debt if we had tax cuts for the wealthy.”

“I can’t find my fricking wallet,” Bush said. He was back, carrying a tote bag and sporting acceptable casualwear.

“Not good,” Cheney said.

“Red always helps me find things.”

“Ask her.”

“She won’t come out of the Winnebago. She’s too mad at me for cancelling Branson. I don’t know why this is so important, why we have to do this *now*.”

“I told you, Karl is getting out of prison today. We have a meeting with him tomorrow in LA.”

Bush opened the side door. “Hey, Shania,” he yelled across the driveway. “Do you know where my wallet is?”

“Where you left it,” came the faint answer.

“Let me go talk to her,” Bush said.

After ten minutes he reappeared, looking sheepish. “She told me where it is, but I had to say she can go with us.”

“That’s not possible. You have to say goodbye to her.” Cheney put a hand on Bush’s shoulder. “For good.”

“What do you mean?”

“This is the last you’re ever going to see of her.”

“Wait, can we get on US-84?” Bush said from the passenger seat. “I know an ice cream place on the way to Crawford. Little side trip, heh-heh.”

“We need to go north to Oklahoma.”

“Come on, Opera Guy, can’t we just take a *look* at the ranch? Gonna buy it back some day. Red and I cruise it sometimes. It would be cool to see it with you.”

“We can do that another time. We will do that. We’ll do it a lot.”

“We will?”

“Right now we need to get to Los Angeles.”

Bush looked all of ten years old as he sneered at Cheney. “Well, if you want to get to Angeltown, you might do better goin’ south,” Bush said. “Pesky little place called Austin. Gets you to I-10.”

“Except I want I-40. You can do Texas on your own time.”

Cheney awoke in the passenger seat, somewhere west of Oklahoma City. Bush was at the wheel, fussing with the radio instead of watching the road. Not that there was much to see, just yellow land and fences in the afternoon haze.

“This is ridiculous!” Bush said. “I just listened to the whole darn Top Ten Country Countdown and they didn’t play Small & Poor. They’re number one in Waco. This sucks.”

“What is the song?”

“I don’t know, some title it’s called by. It’s about Jesus and the oil well. Great tune — Red loves it, too. What the heck happened to Clear Channel?”

Cheney sighed heavily. “George, every region is different now. They broke up the ownership. Reversed all the progress we’d made since ‘94. They really bunged things up, just threw consistency out the window.”

“What, the Bore did that?”

“Congress did it. The Democrats. The Media Diversity Act of 2007. Gore was only too happy to sign it. That was just last year — you don’t follow this stuff?”

“Hey, Chene, I’m not really into all this policy wank stuff. I just listen to my tunes.”

“Well, let’s find some talk radio. This fellow can’t sing.”

“Uh, *helloooo*? This is Tim and effing Faith!”

Cheney started punching the scan button and found the new guy with the high voice, saying: “So the man who invented the Internet now knows all about skyscrapers. We’ll be asking a real architect just how well Mr. Gore’s theory stands up.” The sound of drums, a patriotic power-chord riff, and a jingle that went “Rolf Robinger shoots from the hip.”

“Rolf Robinger misses,” Bush said.

“Shut up, George. Listen to what he’s saying.”

The broadcast continued. “Professor Steer, you are a masters in graphic design at Raiment College. What do you say about a Trade Center being brought down by a jet plane? Is that as crazy as it sounds?”

“Rolf, it is worse than crazy. It is simply not factual. I have run the numbers, and you can make a hole in the side of a building, but that won’t even begin to touch its structure.”

“This is what I mean, Doctor. This is what these liberals like to do. Scare tactics — isn’t that what it is?”

“You know, Rolf, it’s irresponsible. Gore has America convinced that he somehow stopped some kind of holocaust or something. You have to look at the research, which the liberals don’t like to do. The Twin Towers were specifically designed to withstand the impact of a jet plane.”

“It’s another Gore Whopper. This guy should own Burger King!”

“Gore never said that, did he?” Bush said. “That the tower definitely would’ve come down. I watched that stuff.”

“He implied it,” Cheney said.

“I miss Rush,” Bush said. “You can tell this guy is making it up. With Rush you couldn’t tell. Man, I wish he hadn’t OD’d. Can we please go back to music?”

“This guy is making sense if you would pay attention.”

Cheney turned it up.

“Then we’ve got the so-called *hijackers*. They don’t even know how many there were. They arrested, what, fourteen of them on 8/11? Eleven in Florida, three in Newark. But they say there were nineteen, or they say twenty. They can’t even agree with themselves. And how do these guys overpower a plane? With box cutters?”

“Right, Rolf, I’m gonna let some Arab have my plane because he shows me a box cutter.”

Suddenly Bush turned off the radio. Cheney reached for the knob, then saw tears in Bush’s blue eyes.

“I don’t like this, Dick. I don’t like you acting like you’re the decider. I’m the one who’s the ex-governor of Texas.”

“George, I’m sorry. I get a little pushy with the radio sometimes.”

Cheney laughed and patted Bush’s arm. “Look, why don’t you pull off at the next exit. I think we both need some food if we’re going to drive all night.”

Their waitress was a pretty brunette, built kind of like Laura. She was flashing cleavage at Bush, and that seemed to cheer him up. “Would you like that coffee now sir, or with your bison burger?”

“Well, ma’am, I reckon I would like it whenever you’re able to visit us boys again — right, Dick?”

“Absolutely. Or now would be good.”

When she was gone, Cheney spoke gently to his friend. “George, how serious are you about this woman, Red? Shania?”

“Oh, I don’t know. I’m kinda partial to her. I met her at the law firm that handled the divorce. She was a receptionist. She seemed to think I was savageable.”

“Savageable?”

“You know, worth something. She was my only good news for a while there.”

“You do miss Laura, though?”

“Sure. I mean, who wouldn’t?”

“So if you could be back with Laura, that would be good?”

“Not gonna happen — oh, thank you ma’am, and can we get more creamers? Love that cream!”

“Damn,” Cheney said. “Doesn’t anybody watch Fox News anymore?” Richard Clarke was on *Larry King*, and Cheney was up to here with this crap.

They munched on their burgers as Clarke pontificated.

“As the 2008 election looms, the Republicans are disputing the whole 8/11 megillah,” King said. “You’re the czar — that’s why my listeners want to hear from you. Neil from Wisconsin says, ‘I know you caught ‘em, but how did you do it?’”

“Larry, it wasn’t a blinding light on the road to Damascus. It was a bunch of people at a table, every week, starting in March 2001. We were there because Gore did what any good president would do if he thought his country was in danger. He led. His Commission on Aviation Safety in 1997 had called for better sharing of information among the agencies. So he sat us down together, the Anti-Terrorist Trust, we called

ourselves: the CIA, FBI, INS, FAA, and me. He wanted to hear us talk to each other. Unusual. But enlightening.”

“So, you talked — no Damascus.”

“Right. You know the idea of planes as weapons came up early on, the Bojinka Plot thing, and we sort of dismissed it as wild. But the President kept saying no idea is too stupid, tell me everything that could be relevant, and then one day we hear that for years there has been noise about flight schools in Arizona, Islamic guys learning to fly, could they be hijackers. Larry, it sounds overly simple, but the President said, *Why does a hijacker need to fly a plane?* It all came down to that.”

“Why does he?” Larry King said.

“He doesn’t. A traditional hijacker wants the pilots to take him somewhere; he has a bargain to strike. The only reason he would need to fly the plane himself is if he wanted to do something the pilot would refuse to do, even under threat of death.”

“Fly into a building.”

“Fly into a building. Not your average jet pilot’s favourite activity.”

Chortling, King broke for commercials. Toyota with its hydrogen fuel cell car, the dangers of four-hour erections.

Then Clarke was haranguing again. “We were looking at a lot of scenarios that spring, Larry. There were dire warnings about an attack on US soil from our own guys and from our allies, Germany and England. We were looking at a whole bunch of possibilities: weapons, chemical, even nuclear. But this one, planes into buildings, just crept up on us. We kept coming back to it. For one thing, it was so low budget. It isn’t high tech. Once you talk about it, it gets real — real scary. So we started searching US flight schools for Islamic radicals possibly linked to al Qaeda. It was shocking what came up, when the CIA and the FBI got their lists of names together.”

“Like what have we here,” King said.

“The months of June and July 2001 were crazy. We hit the motherlode: a veritable vipers’ nest in the Miami area, twelve would-be hijackers led by Mohamed Atta, whom we’d been on for years and had lost track of. They were all clustered around Hollywood, Florida. We were ready to pounce. Then Atta flew to Newark in August and joined two other suspects — Hazmi and, uh, Hanjour — and they *bought airline tickets.*”

“Do you ever wish you had just waited and caught them in the act?” King said.

“Would have avoided a lot of controversy, no?”

Bush said he wanted to order pie — hell, he looked like he wanted to stay overnight with their waitress — but Cheney was seized by a cold anger that made this mission seem like the sanest thing he’d ever undertaken. It wasn’t the Gore administration’s bullcrap boasting about stopping some bogus tragedy, or its communistic rerouting of money from the achievers to the non-achievers. What really frosted Cheney was Gore’s appalling failure to make war on any foreign country. Okay, he’d taken out the Taliban, but they weren’t really a country. Iraq was still sitting there like a piece of ripe fruit, and Gore had listened to the weapons inspectors. Halliburton stock was in the toilet.

Cheney dragged Bush out into the night and took the wheel.

PART 2: The Cell Takes Action

Karl Rove strides into Junior's Deli on Westwood Boulevard, his forehead gleaming like it's been polished in a car wash.

"Turdblossom, you maniac, you look good," Bush says.

"You look awful," Rove says.

"Cheney made me drive the whole way," Bush says.

"Not true," Cheney says.

They look at menus. "Have the People's Choice triple-decker sandwich," Rove says. "Guy in prison recommends it."

"Your new best friend?" Bush says.

"Actually yes. It wasn't so kind and gentle in there. This guy took care of me. Jewish accountant, but he knew martial arts."

"Where were you, again, Karl?"

"Uh, you know, in Merced County."

"That wasn't what I heard," Bush says. "I heard another name, right Karl?"

"Okay, it was called Atwater. Get over it."

Bush cackles. "Talk about being hosted by your own retard!"

"Hey, those bastards framed me," Rove says. "I was innocent, boys. You know that."

Cheney says, "Okay, Karl, do you want to fill us in on this operation?"

"Gentlemen," Rove says, "you know that feeling when somebody has you beat fair and square, but you want to win anyway? That is what we're going to do — and the best thing is, nobody is going to be the wiser."

"The Man with the Plan rides again," Bush says.

"That's right. That is me. And the best way to explain this plan is to tell you how we came up with it. When you're in stir, you get to talking about strange things. One day my accountant friend told me about a big-time atomic scientist, name of Dr. Lieserl. Used to be at UCLA, then branched out."

"Did he branch Davidian?" Bush says.

"No, George, that would be you. Anyway, this doctor has come up with something a little different. It isn't time travel. It's how to change the past."

No one says anything for a beat. Then Bush cracks up. "Okay, guys, I get it. Surprise party. My birthday is today!"

"Oh . . . right, July 6th," Cheney says. "No, that's not it."

There's an awkward silence.

"But we do have a very good present for you, George," Rove says. "Look, I don't have the theory down perfectly, but here goes. You know how word processing works. You don't have to retype the document like in the old days when my mom typed. You just go in and change it, *then* you print it and it's right. Well, Dr. Lieserl came up with word *pre*cessing. He said the whole 'change the past' thing was too big to tackle. They had to find a piece of it, a manageable piece. Otherwise known as a document."

"What document are we talking about?" Bush says. "I'm not with you here."

“I’ll get to that,” Rove says. “What they came up with — and this happens to be the biggest thing since relativity, my friends — is what if we just go back and change one document, and everything else has to adjust to that?”

“This recessing,” Bush says. “Has it ever been tried?”

“No, George, it’s word *precessing*, with a *p*. It actually was tried, once. They went back and altered an order form, and a chair suddenly changed from blue to red. It worked. Anyway, here’s the takeaway. You go back and you change what one document said. To do this, you have to have the actual surviving document in your hands, not a copy. Then the whole history around that document, say a letter, changes. It’s *as if the letter had always read the way you make it read*. Do you see? And the whole world jumps into agreement with the letter.”

“Wait a minute,” Bush says. “You’re talking about changing the whole world?”

“Some of it,” Rove says. “The relevant parts.”

“What if I kind of like the world I’m in?” Bush says.

“Do you want to be President of the United States?” Cheney says.

“I don’t know.”

“Do you want to beat Gore in 2000?”

“In 2000? Eight years ago?”

“Yeah, that’s what we’re talking about here,” Cheney says.

“This is a little freaky, boys. I’m gonna wake up and find myself in a different world?”

“No, Governor, that’s not exactly it,” says an angular figure who slips into the booth beside Rove. “You’ll *be* in a different world but you’ll never know you were in this world!”

“Gentlemen, I give you Dr. Lieserl,” Rove says.

“Let me put it to you this way,” Lieserl says. “In our test, we ordered a blue chair, it came, we kept it in a glass booth. Then we precessed the order form and changed blue to red. The thing is, before we ordered the first chair we wrote notes to ourselves telling ourselves the whole plan. The next thing, we were in the office and the chair in the booth was red. And thanks to the notes, we knew the experiment had worked.”

“We can’t do that this time,” Cheney says.

“No, Mr. Cheney. No notes this time. So we’ll just create a different past and then inherit it. We won’t know we changed it. But it’ll be a better past — and present.”

“It’s genius,” Rove says. “Fabuloso. And now back to our story. We brainstormed — by phone and computer. Some people thought we could just change a headline in a newspaper, make it say Bush won . . . but that turns out to violate — what was it, Doctor?”

“The Event Load. It would be too great. When too many contemporaneous events have to change to agree with the document. It takes too much energy: we just can’t budge the document. You have to bite off something smaller.”

“Right,” Rove says, “we had to start with something more localized. And this is what I laid out. To stop Gore, we have to injure Clinton. Hit him with a body blow he can’t recover from. He has to be too damaged to help Gore. Then Gore will lose. We thought of a million scenarios, but one of them just crept up on us. Another sex scandal. One more would have crippled him. We were almost there with Paula Jones.”

“Damn it,” Cheney says. “That effing interview is on again.”

They all look up at the TV as Katie Couric says, “Mr. President, was firing George Tenet a key to stopping the 8/11 plot?”

Gore says, “George Tenet served his country long and well. I just felt it was time for some fresh blood.”

“Wasn’t he gun shy in pursuing bin Laden under Clinton?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“All right, I think there is one thing America wants to know, the burning question, so to speak, which has flared up in the presidential debates: *would the towers have fallen?* In a new ad that appeared yesterday, the Tower Builders for Truth have stepped up and said there’s no way. That brought McCain’s polls up.”

“That issue has been blown way out of proportion. Katie, I think you know that I have never said they would have fallen. I have said they *might have*. According to the best science that I’ve seen, there are three questions, assuming the towers are hit at high speed by jets loaded with fuel.

“One, would the spray-on fireproofing have worked on the impacted floors? Two, if not — if the impacted floors burned — would those floors have held up and sustained their load? And three, if they didn’t, what happens then? Does the whole building come down? Reasonable people can disagree on this, Katie. Some experts say if the impacted floors burn long enough, they collapse and the upper floors fall, and that carries all the way down.”

“So the whole building just . . . mashes itself?”

“Something like that. Now, I don’t know if that would have happened, but in any case there would have been serious damage to four or five of our most valued buildings, possibly including the White House, and horrible casualties. The best educated guesses indicate anywhere from a thousand to several thousand innocent civilians dead.”

“So — what’s next for the Democrats?” Couric says. “They’ve been called the natural governing party of America. Do you think they’ll win in November?”

Gore chuckles. “I think the voters will support us if we keep doing a good job.” “You didn’t endorse your own Vice President, Mr. Lieberman. Were you surprised that he lost the nomination?”

“Nothing surprises me anymore in politics, Katie. But we have a very strong — not to mention historical — ticket this year.”

“What should be at the top of their to-do list?”

“Well, it’s not for me to dictate, but I do believe the next administration must pass universal health care. As you know, I’ve come around to the single-payer approach.”

“The Republicans say if that passes, the Dow could fall 10 to 20 percent. Isn’t that bad?”

“Yes it is, but that only shows that the interests of corporations are sometimes in conflict with the interests of ordinary citizens. Who do you think should win, Katie?”

“That is so much hogwash,” Cheney says. “How can he get away with that?”

“He doesn’t,” Rove says. “This telecast never takes place.”

“Okay, Karl,” Cheney says. “Let’s take my car. We have a ten-minute ride to Brentwood.”

In the car, Rove continues his story: “So, we’re sitting around and it’s down to this: where is there a document we can change and have it create a sex scandal in the Clinton White House? We spent a month puzzling over this, then one day I said, ‘If only we had a Monica Lewinsky type.’”

“Monica who?” Bush says.

“She brought down a major State politician in Sacramento,” Rove says. “In a sex scandal. Then she went on to have a career in LA as a talk radio host. And here’s the best thing: word is she *planned* the sex thing. She set out to do it, talked about it as a goal before she was even hired in the guy’s office. Apparently she has a thing for men in authority.”

“Okay, so where does that get us?” Bush says.

“Hold on,” Rove says. “Wait for it. We’re all thinking about Lewinsky and then Del Tremens pipes up: ‘Oh God, I just remembered. I was on her legal team for a while in Sacramento. *She was considered for an internship at the White House in ‘95.* She had a backer, Walter Kaye, but she got turned down. Obviously they sent her a letter. I think she said she still has it.’”

“Jesus,” Bush says.

“I started dancing around my bed,” Rove says. “We just make a small change. This time she gets accepted.”

“This is twilight zone time,” Bush says. “You’re talking about tampering with history.”

“We’re not screwing with the past,” Rove says. “We’re just correcting it. We’re making it the way it was meant to be.”

“According to who?” Bush says. “Is that our job?”

“George, you have to keep in mind that Jesus is really busy. He has a lot to worry about, gays in the military, gays getting married, immigrants invading America . . . so sometimes we have to do his worrying for him. Give him a helping hand, make things the way he wants them.”

“If you put it that way,” Bush says. “But will Bill Clinton cooperate?”

“That’s up to Bill Clinton, isn’t it?”

In the rearview mirror, Cheney sees Rove wink at Dr. Lieserl.

“Make a left here, Dick,” Rove says. “Okay, it’s this one.”

They gather on the sidewalk and Rove whispers to the team. “Look, my operative has been here before. He’s a TV journalist, doing a story on her — to help raise money for a Monica fund, spearheaded by our own Dr. Lieserl, who has also been here. It’s all legit.”

“Why does she need money?” Bush says.

“Auto accident, last year. This is her father’s house. Anyway, my guy found the rejection letter from the White House, on the wall of her bedroom — framed. Can you believe it? That’s her sarcastic sense of humour.”

“So now we take it?” Bush says.

“Hey, it’s sweeter than that. We have permission to borrow personal effects — to create video textures or whatever. Of course it’ll be hard to return, because it will never have existed!”

They go to the front door and knock. A nurse lets them in, saying, “Dr. Lieserl, I really appreciate what your committee is doing for Monica.”

Lieserl asks her to give them a minute, and she steps outside.

In the living room, a body is lying on a hospital bed in a blue dress, wires and tubes sprouting from it. Its steady breath is audible, as is its slow heartbeat on a monitor.

“Is this . . . ?” Bush says.

“This is her, in the flesh,” Rove says. “Slightly comatose.”

“I like the dress,” Bush says. “Nice buttons.”

“Excuse me, gentlemen, I forgot my cigarettes,” the nurse says. “It was one of Monica’s favourite dresses. She’s lost a little weight since the accident, so now she’s able to wear it. We try to dress her nice.” The nurse goes back outside.

“She *is* cute,” Bush says. “Curvy, too.”

“Settle down,” Cheney says. “Let’s get this done.”

At Lieserl’s facility in Encino, Rove removes the letter from the frame.

A gleaming silver machine takes up most of the room. One end of it looks like a scanner, and the lid is up. An LED display reads 5:50 p.m., July 6, 2008. There’s a red button beside the display.

“Man, this is some pricey facility,” Bush says.

“We’ve had some generous donors,” the scientist answers. “Some from your home state.”

“Does this thing use a lot of energy?” Cheney says.

“That’s an understatement. It could cause a brownout in this area.”

“There’s the chair,” Bush says.

At the far end of the room, an ordinary office chair, red in colour, sits in a glass booth.

“Let’s load the document,” Rove says. “And now, if anyone can show just cause why this thing should not be done, let him . . .”

“Karl, wait,” Cheney says. “You’re going an awful long way back, all the way to 1995, and starting history over again. Who’s to say anything will turn out the same? Who’s to say Dubya will even be *running* in 2000?”

“Unrelated events don’t change — right, Doc?” Rove says, winking again at Lieserl.

“Right, that’s it.”

“Okay, then,” Rove says. “Gentlemen, science changed a chair from blue to red. Now it is going to change a decade from blue to red.”

Cheney isn’t quite done. “Karl, there’s something more going on here. You keep winking at Lieserl, and I want to know why. Why are you so goddamn confident about this?”

“I thought you would never ask,” Rove says. “Here’s the beauty part. You get one look at the outcome without actually doing the thing, and the next time you look at it, you’ve done it. We already had the preview.”

“What? We just got the document.”

“I scoped it,” Lieserl says. “At the Lewinsky residence. You can do it remotely, for the first pass. It’s only a simulation.”

“You get a glance,” Rove says. “We saw enough to know we’re on the right track. Mucho righto.” He lets out a high-pitched giggle. “Lee Atwater never thought of this!”

“All right,” Cheney says. “Do it.”

The nurse was watching TV in the Lewinsky living room. A hard-hitting special showed both sides of the “Would the towers have fallen?” controversy.

In the bed, Monica slept on.

Then at 5:59 several things changed.

The nurse was gone.

Monica was gone.

The bed was gone. The TV was in a different corner of the room.

A news commentator was saying, “And now our perspective for today. As McCain defends the war in Iraq, it’s interesting to note that President Bush’s so-called response to the 9/11 attack has cost way over *one million times* what the attack cost al Qaeda. That’s right, 9/11 cost bin Laden \$500,000. A million times that would be \$500 billion; but the Congressional Budget Office says war expenditures will approach \$750 billion by the end of 2008.

“Too bad Iraq had nothing to do with 9/11.

“In other news, the galloping US debt is now over \$9.4 trillion; Bush arrives in Japan for the Rich Nations’ meeting, while one economist predicts a world economic meltdown before year’s end.”