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ELECTION DAY

On the afternoon of November 8, 2016, Kellyanne Conway—Donald Trump's campaign manager and a central, indeed starring, personality of Trumpworld—settled into her glass office at Trump Tower. Right up until the last weeks of the race, the Trump campaign headquarters had remained a listless place. All that seemed to distinguish it from a corporate back office were a few posters with right-wing slogans.

Conway now was in a remarkably buoyant mood considering she was about to experience a resounding if not cataclysmic defeat. Donald Trump would lose the election—of this she was sure—but he would quite possibly hold the defeat to under 6 points. That was a substantial victory. As for the looming defeat itself, she shrugged it off: it was Reince Priebus's fault, not hers.

She had spent a good part of the day calling friends and allies in the political world and blaming Priebus. Now she briefed some of the television producers and anchors with whom she'd built strong relationships—and with whom, actively interviewing in the last few weeks, she was hoping to land a permanent on-air job after the election. She'd carefully courted many of them since joining the Trump campaign in mid-August and becoming the campaign's reliably combative voice and, with her spasmodic smiles and strange combination of woundedness and imperturbability, peculiarly telegenic face.

Beyond all of the other horrible blunders of the campaign, the real problem, she said, was the devil they couldn't control: the Republican National Committee, which was run by Priebus, his sidekick, thirty-two-year-old Katie Walsh, and their flack, Sean Spicer. Instead of being all in, the RNC, ultimately the tool of the Republican establishment, had been hedging its bets ever since Trump won the nomination in early summer. When Trump needed the push, the push just wasn't there.

That was the first part of Conway's spin. The other part was that despite everything, the campaign had really clawed its way back from the abyss. A severely underresourced team with, practically speaking, the worst candidate in modern political history—Conway offered either an eye-rolling pantomime whenever Trump's name was mentioned, or a

dead stare—had actually done extraordinarily well. Conway, who had never been involved in a national campaign, and who, before Trump, ran a small-time, down-ballot polling firm, understood full well that, post-campaign, she would now be one of the leading conservative voices on cable news.

In fact, one of the Trump campaign pollsters, John McLaughlin, had begun to suggest within the past week or so that some key state numbers, heretofore dismal, might actually be changing to Trump's advantage. But neither Conway nor Trump himself nor his son-in-law Jared Kushner—the effective head of the campaign, or the designated family monitor of it—wavered in their certainty: their unexpected adventure would soon be over.

Only Steve Bannon, in his odd-man view, insisted the numbers would break in their favor. But this being Bannon's view—crazy Steve—it was quite the opposite of being a reassuring one.

Almost everybody in the campaign, still an extremely small outfit, thought of themselves as a clear-eyed team, as realistic about their prospects as perhaps any in politics. The unspoken agreement among them: not only would Donald Trump *not* be president, he should probably not be. Conveniently, the former conviction meant nobody had to deal with the latter issue.

As the campaign came to an end, Trump himself was sanguine. He had survived the release of the Billy Bush tape when, in the uproar that followed, the RNC had had the gall to pressure him to quit the race. FBI director James Comey, having bizarrely hung Hillary out to dry by saying he was reopening the investigation into her emails eleven days before the election, had helped avert a total Clinton landslide.

"I can be the most famous man in the world," Trump told his on-again, off-again aide Sam Nunberg at the outset of the campaign.

"But do you want to be president?" Nunberg asked (a qualitatively different question than the usual existential candidate test: "Why do you want to be president?"). Nunberg did not get an answer.

The point was, there didn't need to be an answer because he wasn't going to be president.

Trump's longtime friend Roger Ailes liked to say that if you wanted a career in television, first run for president. Now Trump, encouraged by Ailes, was floating rumors about a Trump network. It was a great future.

He would come out of this campaign, Trump assured Ailes, with a far more powerful brand and untold opportunities. "This is bigger than I ever dreamed of," he told Ailes in a conversation a week before the election. "I don't think about losing because it isn't losing. We've totally won." What's more, he was already laying down his public response to losing the election: *It was stolen!*

Donald Trump and his tiny band of campaign warriors were ready to lose with fire and fury. They were not ready to win.

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In politics somebody has to lose, but invariably everybody thinks they can win. And you probably can't win unless you believe that you will win—except in the Trump campaign.

The leitmotif for Trump about his own campaign was how crappy it was and how everybody involved in it was a loser. He was equally convinced that the Clinton people were brilliant winners—"They've got the best and we've got the worst," he frequently said. Time spent with Trump on the campaign plane was often an epic dissing experience: everybody around him was an idiot.

Corey Lewandowski, who served as Trump's first more or less official campaign manager, was often berated by the candidate. For months Trump called him "the worst," and in June 2016 he was finally fired. Ever after, Trump proclaimed his campaign doomed without Lewandowski. "We're all losers," he would say. "All our guys are terrible, nobody knows what they're doing… . Wish Corey was back." Trump quickly soured on his second campaign manager, Paul Manafort, as well.

By August, trailing Clinton by 12 to 17 points and facing a daily firestorm of eviscerating press, Trump couldn't conjure even a far-fetched scenario for achieving an electoral victory. At this dire moment, Trump in some essential sense sold his losing campaign. The right-wing billionaire Bob Mercer, a Ted Cruz backer, had shifted his support to Trump with a $5 million infusion. Believing the campaign was cratering, Mercer and his daughter Rebekah took a helicopter from their Long Island estate out to a scheduled fundraiser—with other potential donors bailing by the second—at New York Jets owner and Johnson & Johnson heir Woody Johnson's summer house in the Hamptons.

Trump had no real relationship with either father or daughter. He'd had only a few conversations with Bob Mercer, who mostly talked in monosyllables; Rebekah Mercer's entire history with Trump consisted of a selfie taken with him at Trump Tower. But when the Mercers presented their plan to take over the campaign and install their lieutenants, Steve Bannon and Kellyanne Conway, Trump didn't resist. He only expressed vast incomprehension about why anyone would want to do that. "This thing," he told the Mercers, "is so fucked up."

By every meaningful indicator, something greater than even a sense of doom shadowed what Steve Bannon called "the broke-dick campaign"—a sense of structural impossibility.

The candidate who billed himself as a billionaire—ten times over—refused even to invest his own money in it. Bannon told Jared Kushner—who, when Bannon signed on to the campaign, had been off with his wife on a holiday in Croatia with Trump enemy David Geffen—that, after the first debate in September, they would need an additional $50 million to cover them until election day.

“No way we’ll get fifty million unless we can guarantee him victory,” said a clear-eyed Kushner.

“Twenty-five million?” prodded Bannon.

“If we can say victory is more than likely.”

In the end, the best Trump would do is loan the campaign $10 million, provided he got it back as soon as they could raise other money. (Steve Mnuchin, then the campaign’s finance chairman, came to collect the loan with the wire instructions ready to go, so Trump couldn’t conveniently forget to send the money.)

There was in fact no real campaign because there was no real organization, or at best only a uniquely dysfunctional one. Roger Stone, the early de facto campaign manager, quit or was fired by Trump—with each man publicly claiming he had slapped down the other. Sam Nunberg, a Trump aide who had worked for Stone, was noisily ousted by Lewandowski, and then Trump exponentially increased the public dirty-clothes-washing by suing Nunberg. Lewandowski and Hope Hicks, the PR aide put on the campaign by Ivanka Trump, had an affair that ended in a public fight on the street—an incident cited by Nunberg in his response to Trump’s suit. The campaign, on its face, was not designed to win anything.

Even as Trump eliminated the sixteen other Republican candidates, however far-fetched that might have seemed, it did not make the ultimate goal of winning the presidency any less preposterous.

And if, during the fall, winning seemed slightly more plausible, that evaporated with the Billy Bush affair. “I’m automatically attracted to beautiful—I just start kissing them,” Trump told the NBC host Billy Bush on an open mic, amid the ongoing national debate about sexual harassment. “It’s like a magnet. Just kiss. I don’t even wait. And when you’re a star they let you do it. You can do anything… . Grab them by the pussy. You can do anything.”

It was an operatic unraveling. So mortifying was this development that when Reince Priebus, the RNC head, was called to New York from Washington for an emergency meeting at Trump Tower, he couldn’t bring himself to leave Penn Station. It took two hours for the Trump team to coax him across town.

“Bro,” said a desperate Bannon, cajoling Priebus on the phone, “I may never see you again after today, but you gotta come to this building and you gotta walk through the front door.”

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The silver lining of the ignominy Melania Trump had to endure after the Billy Bush tape was that now there was no way her husband could become president.

Donald Trump's marriage was perplexing to almost everybody around him—or it was, anyway, for those without private jets and many homes. He and Melania spent relatively little time together. They could go days at a time without contact, even when they were both in Trump Tower. Often she did not know where he was, or take much notice of that fact. Her husband moved between residences as he would move between rooms. Along with knowing little about his whereabouts, she knew little about his business, and took at best modest interest in it. An absentee father for his first four children, Trump was even more absent for his fifth, Barron, his son with Melania. Now on his third marriage, he told friends he thought he had finally perfected the art: live and let live—"Do your own thing."

He was a notorious womanizer, and during the campaign became possibly the world's most famous masher. While nobody would ever say Trump was sensitive when it came to women, he had many views about how to get along with them, including a theory he discussed with friends about how the more years between an older man and a younger woman, the less the younger woman took an older man's cheating personally.

Still, the notion that this was a marriage in name only was far from true. He spoke of Melania frequently when she wasn't there. He admired her looks—often, awkwardly for her, in the presence of others. She was, he told people proudly and without irony, a "trophy wife." And while he may not have quite shared his life with her, he gladly shared the spoils of it. "A happy wife is a happy life," he said, echoing a popular rich-man truism.

He also sought Melania's approval. (He sought the approval of all the women around him, who were wise to give it.) In 2014, when he first seriously began to consider running for president, Melania was one of the few who thought it was possible he could win. It was a punch line for his daughter, Ivanka, who had carefully distanced herself from the campaign. With a never-too-hidden distaste for her stepmother, Ivanka would say to friends: *All you have to know about Melania is that she thinks if he runs he'll certainly win*.

But the prospect of her husband's actually becoming president was, for Melania, a horrifying one. She believed it would destroy her carefully sheltered life—one sheltered, not inconsiderably, from the extended Trump family—which was almost entirely focused on her young son.

Don't put the cart before the horse, her amused husband said, even as he spent every day on the campaign trail, dominating the news. But her terror and torment mounted.

There was a whisper campaign about her, cruel and comical in its insinuations, going on in Manhattan, which friends told her about. Her modeling career was under close scrutiny. In Slovenia, where she grew up, a celebrity magazine, *Suzy*, put the rumors about her into print after Trump got the nomination. Then, with a sickening taste of what might be ahead, the *Daily Mail* blew the story across the world.

The *New York Post* got its hands on outtakes from a nude photo shoot that Melania had

done early in her modeling career—a leak that everybody other than Melania assumed could be traced back to Trump himself.

Inconsolable, she confronted her husband. Is this the future? She told him she wouldn't be able to take it.

Trump responded in his fashion—*We'll sue!*—and set her up with lawyers who successfully did just that. But he was unaccustomedly contrite, too. Just a little longer, he told her. It would all be over in November. He offered his wife a solemn guarantee: there was simply no way he would win. And even for a chronically—he would say helplessly—unfaithful husband, this was one promise to his wife that he seemed sure to keep.

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The Trump campaign had, perhaps less than inadvertently, replicated the scheme from Mel Brooks's *The Producers*. In that classic, Brooks's larcenous and dopey heroes, Max Bialystock and Leo Bloom, set out to sell more than 100 percent of the ownership stakes in the Broadway show they are producing. Since they will be found out only if the show is a hit, everything about the show is premised on its being a flop. Accordingly, they create a show so outlandish that it actually succeeds, thus dooming our heroes.

Winning presidential candidates—driven by hubris or narcissism or a preternatural sense of destiny—have, more than likely, spent a substantial part of their careers, if not their lives from adolescence, preparing for the role. They rise up the ladder of elected offices. They perfect a public face. They manically network, since success in politics is largely about who your allies are. They cram. (Even in the case of an uninterested George W. Bush, he relied on his father's cronies to cram for him.) And they clean up after themselves—or, at least, take great care to cover up. They prepare themselves to win and to govern.

The Trump calculation, quite a conscious one, was different. The candidate and his top lieutenants believed they could get all the benefits of *almost* becoming president without having to change their behavior or their fundamental worldview one whit: we don't have to be anything but who and what we are, because of course we won't win.

Many candidates for president have made a virtue of being Washington outsiders; in practice, this strategy merely favors governors over senators. Every serious candidate, no matter how much he or she disses Washington, relies on Beltway insiders for counsel and support. But with Trump, hardly a person in his innermost circle had ever worked in politics at the national level—his closest advisers had not worked in politics at all. Throughout his life, Trump had few close friends of any kind, but when he began his campaign for president he had almost no friends in politics. The only two actual politicians with whom Trump was close were Rudy Giuliani and Chris Christie, and both men were in their own way peculiar and isolated. And to say that he knew nothing—nothing at all—about the basic intellectual foundations of the job was a comic

understatement. Early in the campaign, in a *Producers*-worthy scene, Sam Nunberg was sent to explain the Constitution to the candidate: "I got as far as the Fourth Amendment before his finger is pulling down on his lip and his eyes are rolling back in his head."

Almost everybody on the Trump team came with the kind of messy conflicts bound to bite a president or his staff. Mike Flynn, Trump's future National Security Advisor, who became Trump's opening act at campaign rallies and whom Trump loved to hear complain about the CIA and the haplessness of American spies, had been told by his friends that it had not been a good idea to take $45,000 from the Russians for a speech. "Well, it would only be a problem if we won," he assured them, knowing that it would therefore not be a problem.

Paul Manafort, the international lobbyist and political operative who Trump retained to run his campaign after Lewandowski was fired—and who agreed not to take a fee, amping up questions of quid pro quo—had spent thirty years representing dictators and corrupt despots, amassing millions of dollars in a money trail that had long caught the eye of U.S. investigators. What's more, when he joined the campaign, he was being pursued, his every financial step documented, by the billionaire Russian oligarch Oleg Deripaska, who claimed he stole $17 million from him in a crooked real estate scam.

For quite obvious reasons, no president before Trump and few politicians ever have come out of the real estate business: a lightly regulated market, based on substantial debt with exposure to frequent market fluctuations, it often depends on government favor, and is a preferred exchange currency for problem cash—money laundering. Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner, Jared's father Charlie, Trump's sons Don Jr. and Eric, and his daughter Ivanka, as well as Trump himself, all supported their business enterprises to a greater or lesser extent working in the dubious limbo of international free cash flow and gray money. Charlie Kushner, to whose real estate business interests Trump's son-in-law and most important aide was wholly tied, had already spent time in a federal prison for tax evasion, witness tampering, and making illegal campaign donations.

Modern politicians and their staffs perform their most consequential piece of opposition research on themselves. If the Trump team had vetted their candidate, they would have reasonably concluded that heightened ethical scrutiny could easily put them in jeopardy. But Trump pointedly performed no such effort. Roger Stone, Trump's longtime political adviser, explained to Steve Bannon that Trump's psychic makeup made it impossible for him to take such a close look at himself. Nor could he tolerate knowing that somebody else would then know a lot about him—and therefore have something over him. And anyway, why take such a close and potentially threatening look, because what were the chances of winning?

Not only did Trump disregard the potential conflicts of his business deals and real estate holdings, he audaciously refused to release his tax returns. Why should he if he wasn't going to win?

What's more, Trump refused to spend any time considering, however hypothetically, transition matters, saying it was "bad luck"—but really meaning it was a waste of time. Nor would he even remotely contemplate the issue of his holdings and conflicts.

He wasn't going to win! Or losing was winning.

Trump would be the most famous man in the world—a martyr to crooked Hillary Clinton.

His daughter Ivanka and son-in-law Jared would have transformed themselves from relatively obscure rich kids into international celebrities and brand ambassadors.

Steve Bannon would become the de facto head of the Tea Party movement.

Kellyanne Conway would be a cable news star.

Reince Priebus and Katie Walsh would get their Republican Party back.

Melania Trump could return to inconspicuously lunching.

That was the trouble-free outcome they awaited on November 8, 2016. Losing would work out for everybody.

Shortly after eight o'clock that evening, when the unexpected trend—Trump might actually win—seemed confirmed, Don Jr. told a friend that his father, or DJT, as he called him, looked as if he had seen a ghost. Melania, to whom Donald Trump had made his solemn guarantee, was in tears—and not of joy.

There was, in the space of little more than an hour, in Steve Bannon's not unamused observation, a befuddled Trump morphing into a disbelieving Trump and then into a quite horrified Trump. But still to come was the final transformation: suddenly, Donald Trump became a man who believed that he deserved to be and was wholly capable of being the president of the United States.