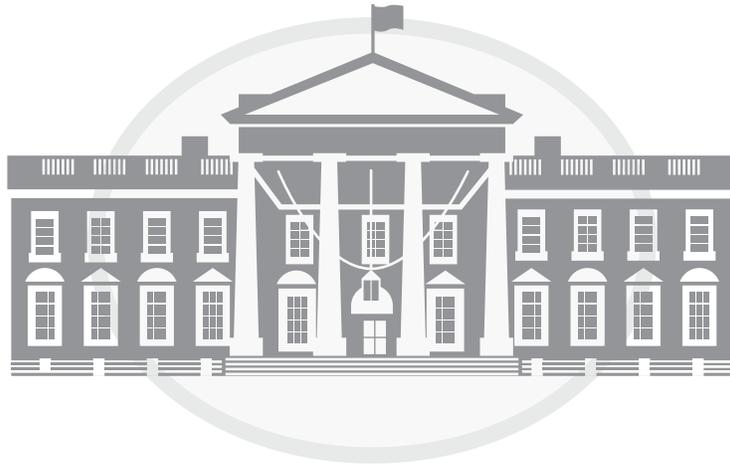




WHAT THE DICKENS?



A CHRISTMAS CAROL FOR 45



BY
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God help us, every one!

Rumors of the ghost of Abraham Lincoln walking the halls of the White House abound. Famous persons who have lived or stayed in the White House have reported feeling a distinct presence of his spirit or even sightings of his figure. It is suggested that Lincoln comes back particularly whenever the country is in peril. Thoughts of these apparitions put me in mind of another famous haunting, that of Charles Dickens' character Ebenezer Scrooge in A Christmas Carol. An imaginative weaving of the two together in this particular time of peril in our democracy has yielded the following narrative.

Chapter 1

December in the D.C. area was typically damp and chilly, with this December uncommonly more so. Each morning, fog drifted along the Potomac and reached in cold wisps over and through the memorials as far as Lafayette Square. By afternoon, the mercury in thermometers struggled to just above freezing and managed to hover there for a few dismal hours. Sometime around mid-month the sun went into apparent hibernation. By December 24th, it had still not made an appearance. A mood of heaviness hung over the capitol.

The White House, thus enveloped in cloud, was awarded no special privilege of immunity to this gloom. On the contrary, 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue seemed, curiously, to be the very epicenter of the obscurity blanketing the city. In fact, from overhead, it appeared remarkably as though the fog emanated from within that mansion rather than cloaked it from without.

Christmas Eve found its sole occupant reclining on his unmade bed, staring blankly at the television screen, the remote lying listlessly in his hand. A crumpled white bag of empty fast food wrappers had missed the low table nearby and lay on the floor. "Fake news, all fake news," 45 mumbled, switching mindlessly from channel to channel for several minutes before pressing the power off button.

Settling back into a pile of satin-covered pillows, each emblazoned with a golden letter T, he gazed disconsolately at the ceiling. The sudden silencing of the TV had left an eerie emptiness of uncomfortable quiet over the room. Gradually, random sounds began to make their way into his consciousness. Noises from outside, late night traffic, a distant siren. The wind around the southwest corner of the eaves. Soon came the familiar night sounds from inside the building itself, floor joists creaking, pipes contracting in the walls.

His eyelids began to close wearily, then fluttered wide open. "What the hell was that?" he wondered. Alert once again, he waited, motionless. It came again...barely audible but definitely there. A shuffling, dragging sound, from far off, from deep below in the basement

hall. The crash of a door flying open and slamming against the wall made him start. The heavy dragging noise became louder and more distinct, multiple rattlings and clankings coming closer step by step, louder and louder, bumping up the staircase, and scraping down the length of the hallway. The unidentifiable commotion paused just outside his bedroom door.

What had begun as a wary apprehension in his mind had rapidly expanded to alarm that increased with the volume of the approaching noise, until rigid with fright, he sat up in his bed, shrinking back against the bank of pillows, bugged eyes riveted on the door.

45 blinked hard several times to behold a hazy, wavering figure enter right through the closed door, which had been intentionally locked hours earlier. "This can't be happening," his mind objected even as his eyes, never blinking, followed the progress of the figure advancing across the room until it stopped not far from the side of his bed.

The haze, or apparition, or figment of his imagination, or whatever it was, bore a familiarity that he couldn't quite identify. Standing nearly six feet tall yet thin to the point of frailty, it floated vaporously a few inches off the floor. As he looked, he discovered the source of the scraping cacophony that had accompanied the approach of the specter. Literally hundreds of rifles, piled loosely together like ill-stacked log piles, were slung in ensnared jumbles that cascaded from its shoulders to the floor and dragged along behind it in a trail of metal that extended out the door and beyond to a point unseen. Interspersed throughout the morass were fragments of army helmets and pieces of shredded combat boots. Spewing from the mouth of the ghost and looped and knotted around its neck were yards, miles of magnetic audio tape, hopelessly tangled, impossible to sort or untwine. The very sight caused the man on the bed to gag.

"Who are you?" 45 barked.

"Ask who I *was*," the reply came in a deep, tremulous voice. "In life, I was a predecessor of yours, even though you do not believe in me."

As 45 peered more closely at this other-worldly intruder, he slowly recognized its visage: heavy eyebrows, sloping nose, sagging jowls. "Richard Nixon! What are you doing here? This is impossible!" he spluttered bombastically. "How did you get in? What do you want?!" He impulsively grabbed for his cell phone, but found that it was out of reach across the expanse of bed.

The phantom slowly extended one spindly arm to point at 45's chest. "You."

“What do you want of me?!” His protestations, begun with bravado, quickly subsided into a petulant whine. “Get out of here. I don’t want to see you. Who let you in?”

“The magnetism of limitless avarice and bottomless lust for power is what let me in. The abuse of that power, so accurate a mirror of my own, is what let me in. The vital need for a course correction in this nation’s history as it is currently unfolding has called me here. This is an errand of undeserved mercy.”

At the word “undeserved”, 45’s anger was poked up like embers into a flare of fire. “Well, take your so-called errand of mercy and leave. I’m the one with the executive power to pardon. I don’t need your mercy. I can pardon myself, if I want to.”

At this, a frightful, moaning cry emanated from the apparition. The sound swelled like a wave and reverberated around the room. It shook the specter and in turn shook all of that which weighed him down, sending up another terrible rattling which took some moments to die out. Unnerved, 45 recoiled.

“I know all about the power of executive pardon of which you speak,” the voice continued, “For I was an undeserving recipient of that same mercy. I can only hope for your miserable sake that you will in time likewise be another.”

“I thought I told you to get out. Why are you bothering me? And what are all those guns you are weighted down with anyway? Why are you dragging those around? You’re a loser!”

Another groan arose from the ghost accompanied by a repeat of the metallic clanking, louder and lasting longer than the previous. This had the effect of temporarily subduing 45 into an unaccustomed silence.

“Yes! You speak the truth, *for once*, in this: I am a loser! as are all who place a higher value on winning at all costs than on humaneness and compassion. These guns you see are the weapons of every soldier killed in combat by my own cunning designs to extend the war needlessly until after my election, so that I, and I alone, could claim the political victory of ending the war. These helmets and boots belonged to the men and women who should have returned home to their loved ones but never did because of my own vainglory. This tape around my neck is the record of all the lies I ever uttered.”

“But you made it your business to win re-election, and you succeeded,” 45 argued. “You only did what you had to do.”

“The American people were my business! Our interactions on the world stage for the betterment of all humankind was my business! Freedom and democracy were my business! I am here tonight to warn you. You have a chance to escape my fate, if you so choose. You will be haunted by three spirits after me.”

“I’d rather not. This is taking up my executive time,” 45 sulked. “Can’t this be postponed to later? Much later? Like...never?”

The phantom continued as if no one had spoken. “Expect the first when the clock strikes one. Expect the second when the clock strikes two...”

“Wait. Can’t you just send them all in at once so I can get this over with?”

“...expect the third when the clock strikes three. I bid you good night.”

“I don’t see how you can expect me to have a good night after this! I think I need a diet Coke...I probably shouldn’t have super-sized those fries...”

The specter said no more, but floated right through and over the bed toward the tall windows in the facing wall. The clamor of all that he dragged with him sent an actual vibration through the mattress that travelled up into the very muscles and bones of the man sitting on it. He shivered and shrunk still further back into the pillows as the ghost stepped up onto the sill and drifted right through the closed window. As the noise subsided, a chill wafted throughout the room. 45 shivered again, rearranging the pillows and drawing the covers up around his neck.

“Glad that’s over with. Good riddance to you.” He lay in the dark and tried to think of sleep, but his eyes kept returning alternately to the door and then to the window. After what seemed a long time, he finally dropped into a troubled doze.

Chapter 2

At one o’clock, 45’s cell phone alarm sounded, jarring him awake. “Who set that to go off at this hour? Must have been a stupid staff member. I’ll find out who did it and fire them.” He rolled over and reached for his phone to stop the alarm, and then, since he was awake and his cell phone was in his hand, decided he may as well check his Twitter feed.

“What is this? #OldHickory? I don’t remember following this guy. What’s going on?”

Annoyed, he looked up to find someone standing at the foot of his bed. Slowly the prediction of the earlier intruder re-entered his consciousness. “How are you people getting in here?! Isn’t it enough that I was disturbed once already? What the hell do *you* want now?”

“By the Eternal! It isn’t hell that I want but it is hell that I have gotten, for it is many a living hell that I caused, suffering upon suffering.” This apparition stood ramrod straight, tall and gaunt. Its bushy, iron-gray hair stuck up stiffly above its forehead, not completely hiding a long scar there. A penetrating look from its piercing blue eyes dared 45 to utter another word.

Unwilling to answer the dare, he thought to himself, “Andrew Jackson?”

In response to his unspoken thoughts, the ghost replied, “I am he. It is my portrait, placed by you yourself, that looks over your shoulder as you sit each day in the seat that you did not come by honestly, at the desk that you have disgraced.”

“How dare you! What are you talking about? To think I chose you as a role model! I am certainly no worse than you ever were. That picture is coming down first thing in the morning.”

“Yes, unfortunately for the nation, you chose me as your role model. And you have certainly made strides in carrying on my legacy of ruthless oppression, blatant misuse of power, disregard for Congress, judicial appointments to serve my own agenda, and disregard for the rule of law when it inconvenienced me. Still, your corrupt real estate practices cannot hold a candle to my own Indian Removal Act. I say this not as a boast, but to my everlasting infamy and shame. There is no reparation sufficient for what I have done. The Trail of Tears shall forever bear historic witness to the extent of my malfeasance.”

A glow from his cell phone caused 45 to glance down at it. Startled, he watched as images in black and white played across its screen. Slaves on a Tennessee plantation toiling under the sun. Men being whipped. Women being raped. Children forced into hard labor. The scene changed to a man being shot in the chest at dueling range, recoiling from the force of the shot and falling back, dead. This faded and was followed by a long, long line of people trudging in an endless column that stretched for miles: men, women, ill and elderly, children, babies, sick, hungry, crying, exhausted, their faces etched with suffering and loss. A close-up of one tiny child, languishing to near lifelessness on her mother’s back, made him look away.

“Well what do you want me to do about it? It’s too late. That’s all in the past. Don’t blame me. This was all on you. It has nothing to do with me.”

“You are correct in saying that it is too late. Too late for me. Too late for these innocent, wronged people. But you are incorrect in thinking that this has nothing to do with you. It has everything to do with you and the office you hold so irreverently.”

The phantom continued, “You have the power to begin to turn the events of this nation in a new direction, one that advances the many instead of just the few. I want you to look into my portrait as into a mirror. See what I was and what I did and recognize what in yourself is every bit as reprehensible. It is too late for me. It is not too late for you to change what needs to be changed to lessen suffering in this world. To enforce equality. To cherish the freedoms of this democracy and not to undermine them. I despair that you in your selfishness are even capable of this, but still I hope.”

“Look,” 45 babbled, “I have tremendous respect for you. Nobody has more respect for you than me. Maybe you made a few mistakes. Maybe you got some stuff wrong. But my IQ is one of the highest. And this job is not easy, you know? I thought it would be easier than my old life. All the constant bad press and the fake news. The rigged polls. The witch hunts. You never had to deal with *that!* So, don’t go telling me what to do. You can go back to hell or wherever it is you came from.” Body language clearly demonstrating his conclusion, 45 folded his arms tightly across his chest and looked down sullenly. As far as he was concerned, the visit was over.

But the ghost had one more thing to say. “Any man worth his salt will stick up for what he believes right, but it takes a slightly better man to acknowledge instantly and without reservation that he is in error. You might do well to aspire to this.”

“Yeah, well I’m *not* a better man. I’m the *best* man. And I’m *never* wrong.” He raised his eyes defiantly to meet the specter’s but was surprised to find that he was once again alone in the room.

Chapter 3

Tossing and turning in his satin sheets, 45 once more managed to fall into a restless sleep only to be roused again by the alarm on his cell phone. He struggled to awaken. “Covfefe...

what?! Two o'clock! Damn! What moron keeps doing this? I'll yank his security clearance." He fumbled to locate the phone under the covers. Once he had shut off the alarm, he gave the pile of pillows a few resentful punches and flopped back down onto them. A soft chuckle from across the room caused him to raise his head. The lanky figure with top hat and beard who was seated in the chair near the corner was unmistakable. Removing his hat, he uncrossed his long legs and crossed them the other way.

"Oh, great! This is *all* I need," 45 complained.

"Well, I may not be quite *all* you need; I may not even be *most* of what you need, but I would venture to propose that I am undoubtedly at least some *small* part of what you need," Abraham Lincoln drawled in his high-pitched voice.

"Trust me, I've already got everything I need. I'm very rich, you know. I got a lot of money. Billions. Believe me. What could you possibly have that I need?"

"There are plenty of things I could say and have already said, which by your actions you have clearly demonstrated you do indeed *need* to hear. And would do well to *heed*. 'A house divided against itself cannot stand.' 'No man has a good enough memory to be a successful liar.' 'We should be too big to take offense and too noble to give it.'"

"Look, you may be one of the greatest presidents, and I'm not sure if there were polls back when you were around, but if there were, I think I'd rate higher. I'm more presidential. You know, a poll just came out that I am the most popular person in the history of the Republican Party—92 per cent. Beating you, Lincoln. Think of that. I beat our Honest Abe.

"Don't get me wrong," he continued. "You were a great president, one of the greatest. You did a fantastic job. Do you know most people don't even know that you were a Republican? I bet you didn't know that. It's true. Believe me. Party of Lincoln. I coined that phrase, you know."

"Is that a fact, now?" Lincoln said, tilting his head. "I had not heard that one yet, I must say. Is that a true fact, would you say, or is that one of those new-fangled alternative facts that I've been hearing about since you came up?"

"What are you, with the fake news or something? Who sent you here?" 45's knee-jerk reaction turned accusatory. "You better hope there are no tapes of this before you go leaking to the press. You know, throughout my life, my two greatest assets have been mental stability and being, like, really smart. You were pretty smart too, I hear. But I went from being a VERY successful businessman, to top TV star—you probably don't know what that is—to

president of the United States, on my very first try. How many times did you run for public office before you won, Abe? Although, don't get me wrong, I think I am actually humble. I think I'm much more humble than you would understand. Say, you met that Frederick Douglass guy once, didn't you? Now there's somebody—I think he's done an amazing job. I notice he's being recognized more and more. Have you seen that too? Of course, I have a great relationship with the blacks. I've always had a great relationship with the blacks. I'm the least racist person you have ever interviewed. Are you here to interview me?"

"Well, now that you've had a chance to say your piece, sir," Lincoln replied, "I expect maybe I'll take a turn. You see, there's a few things it might behoove you to think about. I don't presume to know what is best for *you*, but I do have a deep-seated concern for what is best for this great nation. You see, I'm a firm believer in the people. If given the truth, they can be depended upon to meet any national crisis. The great point is to bring them the real facts."

"You don't know what you're talking about. I *do* give them facts! Alternative facts!"

"And don't go interfering with anything in the Constitution," the ghost continued, ignoring 45's protests about facts. "That must be maintained, for it is the only safeguard of our liberties. We the people are the rightful masters of both Congress and the courts, not to overthrow the Constitution but to overthrow the men who pervert the Constitution."

"But I am the master of both Congress and the courts. I and I alone can fix this. Executive privilege, isn't that how it works?"

"And for another thing," Lincoln added, "It is not my nature, when I see a people borne down by the weight of their shackles - the oppression of tyranny - to make their life more bitter by heaping upon them greater burdens; but rather would I do all in my power to raise the yoke than to add anything that would tend to crush them. Remember, Republicans are for both the man and the dollar, but in the case of conflict the man before the dollar."

"Hmph. What idiot said *that*?" 45 scoffed. Lincoln leaned back in his chair, his shoulders gently shaking with some inner amusement. Straightening again, he continued.

"The way I see it even now in these contentious times, if the great American people will only keep their temper, on both sides of the line, the troubles will come to an end, and the question which now distracts the country will be settled just as surely as all other difficulties in this government have been adjusted.

"But for this to come to pass it is imperative that all Americans recognize that we are not

enemies, but friends. Though passion may have strained it must not break our bonds of affection. We will yet join together when we are touched, as we surely will be, by the better angels of our nature.

“However, you yourself have a decision to make. Because I firmly believe that America will never be destroyed from the outside, at least not without allowing ourselves to be destroyed from the inside. If we falter and lose our freedoms, it will be because we destroyed ourselves.” Lincoln leaned forward in his chair, his eyes fixed earnestly on the vacant expression of the man staring back at him. “And that, sir, is where you enter the equation.”

Something about the sound of that last word pulled 45 back from the mental fog that had settled in his brain. “No collusion. There was no collusion. You can’t prove anything,” he insisted. His attention had been exhausted for some time. “I’m calling security to have you escorted out of here. I’ll see you in court.”

“You may very well see me in court one day, sir, but it will not be in any earthly court where you still yet may be summoned to appear. I will perhaps see you in a higher court, where a greater reckoning will hold forth than any here below.”

“What a zero. Where are those secret service guys, anyway? Morons. They should never have allowed this to happen. I’m going to fire all of them in the morning.” 45 punched a few numbers on his cell phone but was again surprised to see moving images flashing across the screen.

This time they were in color. A close-up of the face of a father, mute with grief, hugging his wife and daughters before being deported to an unfamiliar country, not knowing when or if he would ever see them again. A senior high school student being escorted by ICE agents out of a classroom where she was taking her final exams before graduation. A man in the driver’s seat of a car being shot six times at close range when he reached in his pocket to produce his license, his small daughter in the back seat.

School children laughing and singing in their seats before the view zoomed out to reveal a bomb falling directly toward their bus. 45 flinched and reflexively tried to scroll away from the scene, but to no avail. He watched as the bus exploded. Screams, then silence. The screen went black, then gradually lightened again to show hundreds of children of all ages, infants, toddlers, pre-school and school-aged. They were all in cages, neglected, ignored, crying, frightened and hungry, their little fingers wrapped around the chain link, calling for help, crying for their mothers and their fathers.

“What’s going on? Why doesn’t someone help these kids?” He grimaced, sickened at the horror of what he was watching.

“Look no further than in your own mirror for the answer to your question. You are the reason for this inhumanity to humankind. You are the one who can reverse these events.”

“No, no more! I don’t want to see any more of this.” He threw his cell phone across the room.

“Neither do the American people want to see any more of this. If you don’t see a way to bring about the change necessary to address this suffering, I suggest that you do the best thing you can do for the nation and for the world, and that is to step down, sir. Step down from this office which you have usurped and for which you are singularly unfit, and let another, worthier person steer this country onward to a higher course, away from the disaster you are creating.”

“I won’t do that. I never quit. I always win. I’m the most successful president this country has ever seen. Eventually we’re going to get something done and it’s going to be really, really good. Trust me. You can take that to the bank. I have accomplished more in two years than any president ever. It’s all on the TV. If you watch the real news. Forget about the rest, it’s all fake. It’s rigged.”

But the ghost of Abraham Lincoln wasn’t listening. He spoke one last time, his clear voice overriding the bluster and bombast. “May God bless this great nation, and may government of the people, by the people, for the people, and I include *all* the people, never perish from the earth.” With that, he slowly unfolded his legs and rose to his full, imposing height, made even more impressive when he replaced his top hat on his head. His gaze never wavering, he gave a slight bow, and simply faded from view.

Chapter 4

At three o’clock, 45 jerked awake again. Fumbling around in the dark, he was trying to find his cell phone when its alarm sounded from the floor across the room. Impulsively he threw the covers back and moved to stand. But the rumpled sheets twisted around his legs and he fell to the floor. Too tired to swear out loud, he crawled across the floor to retrieve his phone so he could shut it off.

As he groped at the keyboard to stop the alarm, the light from the face of the phone

illuminated a pair of shoes not one foot away from where he sprawled. The shoes were not empty. From the tops of them he observed a narrow glimpse of ribbed dress socks and above, a pair of crisply pressed trousers. As his eyes adjusted to the dim light, he peered upward beyond the legs of the trousers, past the buttoned suit jacket above and a blue-gray trimly knotted tie. He found himself looking up into a face that was more familiar to him than he wished it to be. Across one shoulder was draped a full-size American flag.

“J-John McCain,” he stammered.

The figure looming over him made no answer.

“Wh-what are you doing here? I didn’t think I’d ever have to see you again. You’re dead. What do you want here? Leave me alone. I don’t want to hear anything you have to say. I wish you would leave.”

The specter made not a sound, only extended its right arm and pointed toward the window. 45 raised his head just enough to peer over the sill and out across the south lawn.

“What? I don’t see anything. This is all rigged.” The phantom merely extended his hand again, finger pointing.

As 45 continued to squint into the darkness beyond the window, his vision began to shift and change. It became as though he were looking through a periscope, its crosslines moving over the land, zooming in on a distant point, closer and closer, until he found himself looking at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. Or was it?

No, he didn’t think it was the Vietnam Memorial, not that he had ever been there. This looked different than the pictures he had seen of the Memorial on Fox News. It was different. It was similar, a wall with hundreds of names on it, names of the dead...but this wall was of concrete and chain link and barbed wire. It stretched across a desert landscape, and armed soldiers stood watch on top of it. As he tried to understand what it was he was seeing, he heard a sound, tiny at first, barely audible...but increasing as slowly and steadily as if some invisible hand were turning up the volume on an amplifier. Unnerved, he strained to hear. The sound slowly became recognizable: it was the clamor of human voices. Crying, wailing, screaming, louder and louder, calling out in a language he did not know, in many different languages that he couldn’t understand. He stopped his ears with his clenched hands but it made no difference; the wails continued to increase until they became a deafening roar in his ears.

“Stop!” he cried out in desperation, pulling back from the window. At once the noise ended.

His ears ringing, he looked up at the figure towering over him. The phantom spoke not a word, but again pointed out the window. Fearful of what he might see, 45 dragged his gaze once more to beyond the sill.

The same periscope-vision took him this time to a higher and wider view, zooming out to include large tracks of land below. It would have been a majestic view but for what he was seeing: coastal cities inundated with water, muddy rivers flooding their banks and all that lay along them, dead fish and animals floating, whole neighborhoods buried in mud, turbulent storm systems leaving wide swaths of destruction, acres of farm fields lying barren and covered in dust, giant wildfires spreading for miles, destroying everything in their paths, and everywhere, people hungry, thirsty, no relief in sight. A stench of fumes and death and rot rose up in his nostrils, growing in intensity until he was gagging and choking.

“Please! No more! I thought it was a hoax! A Chinese hoax. The oil companies *told* me it was. Make it stop!” He retched. As before, the scenes of destruction disappeared and the offensive odor was no more.

“I can’t handle this,” 45 whined. “Please don’t say this is how it’s going to be. I don’t want to see anymore.”

Silently, the apparition pointed out the window a third time. 45 had barely turned his head to look when his eyes were blinded by a double flash of fire and fury the likes of which he had never seen before. A mushroom cloud inexorably blossomed out over the city. The inferno hurtled toward him at an astounding velocity. Before he had time to blink, the window shattered into his face as he was knocked down by the force and swept like a ragdoll across the room. He tried to scream but there was no air to be had. His lungs were a vacuum, his heart felt like it was incinerating, he couldn’t breathe, he couldn’t breathe, he was suffocating...

45 jerked awake to a sitting position from under the heavy pile of pillows. Greedily he filled his lungs with air. He could breathe again. He was alive. He was here in his bed. He turned to the window; it was closed. A fresh snow was falling. His eyes searched the room. He was alone.

He lay panting and shaken for some time before he remembered all that had transpired in the night. And that today was Christmas Day. Looking down, he found his cell phone in his hand, its face fractured into a web of cracks from one corner to the other.

Out of reflex, he opened the Twitter app, then paused. He looked out the window again, watching the snowflakes as they drifted down and accumulated on the outer sill. He was trying to remember. What was it they had said? Look in the mirror? I have a decision to make?

His thumbs hesitated, then rapidly tapped out what would become the most well-received tweet of his time in office:

Donald J. Trump

@realDonaldTrump

I woke up this morning and said to myself

YOUR FIRED!!! Didn't really win the election anyway.

Told you it was rigged. I'll see you at Mar a Lago. For \$200,000.

8:49 AM - 25 Dec 2018

After closing the app, he reopened it and tapped out one last message.

Donald J. Trump

@realDonaldTrump

Merry Christmas!!!! We can say that now... I made it legal again.

8:51 AM - 25 Dec 2018

The End

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