

THE
CHRISTMAS
BARREL,
featuring
His Excellency,
President George
Webenezer Screwidge

by
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It was the afternoon before Christmas, and the White House was in its usual hubbub. His excellency, the president, was in a foul mood. The press had not been kind to him lately, his party had taken a drubbing in the recent midterm elections, for which everybody blamed him, and his foreign policy had everything in the world looking like Spaghetti Junction at rush hour. He was disastrously low in the polls and couldn't shake the feeling that his enemies, who were now legion, were closing in on him.

He had seen it before, down at Crawford, that slow, winding spiral of the buzzards as they circled their prey in a gulch. Some poor, helpless little critter—a rabbit or a squirrel or maybe even an armadillo—was about to become their Christmas dinner, and there wasn't much it could do about it except pray that the end would come quickly when it came.

Screwidge was not a particularly greedy man, although he had enjoyed owning the odd ball team or oil well. But he did like his privacy, and he had had precious little of that since becoming president. He often got the feeling that he was living in a bubble—a great big, thick bubble where he was always on display, even though he didn't see or hear much from his position on the inside.

Now here it was the day before Christmas, and he wanted to be down at Crawford, riding his dirt bike or chopping wood or drowning a few worms in his favorite fishing hole. And, damn it all, Laura had said they needed to spend Christmas at Camp David again, so it didn't look as if they ran off to Texas a

zillion times a year, and he wouldn't get to go to Crawford until the day after Christmas.

She was right, he guessed. But it still didn't sit well with him.

And neither did having to wear his suit and tie and see all those people in the White House the day before Christmas.

It had been a hellacious kind of day, with back-to-back appointments, papers to sign, and aides pestering him about this or that every five minutes. He could hardly wait till four o'clock, when he would get on the whirlybird and fly to Camp David, away from all the prying, gawking busybodies that paraded through the halls of the White House.

He had wanted to declare the White House off limits to visitors and reporters, and treat it as a "no-pry" zone, if only for that single day. But Karl and Dick had told him to forget it, he would have to go up at least ten points in the polls before they dared to do anything like that.

So he was doing his best not to display his pique as he went through the rigamarole of duties on the afternoon of Christmas Eve. He didn't know whose fool idea it was, but they had him wearing a Santa hat and handing out presents to all the White House staff so the press photographers could snap pictures of him that would adorn the evening news programs and next day's papers.

The presents were in a huge container that somebody had dubbed "the Christmas barrel." It was probably just a big trash drum that had been gussied up with wrapping paper and ribbons to look good in the photographs. But it was full to the brim with gaily-adorned packages—Belgian candies and cashmere scarves and leather-bound desk calendars and lots of other appropriately elegant but only

modestly expensive little gifts bearing embossed cards that read: “From the President of the United States of America, George W. Screwidge.” The machine had even forged his signature on each one of them, or something that in its illegibility could easily pass for it.

“Here y’are, Condi,” he said with his twisted little smile as he handed the Secretary of State a package that looked suspiciously like a bottle of perfume. “Don’t get drunk on that!”

A polite titter of laughter ran around the room, like a little mouse looking for a hole to dive into.

“And this one—,” he said, screwing up his face and blinking at the tag, having a hard time reading it. “This one—hell, I think it says it’s for Rummy. Is that what it says?”

Josh Bolten, his chief of staff, discretely reached out, took the package, which was soft and floppy, like a neck scarf, and squinted at the tag. He nodded, and passed the package on to Bob Gates, murmuring, “Sorry. Somebody goofed.”

“There’s probably one in here somewhere for Scotty McClellan, too,” said Screwidge, reaching farther down into the barrel. Then he stood up again, looked around with a wry little smile, thinking he had made a funny, and said, “Oh, I forgot. He’s off somewhere writin’ a book, isn’t he?”

This time, nobody laughed. But that didn’t stop Screwidge from sniggering, if only to cover up his embarrassment that nobody else thought it was funny.

There were presents for Tony Snow—a huge golden stopper that made the president guffaw when somebody pointed out that it was for his mouth—and Lynne Cheney and Dick Cheney and Mike Hayden and Alberto Gonzales and

everybody else, including even the president's daughters Jenna and Barbara.

But there were still presents down in the barrel when the distance from the top to the packages began to exceed the length of the president's arm. Josh Bolten stepped up and offered to assist him, but, with the air of a little boy announcing "I can do it myself," the president scowled at Bolten and said, "Why does everybody always think I'm such a nymphopoop?"

And, with that, he threw himself toward the lower contents of the barrel with such deliberate force that his feet left the floor and his head struck the rim of the barrel, knocking him out cold. Bolten, the first to realize what had happened, quietly extracted the president and gently laid him on the thick carpet. A chorus of "ohs" and "oohs" ran around the room, and the sea of people surged forward to see their Commander-in-Chief lying like a turnip in the center of everything.

"Give him air!" ordered Bolten. "Call the doctor!"

"Isn't he here?" growled Cheney. "He was supposed to be here, like everybody else."

"I think he had some last-minute shopping to do," volunteered a meek little voice. Everybody turned to see who it was, and those who were close enough for a view found themselves looking at the diminutive little lady who served as the doctor's secretary.

"Well, get a doctor—any doctor," said Bolten. And there was a flurry of motion around the room as twenty-three people raised their cell phones in unison and began trying to reach their own physicians—a task that was all but impossible on Christmas Eve.

Meanwhile, the president's face and hands were twitching as his

unconscious was having a little private show of its own. At first, everything around him seemed vague and murky, the way it had been the day after his first presidential election, when the Supreme Court ruled that his party had won in Florida and he was suddenly faced with the big question, “What do I do now?!”

Then, out of the murkiness, there loomed a large spectral figure that looked vaguely familiar. It towered over him, being much taller, and had a long, narrow face and a head of wild, disorderly white hair. Even its eyebrows were long, hoary, and tangled.

Screwidge couldn't tell if the specter's clothes were formal or informal, because they were so encrusted with mold that their original shape and color were quite indistinguishable. But the one thing that was very obvious was a great coil of chains draped over the figure's shoulders and chest, and trailing after it in jangling, clanking disorder.

“Don't you know me?” said the figure, its voice raspy and strained, as if talking were difficult.

“Uh— uh— I think— you do look sort of familiar,” stammered Screwidge.

“Come on, Webenezer, you can do better than that. Surely you remember who I am. I'm the one who brought the Party back to power after Nixon pulled that stupid Watergate gaffe. Your daddy was my vice-president, for God's sake.”

“Ronnie?” asked the president hesitantly. “Ronnie, is it you? But you don't look the same. The white hair—and all those chains.”

The specter appeared to swell and grow taller, and shook with obvious fury.

“Dammit, Webenezer, you still haven't learned any tact, have you?” it said.

“I always had more charm in my little finger than you've got in your— your

damned tush—or, for that matter, in that whole stupid ranch of yours down at Crawford.”

In proportion to the spirit’s swelling and growing, the president shrank and cowered.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” he said, raising his arm as if to shield himself from a prospective blow. “I— I didn’t mean anything. Don’t be angry, Ronnie.”

“Arrghh!” voiced the specter, shaking its mighty head, so that its long, white hair waved back and forth like a banner. “I had to stop coloring my hair after I died, you little dumbbell. Otherwise it would have been dark and lustrous until I was a hundred and fifty.”

“Uh—”

“And your hair grows after you die. Didn’t you know that?”

“Uh— yeh— uh— ”

“Yes, little guy, what is it?”

“Those chains,” murmured Screwidge, quaking as he pointed at them. “They look very uncomfortable. What’re they for?”

Again the spirit seemed to rise and grow until it filled the room, and it rattled the great chains with a terrible clanking noise that made Screwidge cower into a fetal position with his hands over his ears.

When the commotion and noise had subsided, the spirit spoke, this time more humbly, and, Screwidge hoped, a little more compassionately.

“Of course they’re uncomfortable,” he said. “These chains,” he wheezed, “are the chains I forged in office, Tweedledee.”

“In— in office? I don’t understand.”

“You don’t understand much, do you, little feller? These chains represent all the bad things I did while I was president and all the good things I should have done but didn’t.”

“You mean— ?”

“Yup. Iran Contra. Letting some of the fat cats who bankrolled me get those lucrative contracts. Not paying attention to the needs of the poor. Making that damn fool speech in Berlin.”

“You don’t mean ‘Tear down this wall’? I always admired you for that.”

“A lot of people did. But Gorby and I were friends. Was that any way to talk to a friend in front of the world?”

“A president has to do a lot of things he doesn’t mean, say a lot of things he doesn’t believe.”

Again the spirit reared up, as if unhappy with what Screwidge had just said.

“Well,” Screwidge compromised, looking very apologetic, “some things, anyway. Didn’t you find that true?”

In response, the spirit simply gave his great chains a tug and they rattled like peals of thunder, which reverberated for several seconds around the room.

“What I know to be true,” rasped the spirit when the noise had died away, “is that the chains you’ve been forging are going to be a lot bigger and heavier than these. Yours will make mine look like the daisy chains we used to make as children.”

“What— what do you mean, Ronnie? You’re making me very uncomfortable.”

“That’s why I’m here, Tweedledum, to make you uncomfortable. You have

a very high threshold of discomfort, you know. Very high. Not much seems to eat on you. Take that war you started over in Iraq—damn fool thing to do—it never seemed to cost you any sleep at all. Did you really think Saddam had WMDs hidden over there some place?”

“I— ”

“Don’t answer that. They could impeach you if anybody overheard. But even with things at their bloodiest, all those suicide bombers killing and maiming dozens of people every day, you haven’t seemed to worry much about it. ‘We’re making progress,’ you keep saying, with that damned little smirk on your face. Why didn’t anybody ever slap you in the face and wipe that silly expression off of it, Tweedledummy? You just keep right on making stupid remarks and ignoring how much everybody is hurting. All those grieving parents—all the servicemen coming back with their arms and legs blown off, their eyes shot out, their bodies pitted with shrapnel, their hopes and dreams blasted to eternity—all the poor Iraqis who have had to suffer because of what you did. I can’t believe it, Beedlebaum. You always seem as insensitive as a bedpost.”

“I— I’m sorry. I didn’t think a president was supposed to show emotion.”

“Hell, you idiot, you’re in so deep over your head that the only thing you ever show is gross and implacable stupidity.”

The president looked crestfallen.

“Don’t try to pull that stuff with me, seedtick. If it were left up to me, I wouldn’t be here, trying to help you. I remember what a lump of coal you were at my funeral, and then at the service out in California. You were happy to bask in the afterglow of my life, but I could tell how much you envied me and hated

Nancy, and how much you wanted to get back on Air Force One and take your shoes off for a nap. You were really glad I was gone and you could write ‘finis’ to my presence, weak as it was in those last years. You’re a jealous little twerp, Tweedlededium, and you don’t really care about anybody unless they can help you look better in the history books.

“Well, that’s what I’m here for, El Stupido, to try to save your bacon. To help you get rid of some of the chains you’ve been forging since you came to this town. It’s a big order, ninny, and it will take some doing. But I had to try.”

“What— what are you saying? You can help me?”

“Maybe, maybe not. Depends.”

“Depends?” asked the president plaintively. “On what?”

“On what you do about things, doodoo.”

“What things?”

“You’ll see. You’re about to be visited by three ghosts, Hopalong.”

“Ghosts? But— but, aren’t you a ghost, Ronnie?”

The spirit shook its mane of white hair so that it flowed gently, as if caught in a slight breeze.

“Yup, little pardner, I guess you could say that. I *am* a ghost. But I mean three other ghosts—you know, like in old Dickens’s story, *A Christmas Carol*.”

“Dickens? Was he in the last administration?”

“No, you insufferable pinhead. Didn’t you ever read anything, even that?”

“Oh, I do read,” corrected the president, obviously piqued at a reference to his lack of cultural interest. “I read history. I do. Washington, Lincoln, Teddy Roosevelt. And I read a book by Albert Cammus, that French feller. And I read

three Shakespeares.”

The spirit laughed, quite heartily, until it choked on its own phlegm.

“Oh, yes, you’re a big reader,” it said when it got its voice back under control. “I’ve heard about that. You and Rove. And all those biographies. Neat little adulatory stories about your predecessors, trying to figure out how to go down in history the way they did. Too bad you couldn’t have won the Revolutionary War, or had an inquiring mind like Jefferson, or freed the slaves like Lincoln. Those things would have been winners for you, wouldn’t they? So you had to start a war of your own, and save the world from terrorism, you dingbat. And in the process, to millions of people around the globe, you became the biggest terrorist since Genghis Khan and Adolph Hitler.

“You really need this, you know. And if you don’t get a better spirit about things, well, I won’t be accountable for what happens to you, you little pain in the heinie.”

Screwidge looked totally dismayed. It made even the irate spirit begin to regard him a trifle more sympathetically.

“Look, Screwidge,” said the spirit, “it’s not my place to ride you. History’s gonna do that. I’m here to tell you to expect some visitors—these three ghosts, like in Dickens’ *Christmas Carol*. They’re gonna visit you in a little while, the way I have. Only they’re gonna show you some things you need to think about. And then—well, then, if you have any guts at all, and there’s anything inside that diminutive pea-brain of yours worth savin’—well, we’ll just have to see about that.

“Meanwhile, visiting you like this has given me a headache. I’m gonna go off and find me a place to lie down for a while. I’ve played my part, and I think

I've played it well. Maybe not as well as in some of my Hollywood films. But people'll have to take into account that this really wasn't such a great role. Anyway, little guy, get ready. You're gonna have some strange callers."

With that, the spirit appeared to swell, then diminish, then swell again, very large this time, and finally to diminish to the point where it exited through a keyhole, trailing its chains and aura with it, leaving only a slight tinkling noise in its wake.

The First Ghost

Josh Bolten was leaning over the president, gently tapping his fingers against the president's face and saying, "Mr. President, Mr. President."

But the face the president beheld was not that of his faithful assistant Josh Bolten. It was the face of a Latino roustabout from the Texas oil fields, a short, swarthy man with cold black hair falling over his face and collar, and thick, fat lips that lay like Cupid's bows between equally fat cheeks. A heavy stubble of black beard covered his jaws and chin.

The man was clad in filthy blue jeans, one leg of which bore a ripped place about four inches long, and over which draped a faded red-and-black checkered shirt smudged with oil, the same way his face and hands and jeans were also smudged with oil. On his feet were the thick-toed boots of a rigger, which were reinforced with steel and, when they were new three years before, had cost him the price of half a week's wages.

"Hola!" said the man in a cheerful, matter-of-fact way. "I have the honor to

be the ghost of Christmas Past, Señor Presidente.”

“You’re kiddin’ me.”

“Oh no, Señor Presidente. I never kid. I have spent too much of my life working to be a kidder, the way some people are.”

“But if I was gonna see a ghost about the past, I’d a thought it would have been someone from Yale—one of my ol’ drinkin’ buddies—or maybe somebody from my days as governor of Texas. You know, one of those guys from Austin. Or even Anne Richards. I wouldn’t mind seein’ ol’ Anne again, even if she couldn’t stand my guts.”

“Maybe you’d have preferred someone from your old ball club, Señor Presidente. But I’m afraid you are stuck with me. My name is Juan La Fuente Gonzales, like your friend Alberto, but you can call me José.”

The president looked at him intently, as if trying to recognize him. “Don’t I know you from somewhere, José? Did you work for me once?”

The ghost shook his head. “No, Señor Presidente, although I can understand your mistake. We all looked alike to you. I think you once joked about that.”

“Sorry, José. Just exactly what kind of business do we have to transact between us?”

“You will see, Señor Presidente. Come with me.” He reached out for Screwidge to take his hand, but Screwidge shrank back.

“Uh—I don’t exactly like to touch people, José.”

“I have noticed that, Señor Presidente. But this time I’m afraid you will have to make an exception.”

He reached out and took Screwidge’s hand. Suddenly they shot away into

the frosty atmosphere like a couple of balloons releasing air at a high rate of speed. When they came to a stop, it was in a large, old-fashioned drawing room where people were opening Christmas presents.

“Why— ,” the president stammered. “How’d you do that, José? There are my grandparents, up at Kennebunkport. And my parents too. And my uncle and aunt. And there I am, and my brothers. I remember that sled my grandfather, old Webenezer, gave me. He said Santa had brought it, but I knew better, even then. Not that I didn’t believe in Santa Claus. But I thought my grandpa was bigger’n Santa himself. And, besides, I’d seen him carryin’ in a big package on Christmas Eve, and knew it had to be a sled.”

José nodded, and continued to watch the scene as it unfolded.

Barbara Bush, the president’s mother, had just opened a small present, revealing a lovely necklace. She leaned over to her husband George and gave him a peck on the cheek. Then she solicited his help in fastening the clasp behind her neck.

“It’s beautiful, George,” she cooed. “I really love it.”

“It becomes you, Barb,” he said softly.

“My folks really did love each other,” said the president, admiringly. “They played a big part in my life.”

“I know,” said José. “A big part. Maybe that’s why some people wondered why you didn’t consult your father more before going to war in Iraq. Your dad had a chance to do the same, after the Gulf War, but he didn’t want to destabilize the country by taking out Saddam Hussein.”

“Whoa, José!” said Screwidge. “Who are you to be lecturing me on what

I've done in the presidency? I said my parents really loved each other. I didn't say my dad was always right about the decisions he made."

"Suit yourself," said José noncommittally. "But come on, Señor Presidente, we're running late."

He reached out and took Screwidge's hand, triggering the whooshing balloon effect again, and this time they ended up in a graduation ceremony.

"Hey!" exclaimed Screwidge. "I know where we are. This is Yale! I'm graduating from college. There's ol' Dean Whatzizname—and Billy Bob Wheeler. I couldn't believe Billy Bob accumulated enough points to graduate. He was drunk so much that half the time he forgot to go to class."

"What about yourself?"

"Well, I guess that was sort of a miracle too. Look, there I am, just walking across the stage to get my diploma now. That's the president of Yale—I forget his name—he's about to shake my hand and present me with my diploma."

Suddenly the figure walking across the stage lurched and fell into the university president, who awkwardly bore him up until he could regain his feet.

"Man," said the spirit, "it looks like you were three sheets to the wind, Señor Presidente. Listen to those guys on the third row, your fraternity buddies."

First fraternity brother: "Did you see that? Ol' Georgy-Porgy just took a tumble and almost knocked the president down!"

Second fraternity brother: "He's tanked."

Third fraternity brother: "I can't remember a time when he wasn't."

Fourth fraternity brother: "He didn't have to worry. With his connections, there was no way they were gonna fail him."

Second fraternity brother: “Yeah, his ol’ man was a legend here.”

First fraternity brother: “And his granddad before that.”

Fourth fraternity brother: “I heard they’re giving him a new car for his graduation.”

Third fraternity brother: “Yeah? What kind?”

Fourth fraternity brother: “Probably a Porsche.”

First fraternity brother laughed, then said: “Don’t worry. He’ll drive it into a telephone pole in a week.”

Second fraternity brother: “They’ll just buy him another.”

Fourth fraternity brother: “You’re right. Ah, what the hell. It’s the free enterprise system, you know. The more cars ol’ Georgy-Porgy wrecks, the more cars Detroit sells. What goes around, comes around.”

The president watched this scene with a growing mistiness in his countenance.

“God,” he said, “those were good days. No responsibilities. Just boozin’ my way through college. I’d love to have ‘em back again.”

José looked at him reprimandingly. “No way, Señor Presidente. Life always goes forward, not backward. And we have to go forward too, or I’ll get chewed out for making everybody else late.”

At this, he took Screwidge’s hand once more, and the two of them whooshed away to another scene. This time it was to a domestic exchange in a small house.

“That’s Laura and me,” Screwidge said as he watched two young people arguing with one another over a kitchen table. “Hey, Laura, honey, you looked pretty good back then!”

“Yeah, but you looked a mess,” said José. “Let’s listen in.”

Laura: “You have promised me a thousand times that you wouldn’t drink so much!”

George, obviously half-smashed: “Honey, why shouldn’t I drink? A man’s got to drink a few beers in his lifetime, or he’s not much of a man.”

Laura: “Whoever told you you’re a man, George Webenezer Screwidge? A man would know when to stop drinking. A man would take care of his family. A man wouldn’t always depend on his parents and grandparents to bail him out of trouble. A man would have respect for his wife and children.”

George, trying to grope his wife: “Aw, honey.”

Laura, pushing him away: “Don’t ‘Aw, honey’ me, George Webenezer Screwidge! This is the last time you and I are going through this scene. If you come home drunk one more time, it’s over. I mean it, buddy—finished, kaput, gone forever.”

“We argued a lot back then,” the president confessed to the ghost. “It was the drink. I shouldn’t have done it.”

José looked at him indifferently and shrugged his shoulders.

“No, seriously, I mean it. I was wrong to do it. And Laura was right. Bless her heart, she stopped me from doing it. I knew she meant it. I was going to lose her and the girls if I didn’t straighten up. So I was going to this little Bible study, you know—bunch of guys out there in Midland who got together and talked about the scriptures and how Jesus had saved them from this and that. I figured if he could save ol’ Barney Hargrove after Barney tricked his dad outa nearly four hundred thousand dollars, he could probably save me too. So I prayed, and the rest

of them prayed, and Jesus did his thing. I mean, he really did it. He took away my appetite for liquor and I straightened up. I've been a born-again Christian ever since!"

Again the spirit regarded him with half-interest, as if he might not be telling the truth.

"No, man," Screwidge said loudly, realizing the spirit was challenging him. "I mean it! I haven't had a drop of alcohol since."

The spirit smiled. "Not a single one?"

The president backed down a little. Sheepishly, he admitted, "Well, a time or two. But there was always a good reason. Like that week after the big hurricane hit New Orleans. I was down at the ranch, you know, and I kept getting all this bad news about the levees breaking and the water flooding everything, and—well, I remembered how comfortin' a glass of Jack Daniels could be at a time like that, and I promised myself I'd only take a little."

"Yeah?" asked the spirit, dubious. "And you did? Only a little?"

Screwidge hung his head in shame. "Well, it was a terrible time, José. I didn't know what to do. Only the cleaners and me knew how scared I was. The whole country was lookin' to me to do somethin', and there was nothin' I could do. I wanted to be a leader, but, hell, José, you can't lead if you ain't got any troops willin' to follow. And my troops were useless right then, man. Friggin' useless. I had to have a drink—and another—and another. And, before I realized what was happenin', I'd had too many. I had a hangover for two, three days. It was awful! I was s'posed to be runnin' the country, an' I couldn't a run a rural post office if nobody lived within a hundred miles and there was never any mail."

The spirit regarded him with what appeared to be a modicum of sympathy, and said: “You know, Señor Presidente, a little humility doesn’t go amiss on you. Have you ever thought about showing it more often?”

Screwidge looked at the spirit thoughtfully for a moment, as if he had just proposed the most radical idea in the world. Then, slowly, he began to shake his head in the negative.

“Naw, José, it wouldn’t work. People like their leaders to be strong—you know, never back down, never admit they’re wrong, never admit they’ve done anything they shouldn’t’ve.”

The spirit studied him carefully for a minute, then made a little clacking noise with his mouth and said, “You’re a harder case than I expected, Señor Presidente. Too hard for me. I think you need somebody with a little more finesse than I have, and a lot more smarts.”

Then the spirit took out a cell phone, dialed, and spoke into it: “Sorry, boss, I didn’t do so good. He’s a tough nut to crack. You’d better send in the next team. Besides, I think my tortillas are gettin’ cold.”

The spirit clapped his cell phone shut, took one more look at Screwidge, and suddenly whooshed away by himself, leaving the president standing alone in bewilderment.

The Second Ghost

“Hey, what’s goin’ on here?” demanded Screwidge. “People don’t leave the room until I tell them they can. Where’s José? Why didn’t he take me with him?”

A cold breeze suddenly blew over the president, causing him to feel chilly and afraid.

“What’s that?” he asked. “What’s goin’ on here? I’m cold! Why doesn’t somebody bring me my overcoat?”

A second spirit materialized beside the president, holding an overcoat for him to slip into. When Screwge had donned it, the spirit also produced a pair of earmuffs and a lovely woolen scarf out of thin air, as if by magic.

“There you are, Mr. President,” he said in a very cultured British accent. Dressed in striped pants and cutaway coat, and holding an English bowler, he was in fact the very image of a London diplomat. “Your wish, sir—up to a point, of course—is my command.”

“Who’re you?” demanded Screwge. “You sound just like my friend Tony Blair.”

“Ah,” the spirit said, obviously amused. “We all sound alike, don’t we? All but the Cockneys, that is. And you’re so blind and deaf to the subtleties in everything that you wouldn’t know the difference. I expect I could be Michael Caine and you’d still think I was your friend Tony.”

“You’re another spirit, aren’t you?” said Screwge. He pronounced the word as if it were *spur-it*, possibly because he had spent so many years in West Texas. “What happened to José?”

“José? Oh, you mean Mr. Gonzales. I know you spent some time with him—saw a few scenes, and the like. Apparently it didn’t help much. He phoned for reinforcements. Back-up. You know, more troops.”

“Are you a reporter? They’re always askin’ about troop levels and that sort

o' thing.”

The spirit laughed.

“A reporter? Oh, no. Not me, Screwidge. I spent my life in foreign service, not Fleet Street. Codes, secret deals, clandestine operations, that sort of thing. I always read the newspapers, but I never wrote for them.”

“Ah,” said the president, brightening at the information. “This is better. I’m used to you guys in your striped pants and bowler hats. I’m used to talkin’ your language.”

“Really?” asked the spirit. “Funny. I never noticed. It isn’t as if you ever spoke it yourself.”

“Aw, spirit—what’s your name, I can’t keep callin’ you ‘spirit’ (again he pronounced it as *spur-it*)—don’t make fun of me. I may talk funny, and there’s lots of words I have trouble with—”

“I can think of a few,” said the spirit nonchalantly.

“I know, but I’ll ask you to remember that you’re talkin’ to the most powerful man in the world here. I may sound like a cowpoke, but I could blow up the whole damn world if I took a notion to. So keep a civil tongue in your head, man.”

“Cecil.”

“Cecil?” The president was puzzled.

“My name is Cecil. My mother read a biography of Cecil J. Rhodes, the great Englishman who did so much to shape the continent of Africa.”

“He didn’t do a very good job, in my opinion.”

The spirit smiled. “You’re a good one to express an opinion on someone

who didn't do 'a very good job,'" he said. "What do you think history is going to say about your presidency?"

"They're gonna say I was pretty damn good," he answered truculently. "I mean, I'm the one who introduced freedom to the Middle East."

"Oh, are you?" asked the spirit. "You planted democracy there, did you? And did it ever occur to you that it wouldn't grow? That it might wither and die like a cut flower from some third-rate greenhouse?"

"At least, I had the idea. It was what I intended to do."

"Ah, yes. You *intended*. But if you had been smarter, you might have studied the situation a little more and realized that the people of Iraq had to want their freedom before you marched in and handed it to them. Then you might have had second thoughts about all the lives that would be lost and all the votes you Republicans would lose because of your precipitous actions and lack of a follow-up plan."

The president, stung by this criticism, turned around, clasping himself and refusing to listen to any more.

"Sensitive, are we?" asked the spirit. "Oh well, I suppose I knew that already. You could never face the truth with your own press corps, so there wasn't much likelihood you'd face it with me. We may as well get on with it. We have a bit of ground to cover before my assignment is completed."

Screwidge looked around at him shyly, as if to signal doubtful assent. Tentatively, he reached out his hand, expecting the spirit to take it.

"Oh, no," said the spirit, clearly flinching at the proffered hand. "None of that touchy-feely stuff with me, my friend. You Americans are a little too familiar

for my taste.”

Raising his hand, he appeared to draw the outline of a door on the very air itself, and suddenly an actual door appeared where none had been. With a courtly bow and a sweep of his bowler, the spirit permitted the president to step through ahead of him.

On the other side of the newly-defined door, Screwidge found himself in an office where four men—correction, three men and a woman—were sitting around a table. The demeanor of the four persons, together with the shelves of books and the yellow legal pads on the table before them, immediately marked the space as a law office.

“That’s Scooter!” exclaimed the president, walking toward a slightly bent, middle-aged man at one end of the table. “Scooter, how are you, old man? I’m sorry I haven’t been able to see you, but you know how it is.”

“He can’t see you or hear you,” said the spirit calmly. “You’re in the present now, it’s true. But that doesn’t allow us to break any of the rules of the spirit world. You might say, he’s real and we’re not, or something like that. He’s actually conferring with his lawyers as we stand here.”

“But I meant it. I’m really sorry about what’s happened to him. He was a good guy. I don’t know all the ins and outs of this thing—there’s a lot goes on in the White House they don’t tell me, believe it or not—but I’ve always had a feeling he was coverin’ for Dick. You know, Dick Cheney, my vice-president.”

The spirit nodded. He knew.

“I’m sure Dick didn’t do anything wrong either. Or my friend Karl Rove, for that matter. They didn’t mean to out that Valerie Plame, the woman it was all

about. At least, I don't think they did. They didn't tell me, if they did."

The president's voice was beginning to wind down, like a toy that was losing its energy. He sounded as if he weren't quite sure of the matter at hand—as if he knew he might have been left out of a very important loop.

He regarded Libby and the three attorneys as they chatted.

Libby: "What are we really looking at if I'm convicted? Five years? Three? Maybe confinement in a recreational facility for eighteen months?"

The three others looked at each other. Only one, a portly man at the other end of the table, looked Libby squarely in the eye.

Lawyer: "We can't say, Scooter. You know how it is. You have to hope for the best and be prepared for the worst. Of course, if you're willing to turn state's evidence. . ."

Libby paused before he answered. "I know."

It was obvious that he thought of something he didn't want to express.

The woman attorney said, "The president *might* pardon you, but probably not until he's going out of office. He couldn't afford to do it before then. Too much fall-out."

Screwidge brightened. "She's right. I've thought of doing that. In fact, I *will* do it! Don't worry, Scooter, I won't let you swing for this. I'll take care of it!"

The spirit laughed aloud. "He can't hear you, Screwidge. I wish he could. It might cheer him up a little. He's taking a big fall for your team, you know. But then, he always knew it would be this way. I mean, the drones have to be willing to die for the queen bee, don't they?"

“Huh?”

“Just a little apiary humor.”

“Ape— What’s this got to do with Darwin? You believe in evolution?”

“No, Screwidge, not apes. Don’t worry, old man. I shouldn’t have indulged myself.”

“He will be all right, won’t he?” asked the president, clearly concerned.

“He’s a good man, Scooter. I wouldn’t want him to get hurt on my account, or anybody else’s, for that matter.”

“That’s commendable. But I’m not sure it’s up to us. Events will simply have to unfold, don’t you think?”

Before Screwidge could open his mouth to speak, the spirit was raising his hand and drawing another door in the side of the present.

“After you,” he said quietly when the door appeared.

This time, the president stepped through the door and found himself in a tiny, poorly furnished kitchen with an elderly man and woman, who were seated in wooden chairs at a small table. Before them on the table stood an empty pharmaceutical vial.

“I apologize, Mabel,” said the man, whose face, wrinkled and spotted with age, and framed by a few strands of white hair, was filled with consternation.

“It isn’t your fault,” responded Mabel, who looked to be about the same age as the man. Her hair had a dry, frizzled look suggesting it had been permed too many times through the years, and her bare arms were flabby on the tabletop, as if she had once been heavy and had lost a lot of weight. “You don’t have anything to apologize to me for, Sam.”

“Yes, I do, honey. I apologize for not having been a better provider. I shouldn’t have worked for a company that didn’t have a decent health-care plan. Then we wouldn’t be facing this dilemma.”

“What’s their dilemma?” asked the president, apparently concerned.

“It’s a common one,” said the spirit. “You see that medicine bottle? It’s empty. There are several more in the drawer over there that are almost empty as well. Mabel has a lot of medical problems. She’s a diabetic. She has also had cancer and still takes medicine for that. The diabetes makes her heart fibrillate in an odd pattern, and they have to give her pills for that. It would take an M.D. to give you the full particulars, but suffice it to say that she’s like a lot of older citizens in your country who need chemical assistance merely to stay alive.”

The president seemed to stand taller. “I’ll have you know I passed a prescription drug amendment to Medicare and Medicaid—the first ever.”

“Yes, your friends in Congress did. But it isn’t really much help to somebody like Mabel and Sam, now, is it? I mean, that famous ‘doughnut hole’ in the middle of the coverage. Whoever thought that one up, Screwidge, some congressman with a doughnut hole in his head? Sam and Mabel can buy about a third of the medicine she needs every year without its killing them. But then they hit the doughnut hole and have to start paying out of their own pockets, and they don’t have it, my self-confident little friend. They’re sitting there now, wondering what they’re going to do. They’ve been eating only two meals a day for the last eight months, trying to save enough to cover Mabel’s drug bill when the coverage stops protecting them, but it isn’t enough. Sam is feeling miserable about it. He loves Mabel, you know, whether you understand that sort of thing or not. He feels

that he has let her down.”

“But it isn’t his fault,” said Screwge, looking concerned. “He didn’t let her down.”

“No. But he feels as if he did. He even said the other day that they should have moved to Britain when they were younger, and now they wouldn’t have this problem.”

“Britain. You have socialized medicine in Britain. Socialized medicine isn’t as good as the American system. I’ve always heard that.”

The spirit smiled indulgently. “Maybe. But Sam and Mabel aren’t so sure. Neither are a lot of older people who can’t afford to eat and buy their medications too. At least, in Great Britain, we take care of all our citizens, from the cradle to the grave.”

The president adopted a petulant look. “It isn’t my fault. I wanted a better health-care plan. I can’t help it if those bozos in Congress couldn’t come up with anything better than this.”

“They said it was because you’d spent so much money on your war in Iraq. They couldn’t afford anything better at the present time.”

Screwge was silent before this accusation. The spirit looked at his wristwatch. “Oh my. Time’s flying, Screwge. We’ve got to be getting on to our next appointment.”

“Appointment?” echoed the president as the spirit sketched in another door and they walked through it into yet another scene.

“Hey!” said Screwge. “I don’t want to be here. This is a court room. And it must be in Iraq, because there’s that monster Saddam Hussein sitting over there.

This is his trial, isn't it? I wanted him caught, understand, but I never wanted to be in the same room with him. This is going too far, mister!"

"Sorry," said the spirit. "Out of my control, I'm afraid. These things were appointed before either of us was born. I'm just a facilitator, as they say."

"Facilitator, my foot! Well, you can just facilitate me right out of here!"

"Sorry, your excellency, but it doesn't work that way. We have business here. Whatever you may think of him, Saddam Hussein was the sovereign ruler of a country you invaded. That means you're related to him and what happens to him, whether you want to be or not. You can't just stroll down history lane, knocking over the landmarks and then claiming immunity from the consequences. Listen to what they're saying."

A Muslim woman was sitting in the dock, being questioned by the prosecutor. She appeared very diffident, as though she was not born to be giving evidence in such a public place.

"And then what happened, madam?" asked the prosecutor.

"Then they came and took my little boy, my Josef, away, and I never saw him again."

"Did you hear from him or about him?"

She looked at Saddam, then back at the prosecutor. Her eyes filled with tears.

"I heard that they tortured him in the prison. They cut him with knives and pulled out all his fingernails. They placed a burning cigarette in one of his eyes. They—" She paused and looked down at her lap. "They took away his manhood."

The prosecutor waited respectfully, then said, "They castrated your son?"

She continued to look at her lap, but eventually nodded slightly, in the affirmative.

“See, spirit?” said the president, encouraged at her testimony. “See? I did the right thing, invading that creep’s country. He’s a monster. Everybody knows he’s a monster. He gassed his own people. He put people in prison for no reason. He deserves to die for what he did.”

The spirit regarded him thoughtfully. “Because he was responsible for so many deaths and so much torture?”

“Damn right,” answered the president.

“And what about yourself?” asked the spirit.

Screwidge stared at him. “What do you mean, what about myself?”

“I mean, sir, what about you? You are now responsible for a lot more deaths than Saddam Hussein ever caused. And a lot more torture, according to some reports. You’ve been to the military hospitals, seen the young men with their arms blown off, or their legs and buttocks. Aren’t you in some sense responsible for them and the agony that’s going to dog them the rest of their lives? How are you any better than Saddam Hussein?”

Screwidge looked as if he had been slapped in the face with a wet towel.

“Why— why, it’s different,” he sputtered. “It’s very different! He meant to hurt all those people. I didn’t. I didn’t really want anybody to get hurt.”

The spirit cocked his head as if to question the veracity of the president.

“Oh?” he said. “You started a war without waiting for the weapons inspectors to finish their work, and you didn’t want anybody to get hurt? What kind of rock did you crawl out from under, Mr. President, that you thought you

could wage a war without wreaking death and destruction and suffering on thousands of people? Innocent people, in many cases. People who never wanted a war. People who don't understand politics and oil and economics and all the things that led you and your advisors into this war in the first place? Really, sir. I knew you weren't the brainy sort, but I expected better of you than this. Don't screw around with the spirits, Mr. Screwidge."

The president opened his mouth to protest, but nothing came out. He closed it and opened it again, but still no words would form.

Just then, Saddam Hussein diverted the attention of everybody in the courtroom by standing and shouting at the judge.

"You call me a tyrant," he said. "I only did what any ruler in my place would have done to preserve order. You see what a difficult, unruly nation this is, with one faction vying against another. The real tyrant of this world is George W. Screwidge, the president of the United States of America, who uses the vast power of his nation to terrorize the peoples of this region. Ask the president of Egypt, the king of Saudi Arabia, the rulers of Iran and Syria. They will tell you. George W. Screwidge is the evil one!"

The president's face was immediately flushed with rage. He strode toward the box where Saddam stood, shaking his fist at the former dictator of Iraq.

"Sorry, Screwidge, he can't see you," said the spirit.

Screwidge turned and marched toward the judge's desk, pointing his finger at Saddam and saying, "Judge, he's the evil one. Ask anybody in my country and they'll tell you. You should put that man to death for his crimes. If you don't, future generations will say you didn't do your duty."

“No use, Screwidge,” said the spirit. “He can’t hear you either.”

“But it isn’t fair,” whined the president. “He gets to say what he wants, but I don’t. Why isn’t somebody voicing *my* point of view?”

“Sorry,” said the spirit. “It really *is* your point of view, isn’t it?”

“What does that mean?” The president had an ugly twist to his face.

“It means that everything in this world is about point of view, isn’t it? I mean, you adopted the point of view that Saddam had weapons and could destroy the free world. Your point of view led to the war. In fact, there are people who insist that you foisted your point of view on them, when they didn’t really feel like going to war. Saddam is entitled to his point of view too. And it is his point of view that you invaded his sovereign country without the right to do so, and *you*, not he, ought to be in the dock today for doing it.”

“Balderdash!” the president exploded. “Poppycock and balderdash! I won’t stand for this kind of insolence. Spirit, I want out of here right now. Take me home. I don’t care what happens to me, I don’t want to be here.”

The spirit reached into the air and, in a familiar gesture, drew a doorway. Once again, he bowed courteously, and the president strode through the opening into a murky region beyond.

“I’m afraid, sir, it’s obvious,” said the spirit when they were alone, “that you have grown weary of yours truly. It’s just as well, for I fear I have done all I could for you. Now it is up to the third spirit.”

He bowed low again, reaching the arm with the bowler in his hand across his middle until it almost touched the ground. “By your leave, sir,” he said, and was gone.

The Third and Final Spirit

“God!” said Screwge when he was alone. “This is my worst nightmare. In fact, it is all of my nightmares rolled into one. I’m going to have to lay off those zesty enchiladas cook has been making for me.”

“Hello, sir,” said a wee voice from behind him.

He turned, and beheld a slender young black girl of perhaps thirteen or fourteen. She was wearing a red party dress with alternating panels of red, green, and gold in the skirt. Her feet were adorned by white socks and a pair of shiny, black patent-leather shoes with straps across the insteps. Her hair was plaited into three pigtails, with a small green ribbon at the tip of one, a red ribbon at the tip of the second, and a gold ribbon at the tip of the third. Her eyes were round, dark, and glistening. Her skin was smooth, and her teeth were large and very white, radiant against her dark face. She would probably grow to them eventually, but for now they looked a little over-sized.

“Well, hello,” said Screwge, obviously relaxing before such a young and probably inexperienced spirit. He didn’t like children, but at least they constituted a smaller threat than adults. “And what’s your name?”

“I’m Esmerelda,” she said sweetly, shifting her weight from one inturned foot to the other and rocking slightly as she clasped her hands in front of her and raised them shyly to her mouth.

“Esmerelda, eh? That’s a mighty fancy name for such a little girl.”

“It isn’t my real name.”

“No? Why is that?”

“Oh,” she said, still rocking on her feet, “I liked it better than my real name.”

“What’s your real name?”

“It’s Esmerelda now.”

“Oh.” The president laughed. “My name is President Screwge.”

“I knew that. But that isn’t your real name either.”

“What do you mean?”

“It isn’t your real name. My daddy said your name is ‘Stupid Idiotic.’”

The president, abashed at this, looked suddenly lost and incompetent.

“That isn’t very nice,” he said.

She smiled innocently. “My daddy wasn’t always a nice man,” she said.

“Where is your daddy?” asked Screwge.

“He lives in Mississippi,” she said, “with my mama.”

“Oh? And why aren’t you with them?”

“I died.”

He studied her a minute, then said, “Do I know you from somewhere, Esmerelda? You look sorta familiar to me.”

She nodded and said “Uh-huh.”

“Well, where was it? Did you ever come to the White House?”

“No, sir.”

“Did I meet you when I was campaigning in Mississippi?”

Again she shook her head.

“It was after Hurricane Katrina, when you came to Hattiesburg.”

“Oh,” said the president, shrinking a little, as if he found the mention of the

hurricane distasteful. “Hattiesburg.”

“Yessir. You posed for a picture with your arm around me.”

“But— but that wasn’t long ago, Esmerelda. What happened? Why did you die?”

“They told you that when you put your arm around me for the picture.”

“They did? What was it?”

“I had cancer.”

“Why, that’s a shame.”

“You didn’t think so then.”

“I didn’t? What do you mean?”

“You just said, ‘That’s nice,’ and patted me on the head and went on smiling for the photographers.”

“Did— did the hurricane wipe out your folks’ house?”

“Yessir. We was livin’ in a tent when I died.”

“You mean, you weren’t in the hospital?”

“No, sir. ‘Twarn’t no hospital left in our town after the hurricane.”

“Why, that’s terrible, honey. You should have told me. I could have gotten you and your family to Memphis, to the big children’s hospital there.”

“They did tell you, sir.”

“I— I— ” The president was stymied, and didn’t know what to say. He had clearly missed a signal that day in Mississippi.

“Are you supposed to take me somewhere?” he asked.

“Yessir, if you’ll kindly grasp my hand.”

This time Screwidge reached out eagerly to take the spirit’s hand. “Let’s go,

sweetheart. This time you're the boss."

Esmerelda reached up and tugged the pigtail on the left side of her head, the one with the red ribbon on it.

There was no whoosh and sudden departure, as with the first spirit. There was no magical drawing of a door that opened onto some important scene, as with the second spirit. Instead, there was a languid, gentle movement through a lilac-colored cloud that smelled like grapes and hyacinths and lilacs all combined.

"I like this," said Screwge.

"So do I," said the spirit.

"This is fun," he said.

She giggled.

"What's this?" said Screwge when the cloud thinned away and they were standing on solid ground again. "Looks like a funeral. Somebody's being buried."

"Yes," said the spirit.

"Looks like somebody important. Definitely a state funeral. Look at all the limousines. And the honor guard. And the airplanes flying overhead. That woman over there, the one with her head down and the veil over her face—she looks familiar. Do I know her, Esmerelda?"

The spirit nodded.

"Mama?"

The president recognized the sad figure as that of Barbara Bush. Her famous white hair was almost completely hidden by a black hat and veil. Then he saw the other women beside her. "Laura? My daughters? And that's me beside them. God, I look old! My hair is white. Who— who's died? Oh no! My dad!

It's my dad! My dad is dead and they're burying him."

He moved instinctively close to the mourners, reaching out to touch them, but they did not notice.

"Dad? He's in the coffin," he said, looking at the beautiful rosewood box resting on the grave, with a large American flag covering most of it. "I didn't get to see him!"

"Oh yes," said the spirit. "You saw. They laid him in the rotunda at the capitol for several days. You went over every day and knelt by his coffin. There were always photographers there to take your picture doing it."

"Photographers?" The thought was obviously repugnant to the president. "Couldn't I ever get away from them, even at a time like that?"

Esmerelda looked at him sympathetically, but said nothing.

He shook his head slowly from side to side.

"He was a great dad," he said, wiping tears from his eyes. "I loved him. He was such a gentle man. Strong but gentle. I wanted to be like him, but I never could. Whenever I tried to be strong, I came across as crass and unfeeling. Oh, Dad, I'll miss you."

"I miss my daddy too," said Esmerelda.

Screwidge looked at her a moment, then back at himself and his family at the graveside.

"Poor mama," he said. "She was his right hand. She never wanted to outlive him. I remember her saying that."

"Your daughters are pretty," said Esmerelda admiringly.

"They'll miss him too," he said. "He was a good grandfather."

“Did you listen to your father?”

The president hung his head and looked sad. “No, not very much. I guess I resented him because he was always so successful. I was sort of a rebel.”

“Even after you became the president?”

“Especially after I became the president. He didn’t think we should invade Iraq, but I wouldn’t listen. ‘You had your time,’ I told him. ‘This is mine.’” He paused. “Now I wish I had listened.”

“This is making you sad. Let’s go.”

She reached for his hand and he let her take it. With the other hand, she grasped the pigtail on the right side of her head, the one with the green ribbon.

Again there was the lilac cloud and the smell of lilacs, hyacinths, and grapes. And again they floated away together in an altogether pleasant experience.

When they emerged from the cloud this time, they were standing in front of a large, impressive looking building. Across the doorway to the building, a sign engraved in stone read, “George W. Screwidge Library.”

“This is my library!” exclaimed the president. “The one my friends built down in Texas. Man, doesn’t it look great! And it’s huge, Esmerelda— really huge!”

“It sure is,” she said, shielding her eyes against the sun and looking up at the building.

“But who are all those people out at the street?” Screwidge asked.

“Maybe they’re protesters,” said the spirit.

The two stood and watched hundreds of people of all ages parading back and forth on the sidewalk with placards held aloft. It was a quiet, orderly

demonstration, but the very size of it indicated a seriousness of purpose beyond anything Screwidge would have expected outside his library. He walked toward them in order to read the signs they were carrying.

One said, “Screwed by Screwidge.”

Another read, “Not ALL Texans Honor This Place.”

Yet another proclaimed, “Screwidge and Benedict Arnold—They Don’t Belong in Our History Books.”

“I don’t understand,” said Screwidge in a bewildered voice. “I didn’t know this building had even been built yet, and yet here are all these people demonstrating against me.”

“Remember, Mr. President,” said Esmerelda, “this is the future. These are things that haven’t even happened yet.”

“But they will happen? Is that the message? Do they *have* to happen this way, or is it still possible to change them?”

Esmerelda smiled one of her biggest smiles, and her eyes were dancing.

“You’re gettin’ smarter, Mr. President,” she said. “I would say that most people can change the future if they want to. But you have to really want to.”

Just then, the president noticed another imposing building on the other side of the street. It was just as large as the library dedicated to his memory.

A stately sign at the corner of the lawn read, “The Other Side of the Story.”

“What does that mean?” he asked. ““The Other Side of the Story.””

“Let’s go look,” said Esmerelda, taking his hand.

It was such a short distance that the cloud was not very thick. But it was still a pleasant little journey.

Inside, they walked down a big hall. An archway on the right proclaimed “The Real Story of the 2000 Election.” Within that room, they beheld displays of voting machines, enlarged photographs of ballots with hanging chads on them, maps showing voting districts all over the U.S., posters reminding people of the challenges to the vote in Ohio and Florida, and a group of life-size statues representing the Supreme Court as it deliberated on the Democrats’ appeal to overturn the decision awarding the Florida electoral votes to Screwge.

In one alcove of the room, there was a continuously-running film of the election coverage, edited in such a way as to suggest that Screwge hadn’t really won the election at all, but had received it as the result of a lot of skullduggery on the part of clever assistants who were bent on securing a Republican presidency.

“This— this isn’t right,” sputtered Screwge. “I won this election fair and square. Didn’t I?”

The question had been addressed to Esmerelda. She hunched up her shoulders and gestured as if to say, “Don’t ask me, I’m just a kid.”

Crossing the hall, they found an arch that announced “The Real Story on WMDs.” Inside, there were numerous life-like displays, including a holograph show of Secretary of State Colin Powell displaying the famous sketches of mobile chemical vehicles to the United Nations assembly and another of Condoleezza Rice holding up aluminum tubes that she said were like the ones the Iraqis were using to make nuclear missiles.

“I am sick and tired of this,” spat out the president. “I have told people repeatedly that it was all an intelligence mistake. And it wasn’t just our people who were at fault. The British thought so too. And so did the U.N. I don’t want

to go to my grave with this carved on my tombstone. Won't they ever let up?!"

Esmerelda looked sorry for him, and shook her head slowly in sympathy.

Other rooms off the hall featured the truth behind the big phone- and wire-tapping controversy, in which the president claimed he had the authority to conduct secret surveillance on U.S. citizens and others said he did not; the widespread circle of corruption that touched such figures as Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist, House Majority Leader Tom DeLay, Representative Randy Cunningham of California, and numerous members of Congress who had received large contributions from a man named Jack Abramoff; the leaking of CIA agent Valery Plame's name to columnist Robert Novak; the embarrassing FEMA debacle related to Hurricanes Katrina and Rita; the public furor over the Dubai Ports deal; the tumultuous pre-election scandal over Congressman Mark Foley; and the running stand-offs against the impudent heads of state in Iran and North Korea.

"The most corrupt and ineffective administration since Grant and Harding," proclaimed one of the displays in the scandals room.

The president could only shake his head and sputter, "These things happen! It wasn't my fault! I'm an honest man. How dare they represent my administration this way?!"

In the FEMA room, Esmerelda was delighted to find her own picture in one of the photographs showing President Screwidge shaking hands and embracing hurricane victims.

"See!" she said to the president. "I told you that's where we met. Oh, that awful shirt and those ugly shorts I was wearing! Why couldn't I have had on a dress like this?"

“Honey,” said Screwge, “I can’t stand any more of this. This is awful. Who would have put up a museum like this, right across the street from my own library? Why did people let them?”

Esmerelda shrugged. “They say it’s a free country. Isn’t that what we’re trying to do for those people over in Iraq, Mr. President? Make them free so they can do whatever they want to?”

“I suppose so,” he grudgingly admitted. “But people should have respect for the presidency. Democracies won’t work without respect.”

She smiled, one of her big, infatuating smiles. “My daddy used to say that people will respect you when you respect yourself. I figure maybe he was right.”

“But I just can’t believe it. No other president has ever been treated this way. There isn’t an anti-Lincoln house across the street in Springfield from President Lincoln’s house. There isn’t an anti-Reagan museum across from President Reagan’s museum in California. There isn’t even an anti-Nixon place across the street from his museum, and if there was ever anybody who might have deserved it, it was probably him.”

“Well,” drawled Esmerelda, trying to look on the bright side, “maybe you’re just special, Mr. President. If yours is the only one they’ve treated this way, then people are gonna remember you.”

Screwge appeared bewildered and completely beaten.

“I’ve got to get away from here,” he said again. “This is awful. It makes me sick. Spirit, you’ve got to get me out of here!”

“Well, okay,” said Esmerelda, reaching out to take his hand. “If you insist.”

This time she reached back and grasped the pigtail behind her head, the one

with the gold ribbon on it, and they began their trip through the wonderful lilac air, smelling the seductive smell of the lilacs, hyacinths, and grapes. It was a longer trip than usual, and Screwidge was really enjoying himself by the time they reached their destination.

When the lilac-colored fog had cleared around them, they were standing in another graveyard. It was a beautiful, rolling acreage, with rows and rows of little white monuments.

“It’s a military cemetery,” said Screwidge. “I— I’ve been here before. I know this place.” He looked off to the East and saw the distinctive skyline of Washington, D.C., a few miles away. “This is Arlington Cemetery!”

Again, he and Esmerelda were eavesdropping on a funeral service. This time, it was obvious that it was a military funeral they were observing. A lonely caisson stood at the little road, and a flag-draped coffin lay in the midst of a cluster of mourners. Several yards away, a bugler was playing the sad, drawn-out notes of “Taps.” Two smart-looking U.S. Marines were removing the flag from the coffin and folding it with extraordinary precision into the tight little triangle that would be presented to someone in the family.

The president shook his head. “I’ve seen this too many times,” he said. “You never get used to it. In fact, it’s harder every time.”

“It makes me very sad,” said Esmerelda.

Instinctively, Screwidge began moving closer to the mourners, as he had so often done on similar occasions in real life. He forgot that they couldn’t hear him, and was about to say a word to the middle-aged woman receiving the flag when something about her made him realize who she was.

“No!” he said. “It can’t be! Spirit— spirit (he was still saying *spur-it*), how can this be?”

Esmerelda watched him in silence.

“It’s— it’s Jenna. My daughter Jenna. Is that her— her husband in the coffin?”

Esmerelda shook her head. “No, Mr. President. Her husband is standing beside her. That’s her son.”

“Her son? But how— ? I don’t understand. She wasn’t even married. Now she’s middle-aged. And married— ? Her son— ”

“Remember,” said Esmerelda quietly. “This is the future, Mr. President. Things that *will* be, not things that have been or things that are.”

“But— where? How? How did this happen?”

The spirit shook her head, so that her pigtails wafted gently around her head.

“I know it’s hard to believe,” she said. “But the war in Iraq is still going on. It isn’t called a war any more. You declared that the war was over when the Iraqis ratified their own constitution and elected their own government. You said now we just had a ‘presence’ there. You know, soldiers to guarantee the peace, to back up the Iraqi military. But by then the whole Muslim world was upset with us, and the bombings have never stopped. Jenna’s boy—he was just one of thousands who have died over there, Mr. President. I’m sorry.”

Screwidge stared at the sight, at the bare coffin being lowered, at his daughter standing there in a dark veil, at the man beside her, at his own figure, and Laura’s, behind them. He almost didn’t recognize himself and Laura, they were so old and stooped.

“My grandson,” he said. “My own grandson. A grandson I haven’t even met yet. My daughter’s boy.”

Esmerelda nodded slightly, displaying deep sympathy.

“God forgive me, spirit, I didn’t realize. My own grandson. How do people bear things like this? All those brave men who have died. I don’t know how the families have stood it.”

Esmerelda lowered her gaze. “It hasn’t been easy for the Iraqi families either.”

Screwidge’s eyes seemed to enlarge in horror, as if he were seeing the truth nakedly and undistorted for the first time. He opened his mouth to speak, but no utterance came out. He raised his right hand to his face, as if groping for reality or trying to find something to say or do.

“I— I— ” he stuttered.

And then it happened. He broke down and cried. His face turned into a grimace, and out of some deep well of pain a terrible groan floated out. That was followed by a cry of agony, as if his soul were in unbearable torment. And finally came the tears. Not just a few tears, but a torrent of tears. The shrieks accompanying them were fierce and wrenching, and it seemed as if his whole body would shake to pieces under their relentless pressure.

Young Esmerelda watched in sympathy, but did not move. Her head moved slightly from side to side, as if in pity beyond her years. But she said nothing and did not leave the spot.

At last, long after the coffin had been lowered into the grave and the echoes of all the cannon salutes had died away, even after the funeral cortege had wound

its way from the cemetery, the desolate figure of the president, now appearing to have shrunk and inwardly collapsed, gave a final shudder, and the weeping stopped.

He felt totally, absolutely spent. Every fibre of his being ached with remorse and brokenness.

There was stillness.

At last, into the stillness, Esmerelda injected her small voice of hope.

“Remember, Mr. President,” she said, “this is the future. It can still be changed—if you want it to. It’s up to you, sir.”

He looked out toward the city, and could barely see it for the tears now drying in his eyes. His eyes felt tired and achy. He wanted to lift his hand and rub them, but he couldn’t find the energy to do it.

Suddenly, he collapsed to the ground, like a corpse from which all the spirit had been removed.

The Return to the Present

“Mr. President. Mr. President.”

Screwidge thought at first it was the voice of Esmerelda. It seemed to be coming from a long way off.

Then he realized it wasn’t a little girl’s voice at all, but the voice of a man.

He opened his eyes slowly, because it seemed a very hard thing to do.

“Mr. President,” said the voice.

“He’s coming to,” said another voice.

“Oh, thank God, he’s all right,” said yet another.

George W. Screwidge looked up into a circle of anxious faces. Beyond them stood another circle of faces. And, beyond those, he could tell, there were yet other faces.

They were all turned upon him.

“You gave us a fright, sir,” said one of the voices closest to him.

“Josh,” he said. “It’s you.”

“Yessir, Mr. President. You’ve been out for several minutes. We were very worried.”

Slowly, the president’s consciousness returned. He sat up and rubbed his head where he had hit it on the barrel.

“Ow!” he said.

There was a pump knot beneath his hairline. He could feel it quite plainly with his fingers.

“Your physician was off at a party,” said Josh Bolten. “We paged him and he’s on his way over.”

“No need,” said Screwidge. “I’m okay now.”

“He should probably check you out, all the same.”

“Well, if he thinks so. But I’m all right. I really am.”

“It seemed like you were out for an age, Mr. President,” said Tony Snow.

“Yes,” said Screwidge, massaging the knot. “It seemed like that to me too.”

He looked around at the concerned faces, which were all beginning to relax now that he had recovered from the effects of his encounter with the edge of the barrel. He realized how much they all truly cared about him, and it gave him a

warm feeling.

He remembered that it was Christmas Eve, and that made him happy too.

“Come on, Josh,” he said, scrabbling to his feet. “We’ve still got some presents to give away.”

“Are you sure, Mr. President? They can wait, you know.”

“I’m sure, Josh. I’m great. Don’t worry about me. But I’m sure everybody has things to do, and we mustn’t keep them waiting.”

He reached down into the barrel, more carefully this time, and pulled out a package.

“Umm,” he said, looking at the tag on it. “Billy Sylvester, this one’s for you.”

A young man in a checkered sweater stepped out of the crowd, his hand extended.

“Looks like a tie,” said the president. “Hope it goes okay with that nice sweater.”

“Thank you, Mr. President,” said the young man as he accepted the package.

“Tell you what, Josh,” said Screwidge. “Let’s tip this barrel over and let the presents fall out on the floor. I don’t want to pull a repeat of what I did a few minutes ago.”

“Good idea, Mr. President,” said Bolten.

Screwidge had already reached down and grasped the bottom of the barrel. Together, they easily tipped it over, allowing the packages to tumble out onto the carpet.

“Ho-ho-ho!” said Screwidge, picking up another package. “This one’s for—

let's see—for Ginny McComb. Hi, Ginnie. I've seen you around. You have a nice smile.”

Ginny, who was a telephone receptionist in the West Wing, curtsied as she received her present.

Everyone noticed that the president's mood had changed since his little tussle with the barrel. Before, he had been tense and even a little edgy, but now he appeared to be very loose and relaxed. There was even a different tone in his voice, a sort of spriteliness, as if he were really enjoying what he was doing.

“This one—um, let me see—this one's for Jenna Screwidge. My daughter, Jenna.”

Jenna stepped out of the crowd to accept her gift.

Screwidge stared at her a minute as if he couldn't believe who she was. He was still thinking about the middle-aged woman in his vision who had lost her son in Iraq.

“What's wrong, Daddy?” she said.

He was still holding on to her present and there was a strange look in his eyes.

Her question brought him back to what he was doing.

“Oh, nothing, honey,” he said. “But Daddy needs a hug and a kiss before you get your present.”

She laughed and threw her arms around him.

He embraced her fiercely and planted a big kiss on her cheek.

“I love you, dear,” he said. “You're very special to me, and don't you ever forget it.”

“Thanks, Daddy,” she said, taking her package and stepping back.

Shortly after all the presents had been distributed and people were having some punch and petit-fours before leaving the party, the president’s physician arrived, carrying a little black medical kit.

Screwidge said it was unnecessary, but the doctor insisted that they step into a nearby office and do a routine check of the president’s heart and blood pressure.

“Nice party?” asked the doctor nonchalantly as he took Screwidge’s pulse rate.

“Great!” said the chief executive. “Sorry you had to miss it.”

Everything checked out fine, but the doctor cautioned the president not to go to sleep for a while, because it was possible that he had had a mild concussion.

“Sure, Doc,” he said. “I’ll be up for hours yet.”

“Going to Camp David now?” asked the physician.

“You know,” said Screwidge, “I was going, but I think I’ve changed my mind.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. I just realized, Doc, that I’ve never spent Christmas here in D.C., the nation’s capital. I’m the president of the United States, and I’ve never celebrated Christmas in Washington. I think I’m going to cancel my plans and stay here for the holidays. That goes for Crawford as well as Camp David. The people of this country have a right to know that their president is on the job in the nation’s capital.”

“I see. This isn’t the bump on the head speaking, is it?”

“No, Doc. This isn’t a bump on the head. It’s a bump on the heart.”

The doctor looked at him quizzically.

“Don’t worry, Doc. I didn’t hurt my heart or anything. That was just a joke, sort of.”

“Mr. President,” said an anxious Josh Bolten a few minutes later, after the doctor had left and Screwidge had returned to the remnants of the party, “are you really planning to stay here for the holidays? I mean, cancel everything for Camp David and Crawford?”

“Yeah, Josh. I’m sorry for the hardship that will work on some of you, changing the plans and all. But that little wrestlin’ match with the barrel must have knocked some sense into my head. I figure I need to be here in the capital to take care of some things.”

“Uh, what things, Mr. President?”

“Oh, a lot of things, Josh. Most of them can wait till the day after Christmas. I’m going to spend tonight with Laura and my family. But tomorrow I intend to go down to that mission where Jenna works and help serve the turkey to all those homeless people. And I’d like to do a press conference while I’m there, if that’s okay. Doesn’t have to be a big one—just a few of the regulars. I don’t think they’ll mind. Tell them I’ll make it worth their while.”

“But— but— Mr. President— ”

“But me no buts, Josh. I’m not derisional—delusional—whatever I mean. I really want to do this. It’s important.”

“Okay, Mr. President. You’re the boss!”

“Darn tootin’!”

The next morning at 11 o’clock, a motorcade delivered the president, Mrs.

Screwidge, and their two daughters to the Downtown Mission of Hope in central Washington, where the line of homeless people waiting to get in already stretched around the block.

The Secret Service people appeared very nervous, as usual, dashing about purposefully, muttering into their walkie-talkies, surveying all the rooftops in the neighborhood, and constantly scanning the crowd inside the mission.

But the president himself was in high spirits, and appeared to be oblivious to the general ruckus his presence naturally occasioned. He cheerfully donned a big apron with the words “Hail to the Chef” stitched across the front and stood in the long line of servers dishing up turkey and dressing, mashed potatoes and gravy, cranberry sauce, green beans, sweet-potato casserole, mincemeat pies, and half a dozen other offerings adorning the long tables.

Flash cameras went off repeatedly as he paused from his serving to shake hands with homeless persons or question them about how they existed on the streets and what he could do that would help to make their lives more comfortable. Several times he posed with one or more of the street people, easily hugging them and being hugged in return.

“I’ve never seen Daddy like this,” commented one of the twins to Mrs. Screwidge. “He isn’t on pills for that bump on his head, is he?”

“No, dear,” said her mother. “He was this way last night, remember? I think he has just found his groove, as they say.”

At almost two o’clock, when everybody had been fed and the lines had stopped filing by the food tables, Screwidge and his family retired to the mission chapel, where fifteen or twenty of the more familiar White House reporters were

gathered in anticipation of the promised press conference. Screwge was still wearing his “Hail to the Chef” apron, and didn’t appear to have lost an ounce of the manic energy that had been propelling him since his arrival.

“Hello, everybody,” he began, as cameras flashed and videotapes rolled. “I apologize if I took you away from important family gatherings or other things you planned to do today. This was very impromptu, and I couldn’t figure any better way to do it.

“First, I want to wish you a very merry Christmas. If you haven’t had it already, I hope you will have one before the day is over.

“Next, I want to make some announcements about some program changes I intend to institute during the next few days. I know it’s customary to take a hiatus from such things during Christmas, but these are things that I thought couldn’t wait. At least, I couldn’t wait to tell you about them.

“I have done some serious thinking—don’t laugh, Brian—and I have decided that I haven’t done nearly a good enough job as president of this great nation. You deserve a lot better than you’ve been getting lately. But I have seen the light, and I want to make some important changes in the way we’ve been doing things.

“To begin with, I am tired of all the partisan bickering that goes on in this town. I am the president of all the people, not just of the Republican party. So I am announcing right now that for the rest of my term in office, I am going to host a two-hour breakfast every Monday morning for the Democratic and Republican leadership in the two houses of Congress, and intend to have my principal cabinet members present to help answer questions and assist in the planning. We’ve got to

stop seeing everything in red and blue in this country and begin seeing it in purple, which is what you get when you mix those two colors.”

Grinning at one of the reporters on the front row, he added sheepishly, “See, Dana, I did have a normal childhood after all. I used to break a lot of crayons.”

There was a general titter of laughter at this.

“Now, the next thing I want to say is about terrorism and the war. I admit I over-responded to the terrorist attack on 9/11. I think I got a little drunk at the image of myself up there with a bullhorn on the site of the Twin Towers, and let myself be persuaded that it would be easier for me to lead this country if we were in a war. I guess I thought we still had some unfinished business with Saddam Hussein, because, after all, he had threatened the life of my father.

“But that was not a good reason for riding off like Clint Eastwood and starting a war that hadn’t been thoroughly considered by all the good minds in this country. I realize now that we should have kept our attention focused on the war in Afghanistan where we were actually in pursuit of Osama bin Laden and the original terrorists. Then we wouldn’t have lost the support of a lot of other nations and ended up facing crowds of Muslim terrorists who probably weren’t even terrorists in the beginning.

“I owe the profoundest apology to all of you for allowing myself to be swept into an unwarranted conflict. Not only has it cost many of our citizens the lives of their dear sons and daughters, and many of our fine soldiers the agony of wounds that may never heal, it has cost thousands and thousands of Iraqis the lives of their loved ones as well. And the diversion of so much money from our own treasury to wage that war has cost millions of Americans the wherewithal we needed to fund

vital programs of health care, education, and federal assistance of other kinds.

“I’ll be frank with you. I’m not sure if we will recover from such massive expenditures in my lifetime. That is an indebtedness I shall go to my grave regretting that I have had any part in laying upon future generations of Americans.”

Most of the reporters were busy scribbling notes and holding up their small tape recorders. But some forgot to pay attention to these more mundane matters. They were clearly astounded to be hearing the president of the United States making such an earth-shaking confession. And the most incredible thing, to all of them, was that he was doing it unscripted. He had no manuscript, no notes, and no teleprompter in front of him.

Two or three of the older journalists were looking around at one another, as if to say, “Am I going crazy or is the president actually saying the things I think he’s saying?”

If anyone was paying any attention to anything other than the president himself, he or she might have observed an almost stricken look on the faces of the White House staff, from Tony Snow to Gale Norton and Michael Chertoff to Condoleezza Rice. Snow, who was noted, even celebrated, for playing the White House’s cards close to his vest, could not have appeared more stunned if the president had been removing all his clothes before the cameras that were recording his every word and gesture.

But Screwidge, now in his element and obviously feeling very good about what he was doing, rolled right along.

“When Congress reassembles after the first of the year,” he announced, “I

intend to consult with the heads of both parties about the absolutely quickest way to bring our soldiers home. My concern is three-fold. First, I want to get those brave men and women out of harm's way. Second, I want to stop this massive hemorrhaging from our domestic budget. And, third, I want to give the Iraqis every chance to repair the enormous damage we have inflicted on their society by removing from their midst a presence that, for obvious reasons, is hostilely regarded not only by many Iraqis but by many other peoples in that volatile region of the world.

“When this is done, I intend to offer a formal apology to the citizens of Iraq and its neighboring countries for having intruded upon their territory and their sovereign rights simply because we were bigger and stronger and knew we could beat them on the battlefield. I know that I personally behaved like a bully—something I guess I learned down in Texas but that everybody with a little power is probably guilty of becoming—and I am sorry.”

There were several audible gasps around the room, including one that escaped from the lips of the White House press secretary. He was trying to imagine the headlines in the evening news that night, and could not predict which of the bombshells the president had dropped would receive the greatest attention.

Laura Screwidge was shaking her head in amazement, unconscious of whether any cameras might be trained on her. She could not believe this was her husband, George Webenezer Screwidge, talking in such an open and self-deprecating manner. He had sometimes done it in private with her, but never before in public like this.

“I shall propose to the leaders of Congress,” the president was saying, “that

we draw up a schedule of monetary reparations for the people of Iraq that will carry us through the next twenty years, until that nation is once more prosperous and self-sustaining in its own right. I know this will seem excessive to many, especially in the light of our own budgetary needs. But it is morally right and just for us to do this.”

At this point, Screwidge paused and bowed his head a little, as if contemplating what to say next. Most of those present thought he was about to stop. But in actuality he had so many things to say that he needed a moment to decide on an order in which to say them.

“We have taken a lot of heat in the last year and a half over our response to Hurricane Katrina,” he said, “and it was justified. We performed very badly in those crucial days during and after the hurricane. *I* performed very badly. Harry Truman was right—I really admire old Harry—the buck stops on the president’s desk, no matter who else was to blame.

“To tell you the truth, I was having a bad spot myself right about then. My numbers were down in the polls, my programs were floundering in Congress, the war was going poorly, Cindy Sheehan and her people were camped outside my ranch, and there were days when I wondered if I could even go on. Seriously. I really needed that time on the ranch, riding my dirt bike and chopping wood and just sweating a lot.

“So I was basically immobilized when the hurricane struck. I couldn’t seem to get my feet under me and do what needed to be done. It wasn’t Brownie’s fault—Mike Brown, the FEMA director. He had sent me some memos earlier saying that his department was ill-positioned to do its work and that they needed a

lot of attention I couldn't give them at the time. So it was really my fault that we were slow to get things done that might have saved some lives.

"I don't take the responsibility for the levees. That was government inadequacy going back a long way. Bureaucratic boondoggling, I call it. But I have to take the responsibility for our sluggish response, and for that, among other things, I apologize to Governor Blanco and Mayor Nagin and the people of Louisiana and Mississippi. Many of the people in those states are still having a hard time as a result of the hurricane, and I intend to redouble my efforts to see that they get some help. It's late, but it will be better than not at all."

Once more, Screwidge paused as he mulled over what he wanted to say next. Britt Hume of Fox News took the hiatus as an opportunity to stand up.

"I'm not finished, Britt," said the president.

"Mr. President, I just want to ask if you're putting us on."

There was a general rustle of "mm-hmms" and other murmuring.

"No, Britt, I am not putting you on," replied Screwidge. "I am perfectly serious. I know it may be hard for you to believe, because I have not always been this candid and forthright with you. But I have never been more serious in my life.

"There are a lot of other things I could talk about, and will, in my State of the Union address and over the coming weeks—the continuing problem of drugs and crime in our country, the need for an equitable taxation system, rebuilding our infrastructure that we've been neglecting, a prescription-drug plan that really lifts the burden off the poor, some kind of solution to our failing educational system. Immigration—" He shook his head. "Immigration, you know, is part of the global economic situation, not just a local problem. There's an awful lot we need to do,

and must do, for our country.

“But the one thing I will mention now is the growing sense of a great divide between the rich and poor of our society. Some of us have always thought that if we only allowed the rich to get richer, their wealth would somehow trickle down to the people under them and everybody would be happy. That may work for some people in the middle classes, but it definitely isn’t working for the poor and very poor of our country. There are some people in this nation who are obscenely rich and others who are unbelievably poor. I mean, it’s unforgivable that we’ve let it come to this.

“Unfortunately, there is also a lot of white-collar crime and financial scandal attached to this problem. I don’t mean just Enron, World.Com, and companies like that. I mean most of the contractors who deal with our government, and a lot of the lobbyists and people in government who get rewarded in various ways for helping them land their lucrative contracts.

“There is a very low, cynical ethic at work in our financial sector that needs to be corrected. Even a lot of the drug companies and doctors and hospitals, who are supposed to be in the front line of helping people, are guilty of sticking it to the poor. I am old enough to remember a time when it wasn’t this way, or didn’t seem so pervasive. Right now, it’s hard to imagine how we could have become so corrupt and self-centered.

“We need a new spirit in this country, a spirit of love, compassion, and selflessness that will help us to fix what’s wrong with our own social system and then begin to address what is wrong with a lot of the world around us. It isn’t any wonder there is so much crime and lawlessness in the world. Poverty and hunger

and disease breed that kind of outlook on life. It is time we all got down on our knees and asked God's forgiveness for our terrible selfishness, and the way we're always contriving to get ahead of everybody else.

“What do we need it for?”

Here the president leaned across the podium in his characteristic questioning pose, and waved a hand in front of him as if trying to pull the answer out of the air.

“I repeat: What do we need it for? I mean, we're a land of plenty. There's enough of God's riches here to go around for the entire world, and yet a lot of our citizens think they have to hoard it up and be richer than God Almighty. Are they afraid of becoming poor? Or is it a matter of power?”

Somewhere in the room, in a voice that was easily identifiable as female and African American, there was a loud “A-men!”

Several people laughed.

“That's all right,” said Screwge. “I'm glad to get an amen once in a while. I know I'm preaching to the choir here—you folks aren't going to get rich doing what you do. As a matter of fact, neither am I.”

More laughter.

“But I'm really serious about this, people. We need to address this huge imbalance in our society— not just in our country but around the globe. And, while we're at it, we need to do something about preserving the earth itself. That's another thing I should have mentioned. I know I haven't gotten high marks from the conservation people, and they're right. Al Gore's right, bless his heart. I've had too many other things on my mind. But we need to rethink this whole ecology deal and come up with some right answers—save our earth at the same time that

we save people's jobs and the economy.

“Folks, let's face it, this is a difficult time in which to be alive, and the problems created by a culture in transition are enormous. But we know we have the intelligence to solve those problems, if we only have the will to do it. I'm saying it's time we found the will. We've got to, for the sake of everybody on this earth.

“I can't do it alone. I'm just one man, and a very inadequate one at that. But we can all do it together. We all *have* to do it together. And I am going to devote all my powers in my remaining time in office to seeing that we do.”

The president looked down at his hands gripping the top of the lectern and was quiet a moment, as if trying to think if he wanted to say anything else.

Then he nodded his head once, as if to say, “That's it,” and asked the reporters, “Any questions?”

There was a moment of intense silence, which was very unusual for presidential press conferences, when literally everybody was bursting to ask a whole raft of questions.

Then Tim Russert of “Meet the Press” stood to his feet, fixing the president with those directional, laser-like eyes of his, and everybody supposed he would ask a question.

But he didn't. Instead, he began to clap.

One by one, all the other journalists rose to their feet and joined in the clapping. The room reverberated with applause.

None of them could remember when something like this had ever happened before. It was unprecedented in the whole history of modern journalism.

Finally, when the noise of the clapping had died down, someone said, “Merry Christmas, Mr. President.”

“Merry Christmas to you too,” said Screwidge. “And I hope you’ll all have a very happy new year. Thanks again for coming. And I want to thank three very special people, who, even though they weren’t present, were very much here in spirit. José and Cecil and Esmerelda, thank you, from the bottom of my heart. I will always be grateful for what you’ve meant to me.”

The reporters looked around, wondering who José and Cecil and Esmerelda were. So did the members of the White House staff. But they all shrugged. It was Christmas, after all, and it had been a very puzzling day.

Because it was Christmas, there were few regular news broadcasts that evening. But several major networks and cable shows broke into their programming to show clips of the president’s press conference. He looked anything but presidential, standing there in his “Hail to the Chef” apron. But everybody who heard his remarks said it was his finest appearance ever, and that what he said had really made Christmas for them.

The next morning, all the network news shows were devoted to talking about President Screwidge’s unprecedented leveling with the reporters and the American public. Those who had been there testified that they had been as caught up in the event as if they had been listening to an angel of God. They wouldn’t have missed it for the world, they said.

Politicians all over the country, especially the members of Congress who had gone home for Christmas, listened to excerpts of the president’s remarks and realized that the entire tone of political life in America, and possibly even the

world, had suddenly been altered. They all had an unusual yearning to get back to work as soon as possible and begin to transform their country.

In London and Paris and Rome, people viewing segments of the president's address suddenly knew that they had underestimated Screwge and his ability to set the pace for America and the world. In Tokyo and Beijing and Singapore, people said their respect for the American president had shot up a hundred percent or more.

In Tehran and Baghdad, people watched the president's face and listened to the translations of his message, then shook their heads affirmatively and said, "This is a new day for all of us. There is hope for the world!"

And the Christmas barrel, the one on which the president had banged his head—well, nobody but Screwge understood the order, but he commanded that the Christmas barrel be mounted in a big glass case and carefully stored in the basement of the White House until his presidential library had been built in Texas. Then, he said, it was to be delivered to the library and set in a very conspicuous place near the entry of the building, where it would be displayed for generations to come as the barrel that changed the history of America!

For further information on the barrel, go to www.christmasbarrel.com or [www.gov.org/Screwgepresidency /barrel](http://www.gov.org/Screwgepresidency/barrel).

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Soulstice: Celebrating the Spirituality of the Wisdom Years (*Crossroad Publishing Co.*), and Seven Things They Don't Teach You in Seminary (*Crossroad Publishing Co.*). In March/April 2007 his newest book, *The Changing Shape of Our Salvation*, will be released by *Crossroad Publishing Co.* For additional information, see www.JohnKillinger.com.