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Trump's Party

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Donald Trump held his election-night party at the Midtown Hilton, a forty-six-story slab of a building on the corner of 53rd Street and Avenue of the Americas. The Hilton's ballroom is small by the standards of a political venue, and so the press had found it a curious choice of location. Earlier in the day, sources inside the Trump campaign explained to reporters that the candidate wanted to keep the party modest. The *New York Times* was saying he had only a 15 percent chance of defeating his opponent, Hillary Clinton, who was throwing a much bigger party in a convention center on the West Side. But the Hilton had its own appeal to the real-estate billionaire. It was only a few blocks from his longtime home atop Trump Tower, and only a few more from the Grand Hyatt, his first major project in Manhattan. It was also the largest hotel in the city. In 1959, its boisterous developer had dubbed it the "greatest hotel ever built"; it was one of the first to feature a television in every room.

I arrived at the lobby a few hours before the party began. Upbeat, well-dressed white men and women were hard at work, unpacking campaign signs and stacking them on small round tables. Each sign bore a response to one of Trump's past behaviors: Women for Trump answered accusations that he had groped women riding with him in an elevator in Trump Tower or seated next to him at clubs and on airplanes; Hispanics for Trump softened his recent comments that a Mexican-American judge was biased by his heritage in a class-action fraud suit against the now-shuttered Trump University; and Veterans for Trump assuaged concerns over the time he didn't know what the nuclear triad was, the time he told a radio host that avoiding sexually transmitted diseases was his "personal Vietnam," and the time he said that Arizona Senator John McCain, a veteran who was held and tortured in Vietnam for more than five years, was not a war hero because he had been captured. The signs flanked a table displaying five variations of Trump's Make America Great Again hat, including an orange-on-camouflage design tailored for the hunters and other gun owners Trump had called on to stop Clinton from nominating Supreme Court justices. Across from the hats was a bar at which the major

donors to Trump's campaign could purchase mixed drinks for thirteen dollars. All prices include taxes read a sign on the bar. Cash only.

The guests began to arrive around six-thirty. There was Milo Yiannopoulos, who rose to prominence attacking people of color on Twitter, until the company banned him from the platform earlier this year. Omarosa Manigault, an early arrival, was a former contestant on Trump's reality-television show and had recently been helping the candidate reach out to African Americans, for whom he had pledged his support at an almost all-white rally in Wisconsin. Katrina Pierson, a Trump spokesperson who insisted Barack Obama started the war in Afghanistan seven years before he took office, was also there. For the most part the guests separated themselves into the appropriate rooms. But occasionally Trump's volunteers were compelled to assert the proper order of things. Early in the evening, a volunteer stopped a young man attempting to enter the V.I.P. section and informed him that he would need to remain in the reception area. He puzzled over this; the stage wasn't visible from there. "We will be blocked the whole time?" he asked. "Quite possibly," the volunteer replied. "Yes."

There was very little to do in the hours before polls along the East Coast began to close. Journalists ate sandwiches and set up their cameras while police officers took selfies and a man in a cowboy hat strolled around the reception area. Fox News was airing in every room. The anchors had been finding it interesting that Clinton canceled a fireworks show along the Hudson that she had planned for later that evening. It hearkened back to election night four years ago, they said, when Mitt Romney canceled his fireworks over Boston Harbor. This evening, though, the map was in Clinton's favor: she was ahead in the forecasts in Florida, and Trump all but needed the state to win. Her so-called blue wall of working-class counties in the rust belt also appeared to be holding.

Around seven-thirty, many reporters left the press section to photograph a bust of Trump made out of cake, which had been put on display near the cash bar. "They are reporting," a journalist explained to his colleague. The cake was the lone food item presented to guests. There were no cheese plates or cured meats, none of the finger foods one might expect at a grand-ballroom event celebrating the potential election of the next president of the United States. The bust of Trump was about two feet tall, with a generous head of hair. But his face looked grim, as if he were worried that no one would want a piece of him. Journalists abandoned the cake only when the crowd began to cheer. Florida's polls had closed, and early results showed the state was too close to call. A guy in the reception area told his friend that he had a feeling his American Express card was

going to have a big night.

Still, the crowd remained subdued. There is a certain decorum to these events, well understood by those in the Hilton ballroom. Every Midtown hotel in New York is home to one annual white-tie fund-raiser or another. At the Hilton, it's the Inner Circle dinner, which is held each spring by a group of journalists who roast the city's political elite to benefit a handful of different causes. Some mayors are better sports than others. This year, Bill de Blasio told an offensive and unfunny joke that hung around the tabloids for days. On the other hand, Rudolph Giuliani, New York's mayor in the 1990s, has gone to the dinner costumed as a horned beast, a disco star, and a mobster in high heels with no pants. In a sketch filmed for the dinner in 2000, he dressed up as a woman named Victoria whom Trump, playing himself, was attempting to seduce. The mayor slapped the billionaire after he buried his face in his fake breasts. "Oh, you dirty boy," said Giuliani. The Hilton has hosted the dinner for decades, but next year it will move a few blocks south to the Sheraton. Trump's relationship with the press has soured, too. Only a handful of papers endorsed his presidential run, among them the *National Enquirer* and the *Crusader*, the official publication of the Ku Klux Klan.

As the hours passed and Florida leaned toward Trump, the guests forsook their civility. Hats began appearing on heads in the donor section. Kisses went on longer and became more spontaneous. Guests without a drink grabbed one; those with a drink grabbed another. Those once eager to tell journalists they weren't speaking began speaking. "It's all about the Second Amendment," a guest told an interviewer. A bearded man appeared at the entrance to the V.I.P. section and asked someone to take his photograph. "This is history," he said. Around eleven-thirty, Fox declared Trump the winner of Wisconsin and Florida. "New York can suck it, France can suck it," a man behind me shouted. "This is American exceptionalism."

"I want the Muslims out," said the man standing next to him.

Word came in that someone in Clinton's advance team had whispered to another reporter, "We will lose."

Now full of beer and tonics, the guests began to wander through the press section. A woman stole the seat of a reporter from *Mediaite*. "Yay!" she shouted, "we are gonna win!" She removed her boots and suggested to her friend that he take the seat of a CNN cameraman who had stood up to capture a shot of the crowd; he promptly did. A production assistant helped a hollow-eyed woman in an evening dress and a Make America Great Again cap negotiate the stairs leading down from the risers, where the television crews were stationed. A cherry-red older guy with slicked-back hair stumbled up

to me with a beer in one hand and a mixed drink in the other. "Hold my drink!" he shouted, attempting to hand me his cup. I declined, and he placed it on a bundle of media cables on the floor. Guests noticed that Fox was showing scenes from the event on the televisions above the stage, and began to chant: "Call it, call it!" At one-thirty in the morning, the network did. Clinton won the popular vote, said the anchors, but Trump won the election. The crowd erupted in cheers. The Dow Jones plummeted.

Trump was watching the election in Trump Tower, where his presidential run began last year. The tower had seemed a proper venue for his campaign's finale, but it presented a few too many difficulties. He'd already been fined \$10,000 by the city for using the Tower's atrium, as it is a public space where political gatherings were not permitted. His contractor had also underpaid hundreds of undocumented Polish immigrants to build the tower, which could seem incongruous with his pledge to deport all Syrian refugees and undocumented Mexican immigrants. And a federal investigation had discovered that he'd overpaid for the building's concrete from companies controlled by Fat Tony Salerno and Big Paul Castellano, the bosses of two of New York's mafia families. The bosses were sent to prison in the 1980s by Giuliani, the district attorney at the time, who was rumored to be under consideration for the job of attorney general.

Around two-forty-five, Trump walked out on the stage to announce that his opponent had conceded the election. "I've just received a call from Secretary Clinton," he told the audience. Everyone chanted, "Lock her up," a reference to a pledge Trump had made during his campaign to arrest Clinton if he was elected. "I congratulated her and her family on a very, very hard-fought campaign. I mean, she fought very hard. Hillary has worked very long and very hard over a long period of time, and we owe her a major debt of gratitude for her service to our country." The room cheered for Clinton. "I mean that very sincerely." Trump then praised the mostly white audience for being a movement of "all races, religions, backgrounds, and beliefs" and pledged not to forget the "forgotten men and women of our country," referring to the mostly white poor and working-class voters living in the rust belt who had buoyed his campaign. I was unable to locate any of them in the crowd.

A group of Trump surrogates lined up onstage, behind a glass-encased make america great again cap. "Look at all these people," Trump said. "I want to give a very special thanks to our former mayor, Rudy Giuliani. Unbelievable. Unbelievable. He traveled with us and he went through meetings. That Rudy never changes. Where's Rudy here? Where is he?" The crowd began to chant the former mayor's name, but he was nowhere to

be found. Trump moved on to thank New Jersey Governor Chris Christie, whose approval rating in the state fell below 20 percent after two of his aides were sent to prison for closing the George Washington Bridge to snarl traffic in a town whose mayor did not support his reelection. “Chris Christie, folks, was unbelievable.” Soon, Trump noticed some commotion among his surrogates. “Who is that, is that the mayor that showed up?” Giuliani had gotten onto the stage. “Awww, Rudy got up here.” The former mayor grinned. The crowd cheered. The next president of the United States was feeling generous. He thanked Ben Carson, a retired neuroscientist who last year he had compared to a child molester and was now rumored to be considering appointing secretary of education. He thanked Mike Huckabee, the former governor of Arkansas and now a possibility for secretary of commerce, who earlier in the night had tweeted that Clinton would appoint “her Filipino maid” to head the CIA. Finally, he thanked Reince Preibus, the chairman of the Republican National Committee, who recently won the position of chief of staff over Steve Bannon, who runs a pro-white-nationalist website from his basement in Washington, D.C.

“I love this country,” said Trump, before walking off stage.

After the speech was over, I wandered out into the reception area. “You Can’t Always Get What You Want,” by the Rolling Stones, was playing from the speakers. It was past three o’clock and much of the older crowd had made for the escalators. The cocktail tables were littered with Trump’s campaign signs for women, Hispanics, and Muslims. They now served as placemats for the half-empty drinks discarded by guests who just did something even they had thought impossible. Over by the bar, the Trump cake had once again become the center of attention. Several young supporters were circled around it, jumping up and down and screaming for the cameramen. “Peace on earth!” they shouted. “The galaxy won.”