



THE ATTACK OF THE ZOMBIES

“I can’t believe you said that,” Ingrid huffed. Howard leaned back in his chair and looked from her, to Dobie, to Van, and then to himself. They each occupied a corner on his computer’s monitor. “Did you hear me, Howard? I can’t believe you said that.”

“You’ll get over it,” Howard shrugged. “But like I was saying, it’s not a vaccine. It’s an experimental mRNA treatment. You know that, Ingrid.”

“I still think you should take it. It’ll minimize your symptoms if you get sick.”

“Minimize my symptoms? You’re just parroting what the government says. Do you remember when they said the shot would keep us from getting Covid? They knew at the time that that was a lie. Fool me twice, shame on me, so I’ll skip the shot. My body, my choice.”

“There!” Ingrid barked. “You said it again! You shouldn’t be using a pro-choice saying. It’s offensive to women.”

“So I don’t have freedom of speech?”

“That’s not the issue here. Your inappropriate use of a pro-choice saying is.”

“No, my right to choose is the issue. You’re trying to change the subject because you’re losing the debate. And I haven’t even brought up the Nuremberg Code yet. The Covid shots are experimental, and the code says you can’t perform medical experiments on unwilling individuals. That’s what the Nazis did.”

Ingrid began to sputter, at a loss for words. Howard knew that as host of the Zoom call, and plant manager for Dinkman Shoelaces, he shouldn’t be pushing her buttons. But he felt cantankerous

and couldn't help himself. He needed some excitement after a year of lockdowns and masks and shuffling between Xs taped on floors. He needed to break out of the shuffle for a while, so he decided to make an aggressive dash through the weekly conference call of the Dinkman department heads. Normally he and the others chatted after finishing with company business, but this week there was no small talk. As soon as Howard announced the meeting was closed he said that people who took the Covid shots were idiots.

Ingrid still sputtered but was slowing down. Howard felt kind of sorry for her. She was head of advertising and had been as sharp as a tack a year before, but too much downtime changed that. She'd become kind of dull-witted and had lost interest in her appearance. From styled hair and the latest in fashion she'd gone to a bathrobe and what looked like a bushy red fright wig. Her unplucked eyebrows were becoming a fright too.

Dobie, the head of shipping, sat above Ingrid on the screen. He wore a surgical mask over his fat, pasty face and stroked a python that was coiled in his lap. The snake's name was Bejeezus. Dobie took Covid extra seriously. He lived alone but wore a facemask for the calls, and sometimes he even put a snout mask on Bejeezus.

Van occupied the corner of the screen below Howard. He was in charge of sales. He sat with his elbows on the arms of his chair and his fingers steepled in front of a tie that matched his silver hair. The others kidded him about wearing a suit and tie for the calls.

Ingrid sputtered to a stop and Howard expected Dobie to take up the torch on her behalf. Dobie was a Democrat and Ingrid was a self-styled political independent who always voted Democratic. So Howard watched Dobie's mask for lip

movement ahead of speech, but then Van cleared his throat.

“Howard,” he said gravely. “Don’t you think it’s a bit extreme to bring the Nazis into this?”

“No, Van, I don’t. The Biden administration is behaving like a bunch of Nazis with the Covid business. They want people who don’t take the shots to lose their jobs, their freedom to move around and so on. That kind of thinking led to lots of dead Jews in World War Two.”

Van unsteeped his fingers and straightened his tie.

“Well, you really should take the shot.”

“Yeah,” Ingrid said.

“I agree,” Dobie said.

Bejeezus flicked his tongue.

“I’ll add a note to the minutes about your feelings on the shot,” Howard said. “You all think that I should be injected. That’s rare, you know, for the three of you to agree on something.”

“You’re right,” Ingrid nodded, making her hair bounce. “Dobie and Van hardly ever agree. I mean, what with Dobie being a Democrat and Van a Republican. They don’t have much in common.”

“They have more in common than you might think,” Howard said. “For example, they both admire Charlton Heston.”

Dobie snorted. “You mean the actor? Mister ‘pry my gun from my cold, dead hand?’ I don’t admire him.”

“Why not? He was a liberal, same as you.”

Dobie adjusted his mask, gave Bejeezus a stroke and said, “Heston was a gun nut and a fascist, not a liberal.”

“A fascist wouldn’t have taken part in the freedom marches in the nineteen sixties,” Howard said. “Heston did, because he was a liberal. And then at the end of his life, when he was president of the National Rifle Association, he was a libertar-

ian. Liberal and libertarian come from the same root word as liberty. Heston was a firm believer in liberty all through his life.”

Nobody responded. By the way they sat blinking at Howard he knew that the Heston info was new to all of them. And they didn't know what to make of it. They liked being told what to think by news sites that promoted themselves as 'trusted.' Dobie and Ingrid went to leftist websites and Van to conservative. They absorbed only one point of view and as a result had become unthinking zombies. That's how Howard viewed them at the moment, as zombies. But not the Hollywood kind that ran around eating brains; Ingrid and Dobie and Van were chewing on Howard but hoped to avoid any new information that his brain might contain. They were a new kind of deadhead, not zombies but . . .

“Zoombies,” Howard chuckled.

“Pardon?” Van said.

“Nothing.”

“Well,” Dobie said, “I don't know if I believe that about Charlton Heston. Just because you read it on the internet doesn't make it true, Howard. Do you know if the website you got the story from is fact-checked?”

“It's not a story, Dobie, it's in Heston's biography. Even your most politically-biased 'fact checkers' will acknowledge that he took part in the civil rights marches.”

“So you won't tell us where you saw the story?” Ingrid said.

“It's not a story, Ingrid. Like I just told Dobie, it's . . .”

Howard had planned to close the call after making his statement about Heston. He'd wanted to have a bit of fun, then take a shower and watch a movie. But suddenly he felt cantankerous again.

He'd give them a lot more than just Heston to think about.

"Okay," he said, "I made it all up."

Ingrid went smirky, Dobie shook his head, and Van nodded.

"Well," Van said, "you had us going. But you should be more careful how you speak about Charlton Heston. He gets enough flak from progressives as it is."

Howard squinted like he was thinking and said, "Progressives? Do you mean socialists, Van?"

"Sure. Socialists and others on the left. You've never discussed politics with us before, Howard, but you really should try to educate yourself."

Ingrid said, "He probably goes to those conspiracy sites, Van."

"Yeah," Howard said, "you got me, Ingrid. I've been visiting conspiracy sites. All except for one. It's where I read that Republicans are communists."

Astonishment swept across the screen. All three of Howard's co-workers sat with their mouths open for a moment, then Dobie giggled and said, "Oh, this should be good." He reached for his keyboard, and Howard knew he would be recording the conversation from that point on.

"Howard," Van said after he recovered from the communist statement. "Again I must caution you about making . . . wild claims. Republicans are conservative. It's Democrats who tend to be of a leftist mindset. If they had their way they'd turn America into a socialist nation."

"We're already a socialist nation," Howard said. "We have Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid and a dozen other federal assistance programs."

Van squirmed. "Well, I . . . I guess you could make that argument."

"There's nothing to argue about. FDR gave us Social Security in the 1930s, and for nearly a hun-

dred years now Republicans and Democrats have worked together to expand social programming.”

“No they haven’t,” Dobie said. “Republicans hate social programs.”

“Then why do we have so many?” Howard asked. “Republicans are in control in Washington about fifty percent of the time, so why haven’t assistance programs been reined in?”

Ingrid said, “It’s not that simple, Howard.”

“Yes it is. Republicans and Democrats have worked together for decades to expand social programming, and now they’re working together to take us from socialism to communism.”

“That’s absurd,” Van said. “Republicans are anti-communist.”

“Are they, Van? Like I said, I read something that says they’re not.”

“From one of your conspiracy sites?” Ingrid taunted. “We can’t take you seriously unless you tell us where you get your news.”

“You’re right,” Howard said, trying to look properly chastised. “But if I tell you . . . Forget it. You’ll just laugh.”

“No we won’t,” Dobie said, but his mask couldn’t hide his chubby cheeks rising above a smile.

“Well . . .” Howard said hesitantly, “I don’t know. It’s just that . . . Lately I’ve been reading a lot from the . . . it’s called the . . . well, the congressional record.”

Howard had watched Ingrid and Dobie’s faces swell with looks of anticipation as he dithered. They were ready to pounce the moment he named some tinfoil hat site, but they didn’t know what to make of the congressional record. Their faces deflated.

“That’s excellent reading,” Van said. “I go to the congressional record sometimes to study proposed legislation.”

Howard gave Van a thumbs-up and said, "I'm glad you approve, Van, because I found a speech there that a congressman read into the record nearly twenty years ago. His name's Ron Paul. He served as a Republican, but really he's a libertarian, like Charlton Heston. And Paul said that communists took over the Republican Party a long time ago."

"Nonsense," Van said. "Ron Paul's a conservative, and I doubt that . . . no, I'm sure he never said anything like that."

"Well, he did, in a speech called 'Neo-Conned.' He read it into the congressional record in July of 2003. I suggest you all look at it."

"I've heard of Ron Paul," Dobie said, shifting Bejeezus in his lap. "He's a rightwing nutcase."

"He's not a nutcase," Howard said, "but he's been portrayed as one because he exposed the neocons. The fake conservatives in Washington. They started out as followers of Leon Trotsky, a communist who challenged Lenin in a power struggle during the Russian Revolution. Trotsky lost and fled to Mexico, then after he was assassinated in 1940 most of his people moved to the United States. One group, operating out of the University of Chicago, vowed to take over the federal government. To do that they knew they'd need to seize one of our two major political parties, and since Marxists had already laid claim to the Democrats, the Trotskyites focused on the Republicans. And today they control the party. That means that two types of communists are in charge of our two-party system. Conservatives still have power at the state and local levels, but communists run Washington."

Again Howard got the impression of zombies blinking at him, then Van said, "Preposterous. For you to say . . ." He was so upset that he tugged at his tie. "Preposterous."

Dobie said, “Have you been smoking pot during the lockdown, Howard?”

“No, I haven’t. And it’s not preposterous, Van. The ‘Neo-Conned’ speech names names and gives pedigrees. Leo Strauss, Bill and Irving Kristol, people like that. Ron Paul did his research. But we don’t have to rely solely on what he said to prove Republican communism. Let’s look at the recent record of cooperation between the two parties on Covid. First, they agree that people should be paid not to work. Stimulus checks instead of paychecks. Dependency on government. Both parties support it. Second, landlords aren’t allowed to eject tenants for nonpayment of rent during the crisis. But the landlords still have to pay taxes and provide maintenance on their properties. That’s an attack on private property ownership.”

Howard listed other ways that Republicans and Democrats had been working together to advance communism during the Covid mess, and he even threw in some examples of Cloward-Piven, the leftist strategy to bankrupt America by overburdening the social services system. But by then no one was listening. Howard wasn’t listening either. He’d muted the last of the three channels after Van called him a son of a bitch.

Van had removed his tie and was shaking a fist at his camera. Dobie had ripped off his mask and was giving an erect Bejeezus a spirited stroking. Ingrid flailed from side to side, making a blurred red arc with her fright-wiggy hair. All three chewed the air like they were eating into Howard. Like zombies he thought, and chuckled.

He knew he wouldn’t be heard above the cacophony if he unmuted and tried to speak, so he typed a message that said, “I guess I’ll add to the minutes that Ingrid can’t explain why she’s in favor of violating the Nuremberg guidelines. And Dobie disrespected the civil rights marchers of the

sixties. And Van won't acknowledge whether he is now or ever has been a member of a communist party."

He hit Send and all three paused to read. Then they resumed their chewing.

Howard typed, "Same time next week," hit Send again and disconnected.

He leaned back in his chair, sighed and relaxed. The call had been just what he needed. Cathartic. He'd try to mend fences next week, but what if he wasn't able to? Or what if he didn't want to? He might want to wind everyone up again. So how would he do that? The communist stuff got a big reaction, so maybe he could mention Joe McCarthy's infamous witch-hunts.

The shower beckoned. Howard got up from his desk, and as he stretched he dug through his memory for what he knew about McCarthy. He'd read about the man's investigations into what he claimed was a growing communist threat in Washington in the nineteen fifties. At first the investigations stuck to searching for proof, but then they veered off into personal attacks. The media focused on the personal stuff and the country never got its answers about the communists. So was McCarthy right about them? Leftists already controlled the Democratic Party in the fifties, and they were in the process of infiltrating the Republicans.

Howard made a note on a scratchpad. "Was Joe McCarthy right or wrong?" That should stimulate discussion at the next weekly call, but just to make sure, he changed the note to, "Was McCarthy right, or was he right?"

He chuckled on his way to the shower.