Phil Lemos

Fiction

UPSET OF THE CENTURY

In retrospect, it was a mistake for Zinck to have everyone over for a keg party on Election Day. It sounded like a great idea at the time. What better way to celebrate the democratic process by rolling in a couple of kegs, a dozen bottles of vodka and 12 cases of Sam Adams?

But this was Dixville Notch, where Election Day was a little different. The town's 42 registered voters lined up at midnight to vote. It took less than 15 minutes, and according to New Hampshire law they could close the polls after everyone voted. In the past this meant everyone would roll back into bed by 1 a.m., but this year was special. Everyone in town – Zinck's friends, neighbors, even a moose that was loitering outside – followed him to his house for an after-hours bash that would last through the morning and into Election Night. Zinck took the day off from his day job as sports editor of the *Dixville Daily Defender* to party like it was 1776.

Enough alcohol had flowed after a few hours that things started to get weird. Gil Dolan passed out shortly after 5 a.m. Gil always was a lightweight. Jack Royce was running around the front yard naked. Zinck put his head in his hands in horror. It was always the people Zinck *didn't* want to see naked. Tara Vitale was there too, but she was fully clothed. Of course.

Sometime late in the morning, the doorbell rang. Zinck opened the door. As Gil capitalized on the opening to bolt outside and puke on the front lawn, Zinck found a reporter

from the United News Network, Bonnie Billingsley, introducing herself. Zinck thought that was cute, UNN sending a cub reporter to his house for a scene-setter on Dixville Notch, though he couldn't understand why she was arriving 12 hours after the polls closed.

He invited Bonnie in and whipped her up a cocktail, while from the other room Jack shouted, "Hey! Who's the news chick with the sweet ass?!?" For the next few hours, Zinck tried to field a series of confusing questions from Bonnie about record-low voter turnout while sliding into an alcohol-induced blackout. All Zinck wanted to do was make sure people weren't trashing his living room, and here was this chick asking him about whether he was nervous.

When the networks went on the air for Election Night coverage, some 18 hours after Dixville Notch shut down the polls, most of the adults in town were passed out in Zinck's living room. All he kept hearing on TV was, "We're seeing the expected apathy," and "California is in play." Zinck couldn't remember the last time he was this hammered. Bonnie was still interrogating him, but she had been having too good a time herself and her voice was so slurred she could barely spit out her questions. The blues and reds on UNN's Magic Wall Map blurred into shades of green. Zinck wondered if that really was green. Nah, he thought, couldn't have been. It was just the vodka kicking him in the nuts.

The crisis developed shortly before 3 a.m. Wednesday. Everyone at Zinck's house was lying face-down in a puddle of something. The moose found its way to the front porch, trying to help itself to the keg. Zinck himself was barely coherent, trying to fit his head in a small trash bucket, when the phone rang.

"Hello," a groggy Zinck asked.

"Yes, I'm looking for Ken Zinck," the voice said.

"Yes, who is this?"

"This is Max Shepherdson with UNN. We wanted to be the first to congratulate you."

"Huh?"

"We wanted to congratulate you," Shepherdson said. "I know we have Bonnie there already, but we're sending more trucks on their way to your campaign headquarters to report on tonight's developments. The trucks should be there in about an hour. We'd like you to hold off on your victory speech until we can get there, so we can cover it live and then we'd like an exclusive interview with you, Mr. President-Elect."

"President-elect?"

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Ken Zinck's campaign for President of the United States began as a simple jab at the two-party system. Not that Zinck needed much help. The candidates provided all the ammunition for him. There was the incumbent commander-in-chief, Republican Graham Tewksbury, whose attempt to revive his sagging poll numbers by fabricating a terrorist threat on America from the far-flung nation of East Moragovia fooled nobody. On the other hand, the Democrat, Brendan Flaherty, was a Michigan senator and convicted felon who pushed a $925 billion, taxpayer-funded bailout bill for the Detroit Lions through Congress.

The townspeople loved it. Here was "their guy," poking fun at the two major party candidate for office. As word of mouth spread, a cult following began. Money bombs followed. Soon he had enough money for a snazzy Web site and even a 30-second ad to run on national television. Sure, the ad ran at 1:30 a.m., and most people probably thought it was a lame skit from a late night talk show (particularly when it featured an endorsement from Triumph the Insult Comic Dog). But an ad was an ad, and he was excited that it might put him in position to

earn more votes than Ralph Nader and actually finish a distant third. Plus, it sounded cool to hear himself say, "I'm Ken Zinck and I approve this message."

So when someone claiming to be with UNN was calling to congratulate him, all he could think was this must be some sort of joke. Still, he always saw through his friends' pranks. Besides, all his friends were here, and the phone number on his caller ID was a New York City area code.

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"Umm, who is this again?" Zinck asked.

"Max Shepherdson, from UNN." His voice was becoming testy. Everyone worth knowing knew Max Shepherdson.

Zinck took the receiver off his ear and looked around the room. Bonnie Billingsley was making out with Lou Hiscoe. Everyone else was pickled. Zinck ran his fingers through his hair and let out a sigh of exasperation.

"Can I call you back?" Zinck asked.

"I think the American people would like to meet their new president-elect, Mr. Zinck."

"Okay…okay…I just need to clean up around here some; we've been, uh, celebrating…I mean…strategizing all night. Give me until 6 a.m."

How dare somebody try to duck Max Shepherdson.

"Look, Mr. President-elect, we expect to be the first to talk with you, and we don't want to get scooped by the other networks. If this is some ploy by you to coddle to other media outlets…"

"Just…just give me an hour. That'll be fine."

"Don't disappoint us, Mr. President-elect."

The first thing Zinck did was make his way through the maze of hung over zombies and get to the TV. UNN had been on all night. He hit the DVR rewind button and reached the part of the show where the network called the race.

"UNN now is projecting that California's 55 electoral votes have gone to the Ken Zinck," Max Shepherdson had said. "And with that, UNN can now project that, in the most shocking upset in American political history, New Hampshire's Ken Zinck, of the previously obscure Block Party, will be the next President of the United States."

This was followed by an offstage voice saying, "I told you to get this guy's head shot up! Where are the interns?" Instead of the customary head shot of the winner, the network was forced to run with a dark silhouette of a male profile for its title card.

The network panned back to the Magic Wall Map, where there really was a sea of green. It wasn't the vodka after all. All of New England, Delaware, and every state West of the Mississippi except for Utah was green. Oh, and Florida too. Figures. Florida would have to be involved in this somehow. They were all colored green. Yep, that added up to 284 – 14 more than he needed to be elected president.

What was more shocking, though, was the popular vote totals. Despite winning 31 states, it looked like about only 2.1 million people voted for him. Yet he received about 80,000 more votes than Flaherty, who was consistently 10 points ahead in the polls leading up to Election Day. President Tewksbury, as unpopular as any president ever, was a third with only 1.6 million votes. Results were still trickling in, but a major network was confident enough to call the election for Zinck. He flipped over to Fox News, NBC, ABC, CBS. They were all running with the story.

Zinck didn't have time to let everyone else use his home as a crash pad while UNN was on the way.

"Hey!" Zinck called out to everyone.

Nothing.

"HEY!"

People began to stir. Gil Dolan grumbled something about letting everyone sleep. Zinck grabbed his baseball bat from the closet and pounded it on the floor. Then he used it to point to himself, "Up here, people."

"Listen up everybody. I have good news and bad news. The good news is, you're looking at the next President of the United States!"

The house erupted in celebration. Gil Dolan and Lou Hiscoe grabbed Zinck, hurled him over their shoulders and started carrying him around the living room, while everyone else in the room chanted, "ZINCK! ZINCK! ZINCK!" Lou was especially fired up. By virtue of making the right call on a coin flip a couple of months ago, he was now Vice President-elect.

"Hey, put…put me down! What the fuck? We have a lot of shit to get done," Zinck said.

Gil and Lou lowered him to the ground.

"OK," Zinck continued, "The bad news is, UNN is gonna be here in half an hour to film my acceptance speech live. I'm sure the other networks will be following suit shortly. So let's try to clean up around here, cuz after a day of nonstop boozing this place is a pigsty and I don't have to tell you we're all a little stinky right now. I have three bathrooms in here. Everybody hit the showers; three minutes, in and out, don't hog the hot water. And one last thing. When the networks get here, act professional! We have to send a positive message to the rest of the free world."

People started moving around the house. Tara marched up to Zinck and gave him a bear hug.

"I'm so excited," she said. "You must be pumped."

"No!" Zinck said. "This fucking sucks."

"What d'ya mean? Don't you want to be president?"

"No! That's the whole problem. I DON'T wanna be president."

"Then why did you run?"

"I didn't like either candidate. I run for selectman here every two years and get 40 votes. I wanted to run for something where I can get, you know, a couple hundred thousand. I didn't think I would actually win."

He grabbed two aspirin, popped them in his mouth and chased them with vodka.

"Besides, I don't wanna move to Washington," Zinck continued. "You ever been there? It's fucking hot down there. You can barely breathe it's so humid. Plus, I just paid off this house and now I have to move? That sucks."

"Rent it out," Tara replied.

"With my luck, that'd be unconstitutional."

He then rewound the DVR to the popular vote totals and showed Tara.

"Do I really deserve to be president when three percent of all eligible voters in America actually voted for him," he asked. "And why didn't hardly anyone vote?"

Tara put her arm around Zinck in sympathy.

"Tara, what do I do?" he asked her. "This is a nightmare."

"You could resign."

"Oh yeah, that'd look real good."

"Hey, you don't get inaugurated until Jan. 20. You have plenty of time, and these things have a way of working themselves out. Look, I'll help you clean up around here."

Just then, Zinck's phone rang again.

"Hello?"

It was President Tewksbury.

"This is the President of the United States," he said. His voice was shell shocked, the kind of morose tone from someone who just suffered the most humiliating defeat in American electoral history. "I just want to congratulate you on your victory. You're embarking on a great voyage. My people will get in touch with you shortly to begin the transition."

"Thank you, Mr. President."

"You're welcome. Oh, one last thing?"

"Yes, Mr. President."

"Who the hell are you again? Block Party? I've never heard of you guys before. What's your platform?"

"We'll go over it when we meet, Mr. President."

Zinck heard Tewksbury grumble, "I can't fucking believe I lost to this guy," to someone before hanging up.

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Zinck pumped up the TV volume so he could listen while wiping off spilled beer stains and lemon and lime peels and the counter. The pundits were baffled. Shepherdson walked over to UNN's stable of talking heads, three booths full of 47 "experts" from both sides of the aisle whose job it was to argue with each other and pretend to analyze what happened.

Never before had a room full of political junkies been dead silent. Finally, a Democratic analyst piped up.

"Well, I'm just disgusted," she said. "Clearly the Republicans are up to their dirty tricks again. I mean, look at the turnout – 6 million votes, THREE percent of eligible voters went to the polls. I'm sure those Republicans had their 'people' turning poor, underprivileged voters away in droves."

Her rant was interrupted by one of the Republican pundits. "Come on, how can you accuse us of turning votes away when we got fewer votes than you did?" He then railed against the "blatant pro-Block Party bias that UNN has exhibited throughout the presidential campaign."

The studio became silent again, until a pimple-faced intern cleared his throat in the back.

"I predicted this all along, if you guys would've listened to me," he said. "But no, nobody ever listens to the intern." The rest of the panel flashed angry looks at him, and he became silent again as someone offstage shouted, "How 'bout if you get that head shot like we asked you, intern boy?"

Though Zinck was concocting an excuse to bail out on the presidency, he was enjoying the panic at UNN. Then his phone rang again.

Tara, who was vacuuming in the living room, picked it up.

"Ken, it's for you, says he's with the Secret Service."

Zinck grabbed the phone from Tara. "Hello?"

"On behalf of the Secret Service, congratulations, Mr. President-elect," the Secret Service guy said. "We need to get together to discuss how we will protect you and your family for the next four years. Your code name will be Tyrannosaurus rex."

"Great," Zinck said. "Thanks for the update. Can I call you back, UNN is gonna be here any minute now."

"But, Mr. President-elect, we need to go over a few things."

"I'll call you back later this morning."

"Mr. President-elect, this is the Secret Service. You can't hang up on…"

Click.

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The line of people outside one of the bathrooms was long and rowdy. When Zinck asked what the delay was, though, it was evident that whoever was in the bathroom was neither alone nor quiet. The specks of gray in Zinck's hair were multiplying. The last thing he needed with the nation about to descend on his home was tomfoolery between some horny supporters in the shower.

He banged on the door and started yelling.

"Listen, I don't want to hear any orgies in my shower!" he said. "I said three minutes and out! If you people don't get out and towel off in the next 30 seconds, I'll become the first President-elect in history to assault one of his supporters. Then, when I get impeached, I will make sure my Vice President pardons me. Stop fooling around and get out!"

Bonnie and Jack emerged sheepishly from the bathroom and tried to duck into one of the bedrooms. Tara glared at Bonnie and muttered, "slut," under her breath.

That might be the perfect plan, Zinck thought. If he kicked the shit out of someone, he could be arrested and then nobody would want him to be president. The fate of the free world would be Lou Hiscoe's problem, not his. He'd have to chew on that some more.

While Zinck kept running around and thinking about an exit strategy, UNN droned on in the background. He asked Tara to hold off on the vacuuming so he could listen to the TV. While the talking heads were scrambling for an explanation, the network re-broadcast a man-on-the-street segment from earlier in the day. He was disturbed by some of the voters.

"This is Kelly Fisherstock with UNN. We're here at *Food Emporium,* which is doubling as a polling station in Florida, a key swing state," said the woman. "Sir, could you tell me who you voted for and why?"

"I didn't vote."

"OK, why not, sir?"

"Well, all the polls said that Flaherty guy was up 10 points. It sounded like the election was in the bag. Why bother? I have grocery shopping to do. My wife sent me out a bunch of errands."

"Didn't you want to be a part of the democratic process, sir?"

"Ma'am, I gotta run. They just called my number at the deli counter. I need to put in my order. The black forest ham is half-off today."

Another guy who identified himself as Republican said, "It's very discouraging. I just didn't bother. Flaherty had an insurmountable lead. I work a sales job on commission and at this point, I'd rather make money than take a couple hours out of my day to vote."

Kelly Fisherstock was at a loss. Of the first nine or 10 people she approached, all of them brushed her off or said they didn't vote. Finally, she found someone.

"I got home from the game last night and I flipped on the news," this guy said. "They said this Zinck guy swept the vote in Dixville Notch. I never heard of him, but I figured 42 people can't be wrong. I mean, don't they say as New Hampshire goes, so goes the country? Or

maybe that's Missouri. I don't know. Whatever. I voted for him. Hopefully he knows what he's doing."

Zinck dropped the sponge on the kitchen floor, and the sink was beginning to overflow with water. He flipped to Fox News, which panned over to the White House, where a mob had gathered to mock the incumbent Republican while he gave a solemn concession speech. People in the crowd began holding up signs with Zinck's name scribbled on them, though many of them were misspelled Zinc or Zink. They waved the signs in the air and chanted "ZINCK! ZINCK! ZINCK!"

"This is the greatest moment of my life," said one woman, choking back tears. Zinck recognized her; it was the fiancé of his college buddy, who moved to D.C. after graduation. As much as he didn't want to be president, he started thinking that it would be tough to let down 2.1 million people, particularly if they all cried when he wins.

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Frank Kilbon was among the more well-behaved people at Zinck's party, if only because he was a mellow drunk. From the crack of dawn Tuesday, he sat on the couch in the living room and sucked down bottle after bottle, all while saying next to nothing. That's why people liked him. He had a way of connecting with everybody by not pissing anybody off.

That gave the President-elect an idea. He needed more people like Frank.

"I need a favor from you," Zinck said.

"Yeah, shoot," Frank said.

"I need you to be my Secretary of State."

"What?"

"You know, Secretary of State. Every president has one. It's the most prestigious, important Cabinet position. You're good with diplomacy."

"Listen, I'm flattered, but the timing is really bad. I just got promoted to night manager at the Dixville General Store. They're gonna be pretty pissed if I quit now."

"What's wrong with you? Secretary of State pays a lot better than assistant manager of a convenience store. You get to travel the world. You always said you wanted to see Russia one day. Here's your chance."

"Jeez, Ken, I don't know. That's a big decision. I can't give you a commitment right now. I'd definitely have to talk it over with the wife."

"Come on! Don't leave me hanging now. I need you, man."

"Lemme think about it, OK?"

This created the first major rift in the Zinck Administration. Jack Royce apparently was talking Cabinet with Frank. Zinck was finally making a dent in the cleaning when Jack approached him with a sour look on his face.

"What's up, Jack?" Zinck said.

"How come you offered Secretary of State to Frank?" Jack asked.

"Because I think he'd be a good one."

"What about me?"

"Jack, 24 hours ago you were running around outside with no clothes on. I don't think that's a good message for our nation's ambassador to send to the rest of the world."

"There were no cameras here. Nobody has to know about that."

"Well, I could offer you Secretary of Commerce."

"That's lame, Ken. That's such a lame Cabinet post."

"You know what? Fuck you. That's my offer. Take it or leave it. I don't have time to massage egos right now."

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Cabinet squabbles aside, things were starting to take shape. It was 5:30 a.m. and there was a hint of light outside. Most everybody was reasonably sober by now, and Zinck escorted them outside to warm up the media crush. The Secret Service had just arrived and taken their positions around the house. Networks from all over the world, from UNN to the BBC, were descending on Zinck's house. The moose was accosting the reporter from al Jazeera, trying to eat his microphone.

"Are you gonna be OK?" Tara asked.

"I don't know if I can do this," Zinck said.

"You can't be any worse than that jackass who's in the White House now. What do you have to lose? Go out there and knock them dead."

This was the time when Zinck wished his campaign Web site was a little more serious. According to the site, Zinck's major initiative if elected would be to pass legislation forcing the National League to adopt the designated hitter.

He flashed back to his youth. When Zinck was in high school civics class, he wrote a political acceptance speech for an assignment. The speech quoted, among others, Thomas Jefferson, Vince Lombardi and the Dalai Lama. He thought it was a pretty good speech. He still had it more or less committed to memory, and he figured it was destiny for him to use it now. It would at least stall some of the difficult questions.

He swung open the front door and walked out on the porch and his supporters cheered. Dixville Notch had become the brightest spot in New Hampshire with all the network camera

lights. Those who hadn't stayed up to watch the results were now flipping on their TVs to the story of the century. They probably would want to hear something profound.

And then, Zinck completely spaced out. He couldn't remember a word of the speech. He also realized he was wearing a Red Sox baseball cap, which didn't look very presidential. He paused for a few seconds, but it felt like an eternity.

He could only think of one thing to say.

"I'm Ken Zinck, and I approve this message."

The crowd erupted. Word had spread and people from neighboring towns were joining the Dixville Notch crew at his front porch. Suddenly, a loud pop came from the backyard. Startled, Zinck covered his ears as he ducked down on the porch. The moose that was hanging around outside kicked up on its hing legs and ran across the lawn.

"Everybody to the front porch!" the Secret Service guy shouted. "Now! Tyrannosaurus rex is DOWN!!!"

The Secret Service converged on the backyard, where Lou Hiscoe had been setting off celebratory bottle rockets, grabbed Lou and body-slammed him to the ground. While Zinck appreciated the responsiveness, he wanted to make sure he didn't have to select another vice president. He also wasn't thrilled when one of the Secret Service guys shot the moose.

"I'm fine, I'm fine," he said. "I think my vice president just set off a bottle rocket out back. I wasn't expecting it, that's all. Sorry, I got a little spooked."

After the initial commotion, things finally settled down. Zinck made the argument that, as Selectman of Dixville Notch, he balanced the town's budget every year and that's more than he could say about any other candidate. He also had no criminal record, and, at age 40 and a lifelong Dixville Notch native, met all the constitutional requirements of the chief executive. He

was purposely vague about his goals. Zinck was learning how to be a politician fast. And he was dead tired so this was no time to get into specifics.

After a media grilling, Tara came out and asked Zinck what she should do with the empty bottle of Hammer & Sickle vodka. Droplets of sweat beaded Zinck's forehead.

"What the – get rid of that," Zinck whispered. "I don't need the nation thinking I'm some pinko communist."

Tara put down the bottle. Then she looked at him and inadvertently spoke into the microphone, "Would you like some aspirin, Mr. President-elect?"

"Go away!"

The press conference began with a question from a CBS guy. "Mr. President-elect, the commissioner of Major League Baseball was quoted this morning as saying he will vigorously fight any attempt by you to force the DH rule onto the National League. How do you intend to push your agenda through?"

"Whatever. I'll have the commissioner arrested for treason and sentenced to death if he doesn't comply," Zinck said, after which the crowd rumbled

The BBC reporter followed up with a foreign policy question about the fabricated crisis in East Moragovia.

"I don't think East Moragovia is really a threat," Zinck said. "But if they were, we could always nuke them. The Cold War is over, but we still have enough nukes to turn East Moragovia into a parking lot."

The throng of reporters gasped, which spurred chaos and effectively ended the press conference. This was fine with Zinck. He needed to go back inside for a little down time. He announced he would schedule other press conference later. He wanted the next press conference

to announce that he had a chance of heart and didn't want the job, but he didn't tell anybody that. The more he thought about it, the more he realized he might be locked into this commander-in-chief gig.

Tara walked up to him.

"I don't know if that went well," Zinck said.

"You'll be fine. You are the people's candidate," she said, then gave him a kiss.

Power really was an aphrodisiac. That was certainly an argument in Zinck's mind for going with this charade.

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Later that morning Brendan Flaherty announced he was challenging results in Florida, which Zinck won by a razor-thin margin. If Florida were overturned, Flaherty would win the election. Tara and Zinck looked at each other and smiled. While Zinck was starting to settle into the idea of being president, this might be the perfect out.

It had been a long 36 hours. Zinck was worried about more exhausting crises ahead. The Cuban Missile Crisis, Pearl Harbor, Sept. 11, the Stock Market Crash of 1929. Something along those lines could await him in the near future. But nobody's ascension to president-elect of the United States was as unexpected as Zinck's. If he could take this in stride, a worldwide crisis shouldn't be so hard.

And he was too tired to deal with it anyway. This would all resolve itself in the next two months. Around 10 a.m., with people starting to head home and having completed the last of his interviews, an exhausted Zinck plunged into bed and drifted off to sleep.