



Those Jalapeños Are Spicy, President McKinley

I guess you could say it was a typical Wednesday afternoon. After a grueling day of sixth grade, I was working on a history report that was due in sixteen hours.

I knew that William McKinley had been the twenty-fifth president of the United States and the last Civil War veteran to hold the office, and that Mount McKinley in Alaska was named in his honor.

And now I also knew that he smelled *terrible*.

His corpse sat across from me at the dining room table of my friend Captain Zombie.

President McKinley leaned forward and examined the plate on the table between us. "What did you call these?" he asked in a booming voice. "Nickels?"

"Nachos," I repeated for the third time.

"Wonderful things," President McKinley said. He

scooped up a cheese-coated chip with fingers of bone held loosely together with rotting tendons. Then he swiped the chip around the plate to make sure he got a sampling of salsa, sour cream, and olive. “We certainly didn’t have this delicacy in my day!”

He dropped the chip into his mouth, which hinged open in an unnatural way, making him look like a snake preparing to swallow a mouse. As he chewed, bits of the nacho fell through a hole beneath his chin, where his flesh had rotted away. Shards of chips and dribbles of sour cream dropped onto his moth-eaten suit.

I shot a frustrated glance at Captain Zombie, who smiled and gave me two thumbs-up for encouragement. Behind him, my best friends, Teddy and Fiona, watched in disgust.

I pressed on with the interview, moving to the next question in my notebook. “How did it feel to add a new state to the country?”

“A new state?” he asked, looking puzzled. He reached for the plate of nachos again.

“Hawaii.”

“What’s that?” he asked. “Hawai’i was granted statehood?” He leaned back in his chair and slapped his knee happily. “I wish William Jennings Bryan and

Henry Adams could hear that. What say you about my imperialist outlook now, Adams?"

I sighed. My interview wasn't going very well. Captain Zombie had tried to warn me when I'd first proposed it. Apparently, it's hard to keep the living dead on topic. They're so interested in catching up on what they've missed that they wind up doing more asking than answering. It's not the best situation when you're trying to conduct an interview.

Still, I desperately needed to pull up my history grade before the end of the semester. When my teacher, Ms. Matthews, had assigned us reports on former presidents and I had drawn McKinley's name, I had figured that Captain Zombie was the key to my success. I knew I wasn't going to get away with rewording the article about William McKinley from Wikipedia. Ms. Matthews was way too smart for that. To impress her, I would need Captain Zombie's ability to speak to the dead.

I begged him for a week. Then I finally got him to agree, after I beat him at a game of Pictionary with a little help from Teddy. Somehow, I'd assumed that once I walked down the steps into Captain Zombie's secret mausoleum headquarters, the former president of the United States would just open up and practically write

the paper for me, but that wasn't proving to be the case. Teddy and Fiona had been smart to do their reports the old-fashioned way.

McKinley shoveled another nacho into his mouth between happy chuckles. "Say there, lad, what did you call these green things?"

"Jalapeños," I replied. "Be careful—they're spicy."

"Tell me more," he insisted as he topped his next chip with a small slice of jalapeño. "What about the Philippines? Has that become a state as well?"

"No."

"Cuba?"

"No."

"Don't tell me they've both fallen back to the Spaniards."

"No, they're both their own countries now."

"Whooo!" the president hollered as he fanned his mouth with a decrepit hand.

"I told you they were spicy," I reminded him.

Captain Zombie stepped forward with a fresh glass of soda for President McKinley, who gulped it down.

But the president wasn't paying attention to me. Instead, he was studying his drink. He dunked his fingers into the glass and fished out an ice cube. Then

he held it up to the milky orbs that were the remains of his eyes.

“Your ice,” he said in awe, “it’s nearly a perfect rectangle.”

“Yes, sir,” Captain Zombie answered, giving me a reassuring smile. “We call them ice cubes.”

“Will wonders never cease?” the president mused.

“Nate, perhaps this is a bit much for the president to take in all at once,” Captain Zombie suggested. He turned to McKinley. “Sir, perhaps we should take a break. Would you like to play a parlor game of sorts? We call it Pictionary. You can have Teddy on your—”

“I’m not so sure that’s a good idea,” I interjected. After McKinley’s reaction to the ice cube, who knew what would happen if he had to draw a calculator or a cell phone? “Maybe we should just call it a night.”

President McKinley nodded. Then he leaned in close.

“Son, do you know what the last thing I ate was?” he asked softly.

“Er, no,” I replied. Captain Zombie had warned me about this, too. Freshly raised corpses tended to be pretty hungry. That was why Captain Zombie had put out some snacks for the former president.

“A piece of toast with a cup of coffee,” McKinley said

sadly. “Bitter, weak coffee. I thought nothing of it at the time. I was recovering in a hospital bed. The doctors said I was healthy enough to have a little something to eat, and that’s what they brought me. Had I known it would be my last meal, I would have ordered a steak as thick as a dictionary.”

“You mentioned William Jennings Bryan before. Let me just ask —”

“Smothered in sautéed mushrooms and onions.”

“You campaigned against Bryan twice —”

“Oh, and a twice-baked potato,” he whispered.

“What did you think of Bryan as an opponent?”

“Bryan was a clown,” he grumbled, snapping out of his food reverie.

And with that, he scooped another pile of cheese, ground beef, salsa, and jalapeños onto a chip and tossed it into his mouth.

“I hate to bring up the, er, assassination,” I said hesitantly. I was nervous about asking him about his death, but I knew I had to. It was an important part of my report.

“A hospital bed is a terrible place to die,” he replied with a sigh.

“Huh?” I asked as I flipped back through the notes I’d taken. “I thought you were shot at the World’s Fair.”

“Yes, but I didn’t die there,” McKinley answered. “I survived another nine days, fading in and out. The doctors didn’t realize my wounds were infected. They told me I would make a full recovery, but they didn’t know gangrene had already poisoned my blood. A man doesn’t last long under those circumstances.”

“Do you know why that guy wanted to kill you?” I asked. “Why didn’t he like you as president?”

“I don’t think he cared what kind of president I was. I think he felt powerless and wanted to lash out at the most powerful man in the country.” He frowned and his voice grew raspy. “Lying in that hospital bed, I found I could relate. In the pull of a trigger, I’d gone from a man who commanded armies and navies around the globe to a man who couldn’t dress himself or eat solid food.”

“I don’t get it,” I said. “How did that help you relate to the guy who shot you?”

“Because when I lay there in that bed, I knew death was coming for me. I would have given anything to feel as though I was in control of my own destiny. It wasn’t

that I was going to die that bothered me—it was that I had no say in how or when or why.”

I scribbled some notes as he spoke.

“Mark my words, lad,” he declared loudly, tapping my notebook and leaving a dusty mark. “Any man who finds himself powerless is capable of anything if he thinks it will return to him a sense of power. And when we’ve lost power, our beliefs are all we have left, so we cling to them, even when they cease to matter. In fact, that’s when we cling hardest. Our regrets and our desires take on much greater importance.”

The intensity in what remained of his milky eyes seemed to burn through me. I wrote his words down but was relieved when Captain Zombie stepped in again.

“That’s probably a good stopping point,” he said. “What do you say, Nate? Can I take President McKinley back now?”

The president grabbed fistfuls of nachos with both hands and stuffed them into his pockets. “Thank you, Mr. President,” I said, standing. “I’m sure this will help with my history report.”

“Glad to help, my boy.”

I gathered my papers and slipped them into my

backpack. “You mind if we get home?” I asked Captain Zombie. “These reports are due tomorrow.”

“Go ahead,” he said with a flash of his yellowed teeth. “I’ll make sure he gets back where he belongs.”

Outside the mausoleum door Teddy, Fiona, and I hopped on our bicycles. “So?” I asked both my friends.

“I’m kind of glad I didn’t ask him to do Chester Arthur for me now,” Teddy admitted. “I can just imagine him plowing through a cheeseburger while I try to ask him about civil service reform.”

“Same here,” Fiona agreed. “I was picturing Franklin Pierce and a plate of buffalo wings the whole time.”

“Well, I wrote down everything he said,” I replied as I pushed off. “I might be able to find something useful in my notes.”

We pedaled through the cemetery gates and headed for home.