

THE ARTICLE IN QUESTION

by Tom Rowan

Synopsis

The play begins in the late 1980s at a university in California. Grad student Jordan Whitaker is camped out on a beach towel for a campus rally, armed with a hand-made sign supporting the Montreal Protocol in the fight against the depletion of the ozone layer. Esteemed oceanography professor Leonard Lobel happens by and introduces Jordan to Dawn, an attractive undergrad with a similar commitment to environmentalism. Jordan shares with Dawn some of his ideas on a new theory he calls Evolutionary Thermodynamics, a way of looking at evolution as a function of energy exchange, through which human societies can be analyzed as living organisms. The two young people feel an immediate chemistry.

Forward to 1991. In Professor Lobel's office, Jordan pitches his evolutionary theory as a potential dissertation topic. Lobel, who has been recovering slowly from a heart attack, is intrigued by the originality of the concept, but neither he nor Jordan's faculty advisor, Douglas Cavanaugh, thinks it's necessarily an appropriate subject to pursue in an oceanography program. The conversation is interrupted by the appearance of Dr. J. Curtis Reining, a celebrated physicist who arrives unexpectedly at the office; he's come to California to work with Lobel on revisions to an article on which the two have been collaborating. Though Lobel's secretary, Martha, is worried about Lobel's stamina, he agrees to sit down with Reining and get to work. Following a grueling private session during which the two haggle over the final edits, Reining submits the article to a new journal being published by the Galaxy Club, a venerable Washington, DC affiliation of shakers and movers of which both scientists are members.

By the time the article is published in the first issue of *The Galaxy Journal*, Leonard Lobel has passed away, the victim of a second heart attack. By now, the race for the presidential nomination is heating up, and Senator Al Gore, a former student of Lobel's and a tireless crusader for regulations to curb global warming, publicly credits his mentor for instilling in him an appreciation for the magnitude of the problem and of the damage mankind is wreaking on the environment. Surprisingly, however, the published *Galaxy* article turns out to have a more skeptical slant. The press seizes on it as proof that Lobel had changed his mind about climate change at the end of his career, no longer believing it was a serious threat or advocating governmental action. When conservative political columnists begin using the article to discredit Gore, the senator phones Jordan requesting his help.

Having taught alongside Lobel and been his research assistant for several years, Jordan (who is also a former lawyer) doesn't believe for a moment that his late mentor changed his mind on the issue of global warming. He begins to suspect that Reining failed to incorporate Lobel's changes into the version of the article he submitted to the *Journal*—or perhaps pressured the ailing, eighty-something Lobel during their final meeting, wearing the older man down till he was too tired to resist. The tension rises further when Jordan learns the article is scheduled to be reprinted in a book on the current state of climate science.

Jordan and Dawn, now his wife, attend a Memorial Symposium in Lobel's honor, where Jordan delivers a paper of his own on climate change—a paper that openly questions the authorship of the *Galaxy* article and goes so far as to suggest that Reining's conduct in the matter was unethical. Reining, who turns out to be present in the audience, is incensed, and decides to sue Jordan for libel—to the tune of half a million dollars.

Dawn does some quick research on Reining's past and discovers that he has had a veritable career as a scientific naysayer, publishing article after article on topics ranging from acid rain to the ozone hole to secondhand smoke, consistently minimizing the dangers involved and denying that any governmental controls are necessary or desirable. According to Jordan's faculty advisor, Douglas Cavanaugh, Reining belongs to a close-knit group of scientists whose loyalties and convictions date back to the Manhattan Project and the beginnings of the Cold War. To these men, the end justifies the means when it comes to protecting American liberties—and especially American free enterprise—from the encroachment of big government. Not only do Reining's speeches and writings always follow this general bent, but it's revealed that much of the work he's done has been for oil and coal companies, as well as think tanks funded by the energy industry.

With the help of Dawn, Martha, and Cavanaugh, Jordan prepares a defense, planning to serve as his own counsel. His efforts become a personal mission not only to clear his own name but to rehabilitate his mentor's great legacy as a pioneer in global warming science. And he's well aware that much more is at stake, given that Reining's misleading scientific statements have been stalling legislation that could help to curb the crisis. A prominent and well-connected figure, Reining has substantial public and industry opinion on his side—as well as a large team of expert lawyers working pro bono. Before long, Jordan's resources run out and his friends start to turn away, but he resolves to continue the fight.

Finally, Reining's lawyers offer to drop the case if Jordan will sign a retraction of everything he's said and admit that Lobel was a true and willing author of the article. He scoffs, but Dawn is terrified of what could happen to his career if he loses the case—and what the financial devastation could mean for their two young children. In the final scene, Jordan is faced with an impossible choice: between his political and scientific convictions and the survival of his own family.