

Chapter 16 of *The Debate*, Vol. 2 by B. Douglas Robbins

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Stanford had a certain ethic, you have to understand. We were situated in one of the most moderate climates in North America, and all that warmth had to have an effect. The campus was built on the creased soil of a farm in red tile and sandstone. The buff stone was the tone of desert flesh, the pigment that all things revert to when exposed to enough solar power. A steady state. The students and faculty were expected to be as steady. Palm Trees. Rodin. Sandstone archways. Steady.

It was understood that the experiments being conducted in the art of living were irreproducible anywhere else. We were all alone at the edge of the Frontier, not looking beyond the horizon for confirmation that what we were doing was right. Georgetown, for example, panned my application, perhaps more because they believed others would do the same, than any other interior directive. That was not the way it worked out West. New York was no longer Rome. Some say the Empire never ended. Don't believe it.

I had friends at the University of Pennsylvania who hated it there. They described a Business School Hydra with an endless appetite for stiffness and conformity. They said it was Wharton. I believed it was the weather.

I mention all this by way of trying to explain why Jack and Virginia and I took Cindy on as our own. I mention it partly by way of trying to explain it to myself. I might point to the ethic, also I might mention that among us there was a certain amount of distrust and even disgust with the older generation. In abstract terms it was a millennium of imperialism, waste, false notions of the divine as justification for avarice, and huberistic notions of immortality through technology. Sick and sad notions. But I also knew that for myself, my parents had proven themselves, by even the most liberal standards, lacking in even rudimentary sensitivity. They were untrustworthy and vindictive. They seeded in me an ugly self-deprecation as a legacy to their own bantam lusts. Hailie helped me to see how much of that was still inside of me, eating from the center outward, like a worm. My parents divorced when I was 12, my father emotionally remote, forced me to build an

identity from bits and pieces of men I had encountered in other areas of life. Sometimes teachers, sometimes television, sometimes from friends who themselves were victims of emotionally remote fathers. It was a less than satisfactory process.

I was not alone. Jack had told me about the terrorism of being the emotional caretaker of an alcoholic father. Jared had often referred to his mother with detestation explaining that she was oblivious to any issue that did not fit cleanly into her lego-like perception of familial relations. They would make deals, he said. He would promise to be “kind” to her, which meant refraining from speaking of anything of any matter, and she would promise to stop censuring his father in his presence.

There was among many of us, a distinct distrust of the status quo, of laws and courts and anything else that resembled the establishment, that in our minds were our parents. Thus the aversion to press criminal charges. University action was slightly different. The adults at the University were, more than anyone else, in a state of arrested development. They could afford to be because their lovely theorems and utopias rarely had to be tested beyond the realm of sandstone columns. They were perennial students, perennial innocents, and that state of permanent protection may have been what saved them. In any event, they were certainly the lesser of two evils.

Jack, Virginia and I were convinced of many things, some true, some only partly true. We were convinced that we could handle what needed to be handled, that no one else, especially adults would exert better judgment, and that we could fix it.

Maybe that helps to explain why I did not think twice to indicate to Keith that Cindy was not well, and it was, as Chandler suspected, a bad run in with dread LSD. It would all work out I convinced myself. I was sounding more and more like other people each day.

If I have not mentioned Keith in much detail before, it is because there is not much to mention. He was a nice looking boy from New England who liked shiny loafers and neatly pleated trousers. He was quiet and smiled a lot and wasn't a particularly good debater. I supposed he came from old money, the kind that believed it was vulgar to appear too wanting or too trying, but always insisted on its products, namely unadulterated success. He had been dating Cindy, as far as I knew, since they were freshmen, over a year ago—until last week-end, that is.

He was very concerned about her and asked a lot of questions to which I replied, “You'll have to ask her that.”

He agreed to pick us up in his truck the following morning, and together, he and I would help Cindy through this.

East Palo Alto was less than a fifteen minute drive and a world away. Beyond the Stanford Shopping Center, the Polo Shop and Neiman-Marcus was one of the highest per capita murder rates in the nation, and at its edges near the power station, and the marsh land was the Infinity Auto Salvage wrecking yard. We paid a dollar each to have our hands stamped and gain admission like slummers at a third world dance club. The small Latino man took our money and checked Keith's tool bag suspiciously. "They must not have liked out hair cuts," poked Keith.

We all wore ratty clothes, oily jeans, gnarly Converse—Cindy with a grimy flannel around her waist, Keith in a blue collar with an oval patch over his left breast reading Jon. Keith and Cindy advised against jewelry or watches.

Two other greasy men were haggling over a generator, one insisting that it was the wrong one for his car, the other expressing his contempt, "No returns. This ain't fuckin' Nordstrom's."

Through the warehouse doors laid a plain of wrecked cars mounted on rims welded to the frames. A cemetery for dead and dying machines slowly sinking into the mud, as if the Earth was calling her metal, glass and rubber back home.

Through the center ran a muddy road, marked by twin gullies where the tractor made its tread. We hopped over the road on the higher and dryer parts, sometimes forgoing the land altogether for a displaced hood or tire. It was an imperfect process. Mud and water snaked from my shoes to calves. The sun broke through on occasion glinting off the dead chrome and stale puddles.

We passed a group of men jumping like monkeys in a cage on a wheel assembly, clearly without the proper tools. They had pulled a long metal clavicle off another car's suspension and had leveraged it in between the greasy knuckles in the wheel-well. They took turns launching their bodies on the end of it trying to pop or break something out of joint. Then severe hammering on the strut. It was exactly the kind of image I had previously only read about in a Steinbeck novel, born of desperation and necessity.

We passed seemingly perfect Karmann Ghias and gutted out Fiats. Some cars were twenty years old and rotting from fluid oxidation like a candle, and some were fairly new, but told a story of severe destruction. The front end of a black Supra, for example, was crushed so badly the bumper came within a foot of the steering

wheel. The engine submarined. Spider-webbed windshield, sparkling like diamonds. Brown in places. Somebody's blood if you thought about it.

"There!" Cindy pointed, "I want that!" Hidden behind a row of Volvos was a 25 year old Mercedes Benz, hood up, like a patient at the doctor. "It's an old diesel!" she quick flashed. Keith shined at Cindy's delight. She jumped into the open engine compartment and swung her legs in. Plenty of room. "Wow! It looks lovely. Keith, I need, uhm, how 'bout a 10 double m. I want to take the valve cover off!"

Minutes later, the cover off, Cindy was squealing like a pig, "Ohhh! It's perfect. It looks like a rebuild. It's so nice! I want it! I want the whole engine!"

Keith stared with a rectangular gape in his mouth, "Do you have enough money for an engine?" hoping the answer was "no."

"Yep!"

"I mean cash."

"Of course cash!"

So that is what we did for the next two hours, pulling off battery cables, and starter motors, pulling out the studs that cinched the engine to what looked like an old church bell, the water pump, engine bearing bolts, exhaust manifold, and a hundred little wires like plastic covered corpuscles. Cindy couldn't have been happier. I was proud of myself for having brought them out together.

"Can you get this?" asked Cindy, "You're a strong man." She referred to an obdurate philips screw. Keith gave it a turn.

"Is that all I'm good for?" Keith climbed in, head first, while black hair wagged in his face.

"No, you're good for other things," she rustled in the tool bag, "like allen bolts..."

"Ohhhh! And c-clips, don't forget c-clips."

"Yeah, you're okay on those."

Keith asked me to retrieve the hoist. I asked him what the hoist would look like. Cindy snickered. Keith tried to explain how I would recognize it. He only confused me.

"I'll just ask someone," I said.

"No, don't ask. They won't help you anyway."

"I'll figure it out," I replied.

“I know you can do it,” Cindy added as I marched off.

I had a hell of a time with that hoist. I finally found it, stuck in the mud. I had to pay a guy who didn't speak English \$5.00 to help me push it. Twenty minutes later I was sweaty and thirsty having slogged through the wilting road. My friend left me at the Volvo isle.

“To tierra está seca aqui. Usted lo puede empujar,” with that he left me alone to push the last leg. I took a break, watching my Spanish speaking friend slug through the mud where we'd come. Perpendicular to the road was the Volvo isle, with the Mercedes in the distance. Cindy and Keith were no longer tinkering like elves on their mutual goal.

Keith threw his hands in front of him. Cindy leaned over the fender, watching the dark hole in the engine compartment. She shook her head, preened up and squinted in full sun. Keith shoved his hands in pockets but still remained uncontained, hopping in place. Cindy cupped hair around her ears repeatedly with greasy fingers. Her hair blackened there. She crashed a fist on the fender. A bang soon followed.

We held a debate meeting that evening at Virginia Pierce's behest, “Better to tell them now.”

Virginia had been coming down daily since the crisis. Jack picked her up at the Daly City BART because she insisted on meeting him half way. They were beginning to display pleasantries to one another and it was not uncommon to find them closely situated, speaking in private tones about their mutual problem, as if Cindy was their troubled child. I didn't know about Virginia but it did not surprise me that Jack would embrace the roll. He often had to father his alcoholic father, so Jack was well equipped to deal with the disturbed and the pained.

We assembled in the History Corner, as we had so many times before. The window panes reflected like mirrored obsidian, and the overheads made white like paper in the air. I remembered it was in this hall that Jared and I used to run practice debates in our first and second years. I missed Jared--despite myself--and the more I missed him the more it became possible to hate him and that was an overwhelming relief. I had a difficult time hating Jared because I couldn't acknowledge how important he was to me. Indifference was my strong suit, but indifference doesn't tend to flush out toxins like a good rain of hate and anger does. I was finally able to hate him because I was finally able to miss him, and that was only possible because of Cindy. My problems seemed

quite manageable by comparison.

I examined the threshold of room 203, searching for once, all the things that might appear, shunting nothing. I was slightly tense, and I realized that I had felt that way for months now at the doorway of that stupid lecture hall, never before thinking it strange or noteworthy.

“Why did you have to deceive me?” Keith Steadman hovered over my seat. Inclining to rise. Felt conspicuous for it. “You looked me straight in the face and told me drugs. You were playing me for a chump, and I don’t appreciate it.”

“Cindy didn’t want you to know. It wasn’t my choice to say so,” I said too reasonably.

“Cindy doesn’t know what she wants! You’re so fucking dense!” Keith stomped off toward the front of the hall and sat down, back to me, as if those were the last and most poignant words on the matter.

What could I have done differently I asked myself. *We did everything right.* I repeated in time. My heart would not find a slower cadence. I should have taken a stand, boyfriend or not. *Why should we take his bad trip?* Hailie would have asked.

Did I not lie.

So.

It’s wrong.

There is more in heaven than is dreamt of in your philosophies.

And Earth

And what?

Earth.

I always forget that part.

When the central members of the squad had arrived, Virginia stood at the front of the hall. She was the acid mouthed girl that had so often burned other debaters up like kindling, shifting her weight, and weaving her fingers, “Hi...I’m Cindy’s friend Virginia Pierce. I think I know almost everyone...Anyway, uhm, we all need to talk about something that’s happening with Cindy. She’s not here and won’t be coming either. I’ve talked to her and we decided that I would explain what’s going on because it affects everyone.” She grew more confident with each syllable.

“You’ll remember how messed up she was in L.A. and I

guess your coach made up some lame-ass excuse and never talked about it again. Well, Cindy was attacked by another debater while at a post tournament party. You probably know him, he won the tournament for U.C.L.A.” Virginia stood on her tip toes, then flat, trying to gauge responses. Keith anchored his elbows to his knees and pulled his hair back. Jack, shifting near Virginia, scanned nervously.

“I’m just going to say it. She’s been sexually assaulted, and we’re bringing charges,” except for that affected by Virginia’s slightly corrugated voice, no air moved. She explained the details of the action against Speed and how it was to proceed. She asked for everyone’s co-operation and their discretion, “People will find our about this. It’s inevitable, it’s just that it would be better if they found out later, after the process.”

Jack continued, “I’ve already gotten indications that the *Stanford Daily* smells blood. I have no idea how it leaked but we have to do everything possible to obstruct it. As far as we’re all concerned, in-between us and everyone else is the fucking Berlin Wall. Okay?”

Caius rose an agitated note, “If Cindy wants, you tell her me and my home-crew can go to So Cal and **personally** rip Speed a new asshole. You tell her, because I’m serious.” Skip and David snapped their fingers repeatedly in agreement—a fraternity gesture.

Virginia smirked, “Thanks, but that’s not going to help Cindy. I appreciate the sentiment. Really.” She laughed quickly.

“Maybe it’ll help her, maybe it won’t” Caius continued, “But I tell you what, Speed needs his dick kicked in, just for his own sake.”

“Maybe so,” Virginia made a very controlled nod.

“But we’re still debating, right?” asked Skip.

A pause, “Yes, I think we need to do all the things we would have done normally,” said Jack, “Otherwise we risk diverting attention to Cindy.”

Skip simpered, “Fuckin-A. How are we getting to Cal Poly?”

“Cal Poly? I hadn’t thought about it,” Jack crinkled his nose as if confused, “Elric how are we getting to Poly?”

“Well,” I thought, “Cindy has to give a statement. That could be this week-end, or next, were not sure yet. If it’s next week-end, we shouldn’t go out of town.”

“Wait a second,” David Evanson was agitated, “Jack said

we're going, so I don't think you have the right to say we aren't."

"Elric **is** the captain," reminded Jack.

"Bull-shit he is," Keith jumped as if from a sound sleep, "I sure as shit didn't make him captain. Nobody voted on it!"

"We're not a democracy," Jack prowled forward, "We're a meritocracy and I *beeeeelieeve* Elric's record is still a little better than yours."

"Fuck-you," Keith rose in his seat, pumping his elbows, "We are a **debate team** Jack, not a retirement home for has-been plagiarists. Elric shouldn't even be debating, let alone be the captain. Do you realize how many rounds I lose **automatically**, every fucking tournament just because I belong to this fucked-up team? I start out with a 0-2, at **least**, before I even arrive to the first match."

"Can we get some focus?" interjected Virginia.

"It's true," David Evanson turned to me in a most remarkable gaze, "I don't know why Chandler made you captain, but you're the last person who should **even** be in that position. You just came back for the Scholarship. You don't give a shit about debate. We all," he swirled a finger around the room like cake batter, "have been here every season, and never, not once, put a word to paper that wasn't 100% authentic. If anyone should be in line, it should be one of us. Even Jack, but not you. I'm sorry, I just don't see it."

Jack pitched instantly, "Okay David, if you've felt this way, why are you running Elric's China disad, why are you running his Rifkin block, huh? If your research is so impeccable and his is so fucked up--"

"No Jack," I had had enough of others judging us, defending us, condemning us, defining us, "I'm going to be clear about this and that's it. If at any point we need to be a squad, it is now and not for the sake of another fucking paperweight, so I'm going to be way, way clear. I've never said anything before because I guess, I wanted to ignore it and forget it, and I guess I thought it wasn't anybody else's business anyway. Well, now everything is going to be everyone's business."

They were quiet like hard rocks, almost stunned that I could speak on my own. I pulled my weight, and sat on the backrest, feet crabbed the seat, "Jared Kaneman and he alone forged Witches." Keith groaned, but no one else did. He was alone. I spoke to him, "I did not put a goddamn word in Greymalkin's mouth. I trusted my partner as each of you trust your partners.

That's not unusual. They were kick ass cards so I didn't ask where they came from. I didn't need or want to know. That's not unusual. What **is** unusual is that then, and now, none of you seem to know me well enough to realize I couldn't have and did not fabricate evidence."

The door opened and Chandler waddled in.

"I was expelled for a year and lost my best friend in the process, and **even now**, I am a pariah on my own team. I was presumed guilty and denied any process what-so-ever." Stares all around. They made no argument, no sound. I recognized that to induce such a state, on a debate team was considered a weighty accomplishment.

"I probably should have said this a long time ago. I fault myself..."

"Hello gentlemen, and lady," Chandler nodded in his tipsy way. He rested a thigh on the front table.

No one made a reply. Jack and Virginia had explicitly **not** invited Chandler.

"I apologize for my lateness. I had a run in with an old friend."

Still no reply.

"Jack," he picked on Jack most likely because he was at the front, "why are we all assembled here, if I may ask?"

Jack looked around as if the answer was etched on the wood paneling, stained on the seats, scrawled on the lectern.

Skip spoke up, "Cindy's been attacked and she's pressing charges." I always hated Skip. He was Chandler's lackey. Skip continued to explain as long as Chandler asked questions.

Seemingly unfazed, Chandler brought hand to chin, like The Thinker in front of Meyer, "Okay no one does anything until I talk to the University's legal department. We'll get to the bottom of this-"

"It's already taken care of," Virginia Pierce cut in, "We've faxed a complaint to U.C.L.A."

Chandler turned mauve, and his neck bulged as if flooded with bile, blinking all over, "U.C.L.A? By—who's—authority, young lady." He was a man who would call Virginia young lady and meant to chide her with it.

"Authority has nothing to do with it," she answered.

“It most certainly does. This is not your problem. What do you have to gain by being here?” Chandler modulated as if it were the only reasonable question to be asked. He even scratched his head in a move called the “Colombo.”

Virginia was reticent. No matter how she answered it would have opened the door to a discussion of her character, not the issue.

“I am the coach of this team,” he continued, as if his previous question was rhetorical anyway, “Cindy is **my** responsibility, not yours.”

“If that’s true, you’re sorely negligent,” replied Virginia.

“And you’re out of line, young lady.”

Jack insisted to Chandler, “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Chandler shook his head; it fell to one side like a fish, then back up again, “Jack, Elric, in my office.” He turned abruptly, spanking the exit bar.

Chandler moved his round body as if on rails. Through the oak door, patting the green leather chairs. Pinched at the buttons. Mine was cold, being old in the night.

“You boys are my eyes and ears,” he began, “I’m counting on you.”

We were reticent.

“If there is a problem with our girl, why, you can come to me. We can take care of it in house, if you will.”

“We came to you last weekend,” I poked my fingers in the buttons of the chair. Ground up dirt.

“Yes and we did what had to be done in that particular instance,” eyeglasses pressed into his eyes as if held there by rivets at the rim, “Now, there are proper **procedures** for this sort of thing, as laid out in the parental release form. Everyone under 21 has their parents sign one. That makes **me** a guardian and as such, I have certain **rights**. You know that. You boys aren’t stupid. To fail to notify me immediately of harm to your person or another debater under my charge is and abnegation of that agreement. You can be expelled. There are proper procedures for this sort of thing. You can’t just go off half cocked.”

Jack tapped his middle finger hard on the strapped arm, “We couldn’t wait for you to sober up, you know. Cindy has been seriously hurt and you have not done **one thing** to either ascertain

why nor propose a solution. What happened to her last weekend, **under your charge**, is going to have long lasting impacts.”

Chandler swiveled his cherry bulb head in a ticking pause. Leaned his soft back into the spring loaded chair. He turned full attention to me, “Jack’s right, you know,” watching carefully, “I haven’t been all there and for that I am truly sorry. I give you boys a lot of responsibility because I trust you. I really and truly do, but this is a time when I need you to trust me for once. Jack’s also correct to point out that what we do here. now. will have extensive repercussions and I want you to keep that in mind my boy.” It was as though Jack was not even in the room anymore.

“You know,” Chandler gazed at the ceiling, dreamily, not really seeing the ceiling, “Around 130,000 students take the L.S.A.T. annually. That makes the top 1% about 1,300 candidates to law school. You could fill half of the Top Ten with that 1% alone. Now, you may be fortunate enough to be able to score in that bracket. Maybe not. But either way Harvard will **still** have to turn away close to 1,000 near perfect scores every year. Yes indeed, what choices we make now may have long lasting repercussions, Jack’s hit that nail on the head. And that’s true for everyone, you and me...”

Leaning on the desk, “I need some help here Elric...Talk to Cindy, see if you can get her to slow things down a little. Give it a little thought, that’s all I’m asking. Give me a little time. No sense in acting hastily. What do you say?”

I dropped my eyes, chilled by my own certitude. I did not say yes, but I did not tell him no either. *I can have it both ways. I can let him believe what he wants to believe. Simple.*

Taking silence as consent, Chandler grinned and offered some exiting pleasantries. An acidic smell showed us the door.