

Chapter 17 of *The Debate*, Vol. 2 by B. Douglas Robbins

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Virginia shoved hands in her pockets and pulled them out again repeatedly, as she asked her questions. What did Chandler want? What is he going to do? What are we going to do?

Jack repeated over and over, “Nothing, nothing.”

On the way to Cindy’s house Jack said he was proud of me for telling the squad what they needed to have heard a long time ago. “I told them a million times, but until you said it, I don’t think they believed it,” and he put his arm around me and I felt like we were real partners. I felt like we could have been catchers in the rye, easy.

Jack and I spoke of Chandler and what he might do and inferentially what I might do to abet him.

“Everything’s going ahead as planned,” I reassured him.

“Because Chandler’s threats are hollow-” Jack said.

“That doesn’t matter to me one way or the other,” which wasn’t true. I wanted that stupid Scholarship, and I figured there was no harm in humoring Chandler. Nationals would be in a few months and then it would be over. The whole thing. And I promised I would never have to do something like this again. I promised her.

We visited Cindy late that evening. Virginia reassured her that everything would be well and that the team was unified and supportive. She failed to mention that what they were unified under was an acrimony against me.

Virginia asked if Cindy was okay to spend the night alone, and Cindy shook her head. Virginia had a midterm on Monday. Jack had to drive her back. Asked if I would spend the night with Cindy. I said I was happy to, and Cindy liked the idea fine so she packed some belongings and we trekked to my apartment.

My apartment was a mess. I’m a neat freak but recently I had let the place go. I lived alone that quarter and it was expensive as hell but worth it.

Cindy came in and began straightening things. She stacked everything on my coffee table in a neat array. All in the left corner. Then she began picking things off the rug.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“Oh,” she replied as if startled by her own behavior, “Nothing,” and she dropped what she was holding, right there.

“Do you want something to drink?” I asked.

“What do you have?”

“Mango juice, coffee, Gatorade...”

“Anything alcoholic?”

“No.”

“Oh.”

“I’ll make some coffee,” I rummaged through the freezer for my beans.

“Do you like Jack?” she asked from the other room.

“Yes. I love Jack,” I had to tell her the truth; anything else would have been another betrayal from another man. I felt like a representative for my entire gender.

“I thought so,” she sat around the corner on my old couch. I poured black enameled beans into the grinder. They made clicking noises on the way down. “Jack’s the best,” she agreed, “I don’t know why Virginia is so harsh on him.”

“That’s Virginia’s way,” I pressed the cap and the beans shattered like dropped glass. Dust. Boiling water on the stove, “How did Keith take it?”

She sighed, “He thinks I’m a bad person.”

“No he doesn’t. That’s ridiculous,” might have been true.

“I told him. I had to tell him. You were right, Elric. I don’t know what I was thinking. He was going to find out no matter what. Virginia told the whole squad tonight, didn’t she.”

“Yeah,” I added the black dust to the boiling pot and it ceased, “you **told** her to tell everyone, right?”

Nothing.

I repeated, “You asked her to speak for you.”

“Virginia does whatever the fuck she feels like doing.”

I stirred the sable soup with a scarlet chopstick. A restless rumble.

“Virginia told me not to tell anyone, but I told Keith,” Cindy continued, “She’s going to be really pissed.”

“But Keith was going to find out anyway.”

“No. I told him that I kind of liked Speed. I had to tell him everything because I felt so bad and Virginia said I shouldn’t tell **anyone** that.”

I poured the midnight soup into the filtered funnel, steaming.

“I think she was right,” Cindy was sustained by her own momentum, “Keith kept saying that I didn’t love him as much as he loved me and I didn’t want to work on our relationship or anything. I didn’t understand why he was saying that. It’s like he just short circuited and began saying all the weirdest stuff and started pounding on the fender of that old Mercedes.”

I brought the whole pot of coffee and two mugs. It seemed safer that way.”

“Just because you were attracted to Speed doesn’t mean you abnegate rights over your own body.”

“That’s what Virginia says.”

“She’s right.”

“She’s not always right. She wanted me to take the morning-after pill.”

“Are you pregnant?”

“No! No way!”

“Could you be?”

“I guess. I don’t know.”

“Did you take the pill?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because I’m not pregnant, okay? Abortion is murder. You can’t get a dispensation for a fucking abortion.”

“What’s dispensation?”

“It’s like a note from the Pope.”

“You’re Catholic.”

She nodded. I poured coffee.

“It’s like my roommate. She is such a bitch. She brags all

the time about how she got a 1520 on the S.A.T., but I swear she is the stupidest bitch. Let me tell you what she did, you'll just die!" She brought coffee to her mouth, "We borrow each other's clothes, okay. And I said she could wear whatever she wanted **except** for my Christmas sweater that my dad got me for my birthday. So what does she do? She goes to some fucking Synergy party in **my** sweater and gets red wine all over it! She says someone else spilled it but it doesn't matter because she shouldn't have been wearing it. You can't get red wine out of wool, and I can't just throw it away, because it's a birthday present from my father!" She wiped her pink nose with the flat of her palm, "I told her not to wear it but she took it anyway and now it's ruined. Now everyone will think **I** spilled wine on it, but I didn't, it was her. I trusted her and now it's ruined and everyone will think I could have stopped her somehow, but I was in L.A. at the U.S.C. thing, I wasn't even here, goddamnit!" Then she looked away quickly, afraid of something becoming more real by its sharing. Then she was blank all over.

We drank the entire pot. A little after midnight I suggested we go to sleep. I was wide awake. I set up linen on my couch and showed Cindy to my room. She changed into white pajamas with a red plaid design.

I brushed my teeth clean of coffee, turned off the lights and stepped into the couch.

Just her voice, "I'm not tired," from the open door.

"Me neither," I confessed.

"I want to go sculpt, do you want to go?"

"It's really late, Cindy."

"That's okay. I have a key. Will you go with me?"

At the Art Studio a few others were working on projects late into the night. Cindy suited up in her apron, face mask, green glass gazer and fired up a torch.

"Don't look at the tip of the torch without glasses!" she hollered over the hissing gas, "It's worse than the burning bush!"

"The burning bush?"

"Yeah. I know all about the burning bush," and she danced around holding her crotch.

After sparking for a while she climbed down from her ladder, shut off the torch and pulled off the mask to reveal a pluvial face, what do you think?" Smiling.

"Well it's big."

“Yeah, it’s huge!”

“And heavy.”

“Yep.”

“I don’t think you’ll be able to get it out of here.”

“Probably not. It’s here to stay.”

“But how will you display it?”

“Oh, it’s not for display.”

“What’s it for?” I asked.

“It’s for itself.”

“I see.”

“It’s for me too, of course, because I made it and it’s for whomever I show. Like you. But that’s it.” I enjoyed seeing her so pleased with herself. “One day I’m going to fall in love like that,” she resumed, “And no one will ever know. Do you have a girlfriend, Elric?”

“No.”

“Do you want one?”

“Are you offering?”

“No,” she laughed, “I was just asking.

“Yeah, that would be nice.”

“But you’re in love with Jack, right?”

I removed my head from the sculpture to meet her rainy face.

“I’m just asking,” she repeated, “I don’t care if you’re gay. Gay guys are cool.”

“I’m not gay. Did you think I was gay?”

“Everyone thinks you’re gay!” she said as if it were a self evident fact.

“Well if I’m gay, I haven’t figured it out yet.”

“That’s what they say.”

“I’m not gay.”

“Okay Macho Man.”

“That’s better.”

At my apartment I was exhausted but Cindy demanded I stay awake, “If you’re going to baby-sit me, the first thing you

need to know it that the baby-sitter never falls asleep first.”

“I’m not baby-sitting you,” I stood, “do you want the couch or the bed because I’m going to sleep.”

“If you’re not baby-sitting what are we doing?”

“We’re having a slumber party. Bed or couch.”

“Oh good! Do you have hot chocolate?” she rushed to the kitchen and rummaged through the cabinets.

“Yes,” I said woefully.

“Hey! You have beer!” apparently riffling through the refrigerator.

“Not for you,” I called, “Cocoa is in the far left cabinet.”

“But it’s a slumber party!”

“I’ve never had beer at a slumber party,” I answered.

“Elric, have you ever **been** to a slumber party?”

“No, but I’ve never **heard** of beer at a slumber party.”

I joined her in the kitchen to make the hot cocoa.

When she discovered that I had no instant add-water mix she said, “This is so complicated.” We added the raw cocoa to sugar, sea salt, vanilla, and soy-milk over a low flame. “No real milk?” she asked.

“It’s bad for you. Hormones and antibiotics.”

“That’s why you’re so pale,” she surmised, “You need **nourishment**.” I could see shy Keith was so protective of her. She was one of the last innocents.

“I’m pale because you’re keeping me up all night.”

“Studies say occasional sleep deprivation can sure depression.”

“I see.”

As we drank our hot cocoa, Cindy told me how supportive Virginia had been, “I wasn’t even sure I had been assaulted until Virginia helped.”

“What do you mean you weren’t sure?”

“Well, I thought I was. But even so, I thought I was kind of over-reacting. I guess I just didn’t want to face it. But Virginia really helped.”

“Virginia cares a lot about you.”

“No she doesn’t,” Cindy shook her head side to side, “Virginia only cares about herself, but that’s okay,” she sipped her cocoa from a mug with farmers possessing large bodies and small heads reaping the harvest. “You and Jack care,” she nodded furiously, “You two were the only ones. Chandler can go rot in hell.”

“We were worried we didn’t do enough.”

She shook her head side to side while ducking into her farmer-mug.

“Couch or bed?”

“I’m not tired.”

“I have to go to sleep,” I clinked my mug to the table.

“I’ll read out here.”

“Okay,” I lumbered off to bed.

Sometime later Cindy quietly opened my door and crawled into my bed. Wordless.

Squeaking bed. The sound of breath. “I have bad dreams,” she whispered, “Besides it’s a slumber party,” and her voice went up.

“Okay,” I reached for her hand. Cold and wet and soft.

Shifting. She rested her head on my shoulder. Hand on my chest. Could feel her pulse at the throat. She whispered, “There’s something different about you. I think you understand things no one else does.”