

**Chapter 20 of *The Debate*, Vol. 2
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Only weeks later the most important debate tournament of the year would be upon us. And only then would we face our detractors for the last time.

Jared had transferred to Syracuse University, and was debating for them as of the Fall of last year. Why he would want to transfer from Stanford to Syracuse was unclear to me. A mystery really. Jared was a mystery to me in many ways. He kept contact with Jack and through him would learn Jared would be representing Syracuse at Nationals.

I would not know what Richard had to do with all the madness until that tournament. I needed to know not so much to attribute blame as to make sense of what otherwise appeared to be a senseless and random act. That's sometimes the most crucial thing. Human beings can endure terrible hardships if they just find some explanation, no matter how paradoxical, for the absurd. Absent the healing properties of sorting things out, making sense of chaos, we're left with black madness.

I would still not hear from Hailie. I was certain I would have received contact by now. I often would wonder if perhaps she had been abducted by some social service agency. An institution for the insane? Maybe she was living with her family again. In some ways I would no longer miss Hailie. Whenever I would want to speak with her, she would be right there, bounding around like an airy spirit, clapping and telling me things that I already knew deep in my heart to be true. She had left a piece of herself in me.

As Nationals approached Jack and I would cut cards every day and debate against Keith and Skip, and Cindy and David. We would switch partners and do it again. Cindy and I would grow closer. One night she would ask me:

“Elric, don't you find me attractive?”

“I think you're beautiful!”

“Don't you want to kiss me?”

I would shake my head side to side, “That’s not going to help you get well.”

“I’m not a fucking China doll. I can make decisions for myself.”

I really wouldn’t know what to do with Cindy. I would feel like I was constantly making the most pronounced gaffs in her presence. And she would seem to grow in affection for me all the same. I would care for Cindy, I would even be romantically attracted to her, but that sense that whatever intimacy we shared was on the back of a terrible trauma somehow made it too easy. As if it would have been anyone. As if our connection wasn’t based on us, but rather our circumstance. I suppose if the same was conjectured about Hailie and me, I would have denied it.

Cindy would take to sleeping with me every night as if by necessity. I would have dreams that we had no blankets and were forced, like frontier settlers in need of mutual warmth, to bed together. There would seem to be no other explanation. We would hold hands and spoon. We would be cousins in the wild west, short of bedding and huddling for practical reasons.

Crazy things would happen in those weeks as Nationals approached and if you got me going it would be a whole other book in itself. The important thing is that we would see a resolution at Nationals. Believed it.

The entire debate community would be there, Berkeley, U.C.L.A., San Francisco, Michigan State, K-State, U.M.K.C., Cornell, everyone. It would be the first and last C.E.D.A. National Debate Tournament I would ever attend and the last chance to finally get it right. It’s a funny thing and maybe even a little backwards, but for us these things couldn’t have been resolved anywhere else—you can only resolve things where they begin. Not in University kangaroo courts, not in criminal trials. We would make our own judgments, ultimately.

The National Tournament would be the last stop for all of the nation’s pen flippers and card carrying maniacs, the last hope for my Scholarship, my ticket to salvation. And they would all be there, the gauze chewers, the rim roamers, the flow freaks, the policy wonks wailing at Time. They would all be there, and we would have it out, a battle for the terms of what was real, a fight over who was to be believed, a red lipped contest of wit and will, the last chance to win over the hearts and minds of everyone who claimed to judge the debate.