

Chapter 1 of *The Debate* by B. Douglas Robbins

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I loved debate because when it was good, a fire grew in my belly, and when the fire grew strong enough, it consumed me.

Resolved, resolved. The special word that started it all, “Just so we’re clear, the wording is: Resolved, the United States should strongly advance its human rights foreign policy.”

“Chooo-chooo! Chuga, chuga, chuga, chuga...” that was my partner, Christian Vollique on the choo-choo train, pumping his arms like a mad-man. Debate was about speed and hate, endurance and air, syntax and logos, but at the top, the very edges, the spun-over brawl mixed it around and made it all come out the same, and in the end we all sounded like screaming lunatics, and the only way to distinguish yourself from others was in your style. Most debaters never deigned to wine and dine the judge (The judge! A necessary evil. Swollen appendix. Blank slates all!) but that’s where it was at. Debate was not, as they told you all along, about if and only if A then B, but if not B then not A, it was in fact a walking shadow on stage. Pure theater. There were times for bending metal with your mind, but at a certain point you had heard these arguments so many times, you could recite a three point on each in your sleep, and every other idiot telling the tale could do the same. The difference, thus, was in the **way** it was done, arms pumping if necessary, running the blast furnace on high.

“Now, the Affirmative’s plan advocates an **economic** foreign policy. Its intent is economic. Its primary effect in China is economic. THAT IS NOT TOPICAL. The Resolution doesn’t call for the advancement of an ECONOMIC foreign policy. It wants human rights! Tell me about it Christian—”

“Choo! Choo!” Christian knew secrets about me, no one else knew. If I could have been anyone I would have been Christian and I loved Christian, but I could never say, “Chuga, chuga, chuga, chuga, chuga, chuga, chuga, chuga...” Topicality was a very big thing. Highly generic. Fit everywhere. The argument was the equivalent of prattling, “But that’s not the point!” but with a straight face, a face straight as nails. But of course, every case was susceptible to such an argument, and so it was the first file in the box and the manila had been so worn around the edges as to fray like cotton; it creased and wrinkled like old-man’s skin, patchy white blotches like a burn victim’s pallor.

“When they tell you in the 1AC that their plan enacts TARIFFS, when they tell you in the 2AC that plan calls for ECONOMIC SANCTIONS against China, you know that they are not protecting human rights for the Chinese, they are protecting market share for Western multi-nationals. Not topical. Not topical. Hear the whistle blow.”

“Wooooo! Wo! Wooooo!”

“This decision is real easy. You just need to know if our esteemed colleagues are arguing the topic or not. Are they arguing money, or people, the economy, or human rights”

“Choo-chooo! Chuga, chuga!”

“The decision is easy, because the Affirmative is not on board. The clue train has left the station and they weren’t on it . . . I’m off the top”

Debate burned away my doubts, my apprehensions and fears about not being smart enough, or fast enough, or good enough. Debate washed it all away. I was finally clean. God, I thought I would never get clean.

“I want my partner’s third argument where he says ‘Economic sanctions only have economic results.’ Extend it! That evidence is conceded and it is excellent. The card says that nation-states **know**—get that? they **know**—that sanctions never produce a change of heart in the leadership, they only serve, at best, to cause a revolution. That rocks! That evidence gets me two things. One, it is a conceded press that Plan is an economic Plan. That is the Topicality violation. You can’t vote for a non-topical Plan. They lose there. But

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additionally it gets me the turn on case. Their own plan doesn't solve for Chinese human rights abuses, just the OPPOSITE! Plan risks an open rebellion in China, a civil war that according to the Bayer evidence will draw North Korea into the fray and according to the Kramer evidence down below, turns into a nuclear showdown before the year 2000. That is a TURN! I couldn't have asked for a better turn. Their plan doesn't **solve** human rights abuses, it creates them. The surest way to violate Chinese human rights is to nuke them. This is waaaay too easy for me..."

Debate was one of the few things that reminded me I was really alive. It wasn't so much that you were arguing a side as much as you were arguing for yourself, your right to matter, your claim to affect things. There's no denying the promise of a manifest destiny, a land of milk and honey, and the face of the person who shows you how. Debaters in other times were called many things, sophists, philosophers, Christ may have called them false prophets, others may have called them messiahs.

The heat of rhetoric was a warming and beautiful thing even when it was brutal. Be not disillusioned, debate was a brutal sport. More bloody than rugby or boxing, the competition virtually screamed at your head, blew the hottest hellfire into your marrow. Your logic wasn't just being called into question, it was your very substance on trial: the linearity of your spine, the supple redness of your spleen. Some were born healthy with the blessing of God. However when the argument was through with you, it was apparent to all that a cold black sop sat in your chest where a heart should have been, and that the stench from your insides was enough to cause little children to retch. When they were done, if done right, it was like being summarily judged unfit to represent or in any way be associated with the human race. The thinking race. It was worse than any blow to the solar plexus, any kick to the groin. It was humiliation of the highest order. At least until your turn to burn. It was a pleasure to burn.

". . . Please follow me to the Power debate Remember, the sanctions against China on case gets us the link to the Disad. Remember the A sub 'Sanctions damage the Chinese economy.'"

Christian, my partner, and I were the Negative that round—meaning we were to negate, or reject the Resolution. It was all decided before hand, of course, by the higher authorities. If you understood anything about Negative advocacy you understood the Disadvantage. It was a small, self contained thesis that explained how the Affirmative’s Case, and the Plan embedded in it, would be, on balance, more harmful than not. And if you knew anything about the Disad, you knew when to blow it up and you knew when to kick it out. It was called issue selection, a lovely strategic maneuver whereby you chucked the losing arguments, the weak links, the sorry impacts, while holding firm on the stuff you were winning. To kick out, or punt was to concede. To blow up or expand was a grab for territory, like Battle of the Bulge, where the Allies were weakest and least assuming. The Axis might have won the war if they hadn’t alienated Russia, and if they had just hit England a little bit harder. A little bit faster. I was blowing up the Disad.

“The U.S. economic sanctions on Case hurt the Chinese economy, as indicated by the Frenghe card. The Sino response is to turn on the old reactors and redouble the oil drilling effort. This card is amazing. I have so much time, I’m going to read it again, Frenghe says,

While a radio free Asia makes for good P.R. we can not allow the rubicon of liberalization to blind us to the eminent danger of free range nuclear technology. Even if Beijing were to guarantee the shutdown of all its old style nuclear reactors tomorrow we should not be so easily placated. Even by conservative estimates a Chernobyl like disaster is an 80% certainty within a 3-5 year time schedule given the current state of primitive safeguards and shoddy backup-systems.

The judge nodded her head and bopped her left leg in time. Time was the superset in debate. Everything happened In Time. Your speeches were timed, your cross-examinations were timed, you had limited prep time and all the thinking you could do was pressed by the hands swinging together and stretched out, swinging apart. For every argument out there you had

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to respond with a meaner one, a bigger one, two, three, or four of them. For every one. And while you did that, your opponent did the same until there were three pimps for every answer, and three answers for every claim, and the whole thing was getting mashed in Time, faster and faster. Like a growing tree, and the first argument sprouted three answers, and each of them were responded to with three more, until a terrible thicket of white flame scorched the eyes and cracked the throat trying to get to all the points, sub-points, and micro-sub-points, before Time snuffed the tree out with a countdown to nothing. The number zero was the number of asphyxiation, when the blood turned blue, and the spine cracked in two.

“Their second argument says turn. They say as the Chinese economy slows, so does oil consumption. Wrong, wrong, wrong. They’re missing the train. Extend the first answer that there is still **more** oil consumption abroad. They have no answer. It is CONCEDED. I get the clean take-out CONCEDED. The second answer is a turn back to case. Their own authors say sanctions do not have a significant detrimental effect on consumption! You can’t have it both ways, boys. That means that I get ecological impacts in five years, above and beyond the Chernobyl Scenario. And remember if you **don’t** buy their wanky authors then I get the second scenario. When the economy goes south, China cranks up the old nuclear reactors, and that is SOVIET TECH-NO-LO-GY. I’m getting Chernobyl in the 21st century. They’re not giving you an answer. THEY NEVER ANSWER IT. It is never ever mentioned! It is cold **dropped**. Sorry Sherman, what’s dropped is dropped.”

Poor, poor Sherman. That’s what happened when you didn’t come to terms with the time. So much to cover, so little time, and the only way to get it all in, to sort of slow down the clock was to crunch the rhetoric and that could only be done one way: speed. The gut spread was a brain on fire, moving closer and closer to singularity until the time. just. stopped. No one could get there, of course, there were barriers, the speed of light, the speed of electricity, the 1/30th of a second barrier at which the brain responded to stimuli, you were up against all that. But even so, it was truly

fantastic the rate at which the human mind could move when pushed.

It was called the gut spread because that's what it felt like, your guts splayed thin and wide over a dry span, wheezing and hacking, choking and gasping for air, as the words ejected from your throat like rocket thrust, hot gasses, pain and static friction. A quick speech, around 150 words per minute, two and a half words per second was like listening to an old machine gun, or a new-wave faggot techno song. Rapid, but otherwise unremarkable; at 200, the effect is like having jogged the eight minute mile; by 250 words, the mean for varsity level debate, breathing was regulated with solemn earnest, as if practicing yoga, through highly regulated self induced hyper-ventilation. The double gulpers, comma gulpers, and dramatic pausers got stuck here. At 300 words per minute, a little over seven words per second, a certain amount of comprehensibility was compromised—only the trained ear of a former debater turned judge could understand, one who had made the fire walk herself once, and heard voices herself once, and spoke in tongues—and the speech took on a binary rhythm, a monotone, and an elevated pitch, like an engine winding toward red-line. Spittle projected from the open mouth, while steam streamed through teeth and gum. Beyond the 300 wpm threshold few dared to go. Most burned up in a mealy mouthed meltdown, spinning into complete saliva incoherence. But a select few could push that envelope when need be, among them my partner Christian Vollique; and when he did, the sonic-boom extended for miles, deafening and horrid.

Now, Sherman wasn't moving nearly that fast. Time sucked him into the whirlwind like a little figure spinning around and around with his arms outstretched to the sky. Sherman couldn't make all the answers in time. Some were left blank like an uncircumscribed tombstone. A tabula rasa. We had the argument, they had no answer. In debate that meant consent. Silence was consent. There were not an overwhelming number of formal rules in debate but the rule of silence was indomitable and final. Upon this rule the kingdom was built, for what was not spoken was as important as what was. There can be no secrets without silence, and no submission. A dropped

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argument was a conceded argument and Sherman was conceding all over the flow. On his hands and knees he was conceding.

I was spreading a red streak. I was reading two, three, four responses for every one of theirs, more, “My seventh, non-unique: their own authors say ‘we all die.’ The inevitability of unilateral death **before Plan** destroys Case solvency. They cannot solve. Case goes away. You would be voting here.”

There was no problem. Their Case couldn’t solve it even if there was one. Our Counterplan solved better. Their Case was non-unique, vague, without a determinate time frame or a practical way to finance; they inadvertently caused a revolution in China, taking out all net Case advantages, riots and blood flowed in the streets, carnage, and lost relatives, global instability, refugees, famine, and a chain reaction that lead the South East back into economic ruin and drew North Korea into a tidy coda of ever-loving global thermal nuclear holocaust, all because Sherman Lizeint and his partner Philip Pelsner thought they were advancing an American human rights foreign policy in China. Case was contradictory, hypocritical, absurd, counter-intuitive, internally incoherent, misguided, and eventually suicidal—it was a recipe for disaster, a cauldron of evil, evil and well intentioned, but unprecedented catastrophe. And that was all in the first three minutes. Then I **really** burned like a madman.

I rocked forward and back, pounding my fists together like battering rams, and I read the arguments from my flow, all those tiny cryptic notations danced from ink to eye and then blasted from my mouth like white-hot logic, a fire baptism for all things cowardly and sick, tingly and dirty. Analysis was a beautiful thing. It reduced it all to rudimentary elements, a clean, simple form—it broke it all down, like long dead skull and crossed bones, to a pallid bleachy clean: *I am death, the destroyer of worlds*. And from there you had a chance to do it all over, a chance to do it the right way. I never had a real chance. All I ever wanted was to be even. Christian had every chance, born pink and soft, in the nuzzled softness of love. He was a product of hope and beauty, and it was really quite unremarkable that he’s been as successful as he has—as if the order of

the universe depended on it. It did. I never had a chance, and for the sin of having been born wrong I owe an unremunerable debt. I sound like a fucking Christian. Those assholes have no conception. They think evil comes from without, from some comic-book character with a tail and horns, and that heaven and hell is the metaphysical equivalent of capitalist strata, with upward mobility only an issue of faith and resolve. Pure superstition, all. Some say an opiate. Only if it were that benign.

I held my tie in one hand, balanced my flow, an 8 1/2 X 14 yellow legal pad, on the palm of the other, and dampened the flue, slowed it all down, “This round is over. It is a clear win for Berkeley, for two reasons, first they’re derailed on Topicality. When the Resolution calls for a human rights foreign policy Philip and Sherman give you an economic one. You can’t vote on that, you can’t even touch it. It’s beyond your jurisdiction and you must reject them for that. Second, the Disad is a clean kill. When Sherman fails to read **one** piece of evidence, not a single card about the possible Chernobyl scenario brewing in China, that is a conceded impact. That’s clean. And when we link the sanctions from Plan to the Disad with the Frenge card, we’re pulling case like a caboose. From car to car to car, it links up...”

Beep, beep, beep! The timers wailed.

“... Do not allow new answers. Please protect me”

“Time!” yelled my judge.

My partner smacked me a high five. We were a team, Christian and I, and I loved him but could not say. There were penalties for speaking secrets, and my knees, and my eyes, and my hands were already torn up paying tolls. I should have known by now that I would never get even.

At the eighth and last pre-lim round of the Mustang Invitational, Cal Poly’s annual debate tournament, San Luis Obispo dumped buckets of gray-silver in a nasty storm. Christian and I had done well that week-end and expected to clear easily. If you picked up six of the eight pre-elimination rounds, you “broke” into out-rounds. That was where the real action was. If you weren’t in

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that upper third to upper fourth, it wasn't hardly worth showing up at all. We hadn't lost a round all week-end, and it was looking more and more like a face crush with old Sherman and Philip from Cornell University. It was looking like an 8-0 record.

I positioned my 7-Up can and lit a Marlboro Red, gazing at the gray pouring rain outside the classroom window. I put a hand on the Danish cookie tin, as if it were a bible. It was our good luck charm, full of secret power. It sat faithfully at the front of my desk every round, warding off evil.

Christian nonchalantly flipped a red pen. The disarray of open boxes and files and scattered briefs mazed around us. It was the aftermath of a paper war, the most feral and vicious kind really. This classroom was like a hundred others across the country, white lights above, mildly tacky linoleum below, a sea of empty desk-chairs with the tops bolted to the seats and, arm rests going around the right side as if lefties were members of a tawdry little secret cult, not to be officially recognized. Windows wrapped around the back of the room filled white and deep gray behind a lone judge writing hurriedly in the break. Competitors sat at the front of the class with blackboard behind. Each room usually had some sort of table-desk at front. The first team to arrive for any given round would lay claim, and their adversaries would get table scraps of sorts. They would be invariably forced to assemble a little fortress out of those table chairs. A real disaster, because they had scant surface area and tilted slightly upward. When put together, they formed a little roof top, good for evacuating rain, but bad for all else. In the sixth round we had the table, they had the roof.

The last speaker, Cornell's Philip Pelsner stood up mechanically, "I'm ready." Timers went beep. Christian pushed his five times. You couldn't be too careful. An extra 30 seconds was often enough to change a whole round, and they would sneak it on you if they could.

"Okay, we're going T, the Power debate, and Case in order." T or Topicality was his biggest problem. It was an absolute Voting Issue, meaning that if the judge decided to vote on it, to vote for us, we would win

unconditionally, right there and then. It was the key Voter. Everything else could be massaged. Not T.

Philip was a pretty boy. He could have been a model in *International Male* or one of those fag magazines. Dick in ass. That kind of stuff. He wore a flat chin, trapezoidal eyes, conservative hair and he was as flat, and angular, and pissed.

“Richard, could you put out the smoke?” he cringed. Jaw grinding side to side.

“Sure, sure,” I grinned and crushed the butt.

“He’s got flub written all over him,” Christian reclined whispering.

I nodded. It was important to appear indignant and outraged without actually **being** so. A little theatrical outrage was a great persuader, but bilious hate, choking venom? That stuff was just as likely to choke you as your opponent. It was a matter of control. Philip let me and my smoke and my swagger get to him. He was so torqued, so ready to implode, his hand shook. That was no way to win a debate.

Philip lifted his gaze toward the back of the room as if ruminating solemnly, and finally coming to a difficult, but certain conclusion, “This Topicality debate is a pathetic sham, and I’m going to tell you why. Their definitions for an economic foreign policy includes EVERY CONCEIVABLE foreign policy. That is Sherman’s second argument on the Standard. There is no way **any Affirmative** Case can ever be a human rights foreign policy under Berkeley’s definitions. According to them the Affirmative can **never** win. That is bad debate. That is my argument in the 2AC, that is Sherman’s extension in the 1AR. Hobbes never comes to grips with the fact that their Topicality interpretation is abusive, and their approach to the Resolution is abusive, and if you vote on this and you drop us on this, it is a travesty of justice.” Philip stamped his foot hard on “travesty” and “justice.”

Philip Pelsner and I debated together in high school, and that’s where he picked up that “travesty of justice” schlag. I taught it to him. The idea, said our coach was to elicit moral outrage in the judge, so I came up with the “travesty of justice” rhetoric. Philip has been using it ever since. The first few times you hear it, it’s pretty

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effective. It gets your blood going. But Philip's unwavering repetition turned a fresh and invigorating anthem into a predictable and hackneyed cliché. At some point everyone was using it. You could not elicit moral outrage if your judge believed you were using a tired convention, and Philip had used it often enough to qualify as old, dead, and beat tired.

“On the Case debate...Now, please off the top, you'll remember Sherman's argument that they're putting evidence all over the flow. Richard even proves it to you when he says, 'I'm putting the link cards to my GATT position in the 1NC on the Observation 1 debate and I'm reading the impacts on the Observation 3 debate.' Now, do you think this is good debate, reading a link here and an impact over there to try to trick us into thinking they're not running another Disad when they are?” Just like Philip, when he couldn't win on the issues he argued about the **way** the issues were debated. Debating about debate was a legitimate tactic, that's what T was about, but Philip Pelsner was **always** debating about debate. To me that was a coward's tactic.

“I think it is bad debate when they apply some evidence here and some there and no-one can figure out where it's going until Rebuttals and then it's too late for a cogent response because it would be new. I don't think you should accept this in any way, shape or form. I don't think you should punish me for their sloppiness. I think they are being very unclear and very abusive.”

Philip and I debated for two and a half years in high school and we did pretty well, up to a point. Eventually I had to part with him. It wasn't about the way he debated per-se, it wasn't about his chops—I wonder how much of anything was ever about chops—but who he thought he was. Philip had, what I called a glass ceiling personae. He would go all out, get crazy, crush the weak, all that jazz, until it became more and more evident that he stood a good chance of actually winning. By quarters or semi-finals Philip would hit his ceiling. It was as if he couldn't bear the possibility of being that good, the sole survivor in a contest of wits. His own competence was too much to bear. That's when he would collapse like a cracked bridge. He was frightened to death of his own fire, scared of and

trembling from an inner potency he never allowed all the way out. For him it was too terrible.

“I don’t think you should promote that kind of debate. Uh...I’m not saying, I’m not saying...”

That’s why I knew Christian and I had wrapped up the eighth round before it even began. After high school, Philip never could bring himself to beat me, and not because I was a better debater necessarily.

“...I’m not saying it’s a Voting Issue but I think you should give me a lot of leeway on this because I don’t think anyone could have expected it . . .”

I think he took our split very personally. When we parted ways, he understood my rejection as some kind of re-affirmation of the whole glass ceiling meta-system. For him it was self-affirming sabotage, and he became even less worthy of gold and solar power. At least in his own mind. He was constantly looking for signs of his own incompetence through adroit self-sabotage. It was his own kind of genius. You have to respect that really, even if it was self destruction.

“ . . . Now, the civil war impacts are mitigated, we’re mitigating them. There is not a risk quotient great enough to reject Plan. Uh, my next argument is the number eight, the Kramer evidence is TERRIBLE, he doesn’t say there will be a nuclear war between China and North Korea, he doesn’t even provide a scenario. The card just says it will, ‘set the stage.’ What does ‘set the stage’ get them against 50 dead prisoners a month? How will you explain to the families of those 50 dead political prisoners why you will not intervene because some Ph.D. says that there is a **possibility** that in four years there **might** be a ‘set stage?’ These guys have been predicting nuclear holocaust for the last forty years!”

Philip was making a good press. In the 2AR he was bringing it back from the dead. A resurrection. But I was waiting. With Philip it was always just a matter of time.

“You would defer to the Decision Rule that says when you have a moral crisis, you must STOP THE EVIL, consequences be damned. Berkeley’s answer is that nuclear war is worse. NO! Besides the fact that I am beating the Chernobyl press and there **is no North**

Korea scenario, we cannot allow the Chinese to kill 50 innocent dissidents a month. To turn your head on them because you're worried about some hypothetical political consequence is to renege on your ethical duties as a policy maker and as a human being. To reject the sanctions and ignore the prisoners it to REWARD THE EVIL. The analogy is that in 1860 we could not abolish slavery because Richard and Christian would argue, to do so would risk civil war. This is a morally bankrupt argument. You will not reward the evil.

“And this is not **new**. This analysis is in the 2AC...”

The essential aspect of the Rebuttals, the last four, five-minute speeches, was no “new” arguments. You were disallowed from raising issues that hadn't already been discussed in the Constructives, the first four speeches. You were supposed to synthesize and conclude. Those were the rules. A “new” argument was to be rejected simply on the basis of its newness, and Philip was trying to explain why he wasn't new, and he was trying to explain how he could possibly win this one. Of course his arguments were new and even if they were not, they certainly weren't extended by Sherman in the 1AR, which means they were dropped, and silence was consent—and Philip knew that. He found his glass ceiling in that fact.

“And even if you think it **is** new, even if you do, you're still giving me, giving me, giving me the leeway to answer after Richard's abusive 2NR. Remember, he was all over the flow, and you will grant me leeway . . . uh, that's why it's not that new . . .”

It was then we won the round. Philip decided it was too much and gave up the ghost. It was all in his voice. He was too honest to mask the strain. When he lost hope, he lost the confidence game. He was strong with the “Don't reward the evil” stuff, but his voice cracked in the end. You could hear it. His voice cracked, and out leaked his fire. And the belly was cold because at the middle he believed it was too much, he thought he was outmatched, in a dark, cold hole, and so he was. His voice was cracking and he was stammering, heat dissipating, embers chilling. He was like a sobbing teenager, bloody sheets hanging out the window for good measure. All that stuff.

By the end of his speech he was pounding on about RVI's and a million mitigators and way out D-rules—all sorts of back doors to give the judge a quick and dirty way to squirrel out of a flow vote, should she be of the mind to.

The tone of his voice was tired, “This round is a clear win for Cornell,” arms outstretched, “No Case can meet Richard’s Topicality interpretation. It is abusive and to vote on it would be a travesty of justice,” again stomping a foot on “travesty” and “justice.” “The risk of Case far outweighs the risk of the link on the Disad, and what you’re left with is a slight chance of a mitigated war with no time frame, no credible nuclear scenario, up against 50 DEAD CHINESE political prisoners.”

“TIME,” yelled the judge and Christian’s timer beeped like an electric bird.

“. . . Okay, but even if not . . .” Philip drifted off like a drill suddenly unplugged, “. . . but even if you buy the Ecology, or I mean the Power debate, or whatever, 50 people a month would still outweigh.”

“Time,” the judge said again, less enthusiastically. She was a real stickler for time.

“. . . don’t reward the evil . . .”

Christian and I stood up before the end of Sherman’s last sentence to further discount his waning credibility. *Crush the weak.* We strutted over, shook hands and congratulated each other, “Good round,” all around. We looked in their eyes. They averted ours. It was embarrassing for them because I knew them from way back, since high school and it came to this. It was depressing as hell to be beaten by someone who knew you. It somehow put everything in a different light, even the past, even what had already been done.

I lit another Marlboro and blew up into the white perforated ceiling.