

Chapter 2 of *The Debate*

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Christian and I left our bins and traveled downstairs from the stiff linoleumed, buzzy fluorescent English building to the crowded front steps, where a stripe of smokers were stuffed under the meager tin awning, foiled by wet gusts.

I liked the rain, I always have. Dark clouds and steely-cool light tended to evoke terrible truths, and weeping, and even though sometimes humiliating, when the colors gleamed into sharp focus and unlocked the resplendent beauty it was a relief as well, to finally have been exposed, and to finally be offered a chance for salvation. (You would imagine I was sentimental and silly. I wish that was all it was. You will never know beauty until you've known pain, and you will never have known pain until you've inflicted it upon yourself. End of debate.) There was truth in that sort of light, you would infer, though no one else seemed to pay it any notice. I used to think such willful ignorance was like ignoring the baby while it threw a tantrum, or giving an untouchable the silent treatment. No longer. As hard as it was to believe, I honestly suspected they just didn't see it. It was all around and they didn't see it. For cowardice? Maybe. For inborn blindness, likely. They couldn't help how they were born: wetface, blind, and prey, all.

"What's-sup Richard, Christian?" twanged Paul Lee in a Valley accent, elongating and shortening vowel concentrations with protracted casualness, so it sounded like, "Ri-churd, Cris-chen," nasal and a hissy rasp.

"Hey Paulander," said Christian lighting up.

Paulander and his partner Kelly Wozniack were among the most feared teams on the National Circuit. As sophomores, last year, they cleared into outrounds and clawed all the way to the quarter-final round of

Nationals only to drop to the team that later went on to win the Title. Cornish and Wiezen from Kansas State University were the 1995 Champions, but it was a controversial decision. A slim win, unexpected, as if culled from the silent majority.

Paulander raised his fist and pounded down on Christian's. Christian reciprocated.

"So, who's got shit-eatin' grins now?" asked Paulander hopping from leg to leg.

"We chewed on Big Red for breakfast," I simpered, "Ahhh- all those empty calories," thumping my curving belly.

"Philip and Sherman?"

"Yep."

"What was Cornell doing?" Paulander wagged his head around like a boxer, and grinning like an idiot.

"Besides writhing and sobbing?" I cooed, "Not much. They want to release political prisoners in China using economic sanctions. And they're doing fine, of course until Rebuttals when they drop the Chernobyl impact on the Disad-"

"Ow! That's gotta hurt!"

"-Yeah, and then they try to kick-in an old fuckin' D-Rule from way back in the 1AC that says you never reward evil. A deontological thing."

"Any rationale?" Paulander ricocheted.

"Said they get leeway because I put evidence all over the flow and I confused them."

"Debate's tough," said Kelly Wozniack, "Toughen up guys."

Paulander laughed, "Oh! You put cards all over the flow! Where the hell did they want you to put them? Up their ass?"

"Evidently," I said. Christian and Paulander broke out in laughter, and Kelly latched onto her partner's shoulders as if about to piggyback. Paulander and Kelly didn't date, but they were very close. Kelly said her family would go ape-shit if she started seeing a Chinaman, and Paulander indicated that his soul would be in existential peril if he consented to premarital sex,

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but more importantly, he could never bring himself to kiss a heathen atheist. Paulander would sometimes try to explain to Kelly that she had mortal sin. *No one's perfect* she would reply.

"They ended up there anyway," puffed Christian.

"Typical Philip Pelsner," I said.

"How are the Blue Suede Shoes?" asked Christian.

"No go," said Kelly Wozniack, "I still have hope, though. I know Paulie's a dancin' man deep down. We just have to keep on trying."

"I want to be there when you do it!" gleamed Christian, and side glanced me. Paulander had been working with hypno-therapy all year to improve his spread. Though fast, Paulie wasn't always so clear. He had a thick tongue because his ancestors hunted whale to hear him tell it. So the hypnotist had been planting the suggestion that whenever he hears the phrase, "Put on your Blue Suede Shoes," he is to speed with perfect clarity.

"It's worked under hypnosis," said Kelly, "It just hasn't worked in the pinch. In the last round I said, 'Paulie, put on those **Blue Suede Shoes**,' and he **stops** and goes, 'What?'"

"I thought you were feeding me something!" Paulander laughed.

I lit another cigarette while the light gusts made hair dance and the door to the English Building swung open, and crashed closed like in a western. Two boys passed through it in mid-swing. The red haired boy with freckles on his nose and the thick glasses was Herman Moloch and his partner, shaved to the scalp like a buzzard was the hulking Krash Everett.

"Hey Pauleeee!" boomed Krash and galloped out to the far end of our tin awning. Paulander gave Krash a big hug and then charged his fist straight into Herman's.

"How's it hanging Paulie?" asked Herman, and Paulander adjusted himself. Paulander and Krash had been good friends ever since they fought over the same girl, two years ago as Freshmen. Virginia Pierce was the sweetest debating Freshman in the West and both Krash and Paulander wanted a piece of that candy—as

Paul Lee put it. The only rational solution was to debate for her. The Resolution was: Paul Lee should back off so Krash Everett can get some. Krash was Affirming. Paul Lee argued that if Krash got the Sweet Thing there would be a nuclear war in Eastern Europe in five years. Krash answered that war was an acceptable price to pay for love and he cited the *Iliad* and said, "Imagine what the legacy of Western Civilization would be if Paris hadn't gone to war for Helen?" Paulander said that Western Civilization sucked and absent Paris there would have been no Imperialism. So lounging around the pool table on the ninth floor of West Hall at debate camp, Krash and Paulie had it out, and when they were done we all voted for the Negative. "I'm not getting into a nuclear war for Virginia Pierce," said Kelly Wozniack.

When Virginia Pierce found out Paulander "won" her she was ready to rip off somebody's head. In the end neither of them were able to procure even a peck on the cheek from Virginia Pierce that summer. Krash and Paulander became drinking buddies soon after. Krash liked Paulander's improvised Western Imperialism Disad so much he asked to use it and has been running it as a backup Disad ever since.

Herman bummed a smoke and Krash said he wouldn't defile his temple with nicotine.

"How are you guys doing?" asked Paulander.

"We're good, we're good," said Herman Moloch, wrapping his arms around himself, "We weren't so good yesterday, but today we're good. We're goin' big."

"I woke up this morning," fulminated Krash, "Powdered my balls, and drank a tub of coffee. Then, when I took the biggest shit known to man I knew we were gonna kick some serious ass."

"I hope you didn't flush," Paulander jumped up and down, "Those are some of your best arguments."

"Yeah-ha-ha," thundering laughter while Krash barreled straight on through, "I'm serious, if you don't get it moving in the morning you're gonna be blocked up all day. Messes with your circadian rhythms."

"So did you kick some ass or what?" Paulander toed like a ballerina.

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“Oh yeah. We got air. It was big.” Krash nuzzled beside Paulie and slipped his arm over Kelly’s shoulder and smiled at her, “We hit Xiang and Gerfenhiemmer, the Banana Slugs. They ran Cult of the Consumer. Didn’t link to the Res. Real T problems, but you know I can dig that. It doesn’t get under my skin or anything. You know I think the Resolution should **be around**, but I’m not gonna be so hypocritical as to demand a topical dictatorship,” Kelly smirked as she covered Krash’s hand on her shoulder. “It’s like, **really** a neo-Marxist critique, though Santa Cruz wouldn’t fess up. I think they were just trying to squirrel out of sosh links, and you know how that can just blow up into a spew-fest.”

“Then it’s Backfile hell, all the way to 1988,” added Herman Moloch. The topic, also known as the Resolution, tended to be so broad, no one could be even roughly certain what their opponents would mutate into, thus the need for Backfiles.

Backfiles were cards of Resolutions past, unlikely to be used during any current round, but hauled along as insurance. You could never tell when the debate would take a strange turn into the realms of nanotechnology, new social movements, or radical epistemology. The Backfiles were toted around in bins, boxes, crates and cabinets, which were, in turn riding dollies, trains, carts and trucks. Any given two-man team might bring three to eight tubs, each filled with hundreds of folders, and thousands of briefs.

Among the fattest, most pervasive Backfiles was sosh short for socialism, because the authors tended to write the most flammable rhetoric in the literature. Why the parchment didn’t just incinerate itself right on the roller rails of the printing press was a deep pyrotechnic mystery. Everyone dragged around a cord of these fanatical cards that read, like Sanchez wrote in 1996,

Socialism is the one and only hope for mankind. All other alternatives for social organization, though attractive at first, are little more than the proverbial paradox of three wishes. The first wish for prosperity brings with it cloaked consequences, such as eco-destruction, and population overload. The second wish therefore must be used to negate the first. The only use for the last

wish is to wish for no more wishes. Socialism indulges in neither Genie-like fantasy, nor global suicide. It is not only the most facile and intuitive of social contracts, it may very well be the only solution to the conundrum of state to state nuclear exchange.

Krash hypothesized Santa Cruz was attempting to detour that kind of boiled over Backfile war where one-hundred sosh cards met one-hundred vying, second order utopia Back-up files. The Cult of the Consumer was not in any way a Marxist or a Socialist style proposal, they said. Much of debate was about links and evading them. If Cult of the Consumer was not, in essence, socialism remade, then Krash's thousand-million cards, some dating back all the way to high-school and beyond, were but dead weight at the airport, mere ballast in the belly of a 747.

"Card wars are so bor-**ring**," chimed Kelly.

"Yeah, they bite," Krash obsessed, "So, UCSC says that modern consumerism violates certain human rights, and they read a bunch of cards about how it violates..."

Christian touched my arm and marched off. He climbed the porous concrete steps and slipped along the hand rail until Jack Watco and Elric Grundle of Stanford shook his hand and motored their heads and everyone grinned like weak sheep, oblivious and simple. The quicksilver fell down just beyond their figures like a backdrop and thunder moaned faintly.

Jack Watco was compact and neat with sandy blonde hair. He was the sort of kid that played soccer and kickball and baseball with the sixth graders while in the third grade because he was that good. He was the sort of kid that always told you you'd given it a "good try," after you missed the goal and he meant it. You wondered if he felt sorry for you. You felt ashamed in comparison, for smelling of black tar, for being born so badly.

Jack's partner was a different story.

Elric Grundle was too tall for his frail build and his skin was too lean to be stretched so far over the expanse. Elric wasn't a gargantuan, to the contrary he was

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exceptionally thin, and that perennially waifly condition suggested he was a creature of ether. He was very pale with dark eyes, big sockets and dark hair. He was a freak. There was something else about Elric Grundle and the Stanford program in general: they were pariahs.

Debate was a very strange game because it was a game that moved as you played. That movement was partly attributed to the fundamental condition of argumentation and negotiation. Everything was up for grabs. There was no limit really to what could be done beyond the super-set of Time itself, and as for rules, well, they were creatures of thought and language, and as such, were pliable to the argument as well. Very few permanent rules existed in debate. But there was one rule

Cards had to be real.

There was a suspicion, even within the deepest central chambers of the hardcore converted, that the activity, the spewing, and foaming, and screaming was at heart, an egg-headed jerk-off carnival. The one thing that lent the debate any legitimacy was the fact that evidence came from *real published authors*. That is, scientists, professors, doctors, experts in their field, research fellows, and sure, cranks, flammers, futurists and visionaries, but at minimum they were real people who had their thoughts and words published in a real medium. If the debate was weird, it was because life was weird.

The conventional wisdom of the circuit was Stanford destroyed that. About a year and a half ago they had forged cards, made up some evidence, attached the name of an ersatz author, and claimed that the shit was for real. Then they got caught. How they were caught exactly was an enigma that only the most central of the deepest parties had knowledge of. Of course I knew who caught them because it was me.

“. . . supposedly a just and fair distribution of goods among the industrious, in a civilized way. In other words the Free Market produces good **ends**—”

“Right, right, right . . .” Paulander hopped little hops and nodded his head repeatedly as if hooked to an electrical socket.

“-the Invisible Hand, right? That’s what they say,” Krash rattled on like a glass jar. Christian waved me over. I needed to talk to Elric Grundle and Jack Watco like I needed a hole in the head, but there seemed no avoiding it without outright snubbage, and there were reasons why that wouldn’t have been smart. I stamped the cigarette and left Paulie and Krash and Kelly and Herman to distill the Cult on their own.

I moved up the pallid steps, limping through the crowded smoking steps. Out at the edge’s perimeter where the last aluminum rail held the silver gusts at bay, were Stanford’s A-team, and my partner, smoking and swaying. I shook hands and smiles all around. Fucking cowards. Blind as fresh born infants in slime, and painfully vulnerable at the top of their heads, in tender bellies, legs retracted in abiding squat.

I was introduced to a short boy with a thick neck, a wrestler type, named Caius. He called me by name like he **knew** me and that was unnerving. He didn’t know me, the small boy, with his small life. Though his body was staunch, his face was round, a real momma’s boy, you could tell. Did sports for the “fun” of it not the blood. His round eyes betrayed his secret. You could kill a boy like that, cut his head clean off and everyone would ask “Why?” but no one would ask “Why him?” Predators always hunt the young, weak, and sick, and not for some larger evolutionary principle, but for pure burning disdain.

“Say Rich, what’s Julie Kaneman up to?” asked Christian smiling.

“Well, last I heard she transferred to Syracuse,” I patted my chest for more smokes, “Don’t you keep in contact with her?” I sneered at Jack.

Jack shook his head side to side to side smiling stupidly. Julie Kaneman was Elric Grundle’s old partner when the whole forgery incident came out. (More and more people, I know. It’s not my fault, the world is full of them. You will not punish me for this.) Julie never debated for Stanford again and had since transferred to Syracuse University for unspoken reasons. Most people considered the whole event inexplicable and the fall-out no less strange. Christian thought that because Julie was my partner in High School—after Philip, and a vast improvement—I was

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still in touch. It was true that Julie and I were tight years after graduation and pretty good friends at the time of the scandal, in fact, but afterwards she drifted away, apparently as she did from everyone. I could sort of see why.

“We’ll hear from Julie Kaneman again,” I promised, “She always did have a way of getting back in the game.” She was an amazon in high school. I remembered her as loving frisbee. She loved it with a violence. She once describe it to me as a disc, that if made of metal, and serrated around the edge, would be the perfect metaphor for love. “Never count her out, is my advice,” I clinched my eyes as if shielding the rain, and they began to ache and sting, but I would not cry, I was sure. There might be a toll to pay, but I would pay it.

“No one ever gets out anyway,” joked Christian—which was true. Debate had a way of sinking its feathered incisors into you and you never could escape. No one who ever debated seriously could ever give up the activity until they were kicked out of it upon graduation, and for some, even that wasn’t final. There was coaching. Being a debater was an ontological condition. It was the assumption of a tremendous personae, and like the memory of a murder, it couldn’t be given up easily, if at all (I don’t personally know about murder. I’ve never killed a single person my entire life, though I’ve had plenty reason to. I have exceeded the standard, and I win there.)

Elric nodded solemnly. He glared at me suspiciously as if he were trying not to. Elric never did like me. Elric was the kind of debater that was excellent at surmising what you were arguing (or trying to argue) and finding some way to translate it personally into his own paranoid neurosis. Once I told him that he was being paranoid, and we all knew it and we were going to get him for it. Elric didn’t think it was funny. However, as in many other ways, he was singular in that conviction.

“Julie hasn’t gone away,” agreed Elric.

Virginia Pierce and her partner from San Francisco State joined us soon thereafter. We were lined up against the rail at the edge of the wet perimeter. I stood next to Christian, and then it was Elric and Jack on the

far end. We were squeezed for room until Virginia Pierce and her partner joined us. When they approached, the debate cluster broke up like slow moving shrapnel and they stood before us—the girls—like patricians. Virginia asked about my black eye. I told her she should have seen the other guy. We talked shop and Elric seemed noticeably more relaxed.

Virginia Pierce cranked up a rant about judges that had their heads up their asses until she was blowing smoke, her cute nose snarling:

“Gomez voted on language! Fuck me! Okay? He said after the round that he wasn’t too sure of Ebola happening anytime soon but that he was voting on the Critique to move one step away from Anthro. What schlag!”

“Schlag” was a universal debate word, originating with a Dr. Schlag who took Kant at his word and demanded proof of free will before assenting to the resumption of a moral discourse. Since free will, like the existence of god, was and will be forever unprovable, a demand for its deduction was painful and black-cynical sophistry. The word came to be connoted with absurdity and cowardice, and unwillingness to face issues head on. It also served as a substitute for “stupid.” Now, it may seem peculiar but debaters very rarely characterized rhetoric as “stupid.” It might be “schlag,” rarely stupid. There were very smart strategic reasons to make incredibly dumb arguments. One reason was, dumb arguments were often much more offensive than smart ones, which meant they got under the skin, and most people didn’t debate well when they were angry. Dumb arguments were confusing and contradictory and baited dumber and more contradictory answers. And then they had you. So in some instances stupid argumentation wasn’t entirely stupid, but was certainly “schlag.”

“The mother-fucker wasn’t even flowing and that’s a fact. I wanted to crush his trick knee, gimpy fuck! I’m telling you this sort of weak crap doesn’t happen in the NDT.” Virginia Pierce loved debate for good reason. She was a superstar. She had what all superstars had. She had “It.”

There came a time, usually within the first year and a half of being introduced to the activity in which each

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debater had to decide if they were going to make the leap from earth to sky. Many people didn't make it. They didn't have It to begin with and the initiation was too much for them, so they gave up or were burned alive trying. For those who had It and knew they could make the transition, there was an unmistakable difference. The first indicator was the trance-like spread. Speed debate was burning your brain at the rate of pure thought. There was nothing to get in the way, no matter, no tissue, no spinal fluid, no blood nor bone. There wasn't even room for you and all your hang-ups and all your personal problems. No room. For eight minutes in Constructives and five in Rebuttals you were pure mental meltdown as your brain burned right through the floor and your eyes glowed like hot coals. It was a truly transparent experience. Gaining entrance to the elite of debate was not unlike gaining an extra sense.

Virginia Pierce had that. She had the gall, the confidence, the gift to make others believe her. Belief, like love, requires faith and it requires a vision of truth. Virginia could elicit both. She knew that the things she could do, most people couldn't—partly because they never tried and partly because they didn't have It and never would.

Virginia asked how our squad was doing, and were we going to break, and all that yakity yak, so I had to change the subject to something more interesting before I began to feel that need to cut someone, myself, and watch the blood run like hate. It was a terrible temptation, "Paul Lee is still waiting for his date, Virginia," I pursed lips, and locked her eyes in.

She shifted her weight and shot back, "Tell Paulander that if he has any time in between circle jerking with Krash Everett, I would absolutely love to go out with him." Roaring laughter matched the rain on the pavement, "That is if he can keep up."

"Oh Paul Lee's pretty quick," I assured her between tremulous laughter.

"That's what I'm afraid of," she smiled all her teeth, "And I don't know if hypnosis can fix something like that," and more laughing at Paulander's expense.

Soon we were talking about the Blue Suede Shoes and the U.N. and eventually about body piercing and the poundability of Guinness on tap—when it's poured right, of course.

“Guinness is a white man's Guinness,” said the inert boy from Stanford looking around for approval. He was repeating some inside joke or an obscure movie or book reference no one got; I knew what he was doing and I pitied him even. He wasn't a bad person, per se, but he would make the same mistakes again and again, and what was the fucking difference? With no response, Jack and Elric's quiescent boy crawled back into a warm and familiar hole where he had set up house, and had a very comfortable arm chair and color television. He didn't have It and never would. I knew boys like him. He was so very vulnerable it made you want to weep as you gnawed on his splintering bones, and rubbery sinews, butter-fat bowels and stringy heart mass, sensitive and soft like a chew-candy. Boys like him grew up to be respectable, bald and content. I knew boys like him, they grew up to be pink and fat, they never ate meat and they loved their mothers. They did the right thing, and at the end of an evening would wonder aloud why God had forsaken them. Never *why them*, only *why*.

I watched Christian laughing and chatting with Virginia Pierce. Christian had a touch of that soft hole in him. He was my partner and friend, and a hell of a guy, a rocking debater. But things were changing and if you don't change with them, you get left behind. I was changing with it, Christian was not. The quiet boys, the Elrics, and the Philip Pelsners with glass ceilings were always the hard luck cases, and while that was a goddamn shame, I wasn't about to let it be my goddamn shame. Christian, like Philip had his own special limiting device, and as his partner, I stood under it as well. He was in line for a Scholarship he could never win, and yet would not stand down to make way for someone who could. Christian didn't understand blood, and the deep heat. He never had to. He was born from love.

He and I lost the USC tournament the week before last to Speed and Zoë, if you want to know the truth. At the final round, the moment of truth, we dropped, and it wasn't my fault. But in some ways, it may have been

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a fortunate thing. I saw Christian, my blood brother, in a fresh, new light; and it glared and refracted off the glass overhead. I really don't want to get into it. There are things that cannot be spoken, at least not without a price. There are rules.

A week after the drop and a week before this tournament, the Mustang Invitational, was sort of half way in-between everything. That Monday morning, last week, I walked to class newly aware of the strong forces around me, the life underground.