

Chapter 3 of *The Debate*

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A line of soggy sweatpants and ponytails crept through the open doors at Caffee Strada. A girl with a scowling bear just above the snap-lock on her blue cap, spun back, appearing tortured with puffy eyes. Took comfort she was no longer the last in line. In front of her, a boy wore a navy backpack with a patch attached plumb in the center reading “Fiat Lux.” In front of him, a pretty Chinese girl stepped sideways again and again, searching her watch and turning around to monitor the campus, as if it were going to set sail or sink. She gripped a blue-book with a grizzly on the cover. A pale boy with spiky, bleached hair ordered. He wore a gray sweatshirt around the waist that read CALIFORNIA, in blue and gold brick letters.

“What time do you have?” asked the sidestepping Chinese girl.

Fiat Lux said he didn’t have a watch but thought it was about eight. The puffy-eyed scowling-bear shrugged her shoulders.

“Shit. I have an o-chem mid-term,” the sidestepper waived the blue-book around to make a point, “Could you hurry the fuck up? I have a quiz. I need a fucking latté.” The CALIFORNIA sweatshirt twisted around and expressed fatigued contempt with eyebrows and lips.

“You can give them a break, you know,” I growled, “They have to work for a living.”

“Shut up!” she yelled without turning back. The line took a step forward, but I stood still. Two massive orange espresso machines protected the short Hispanic boys at the lateral edges of the front counter, with gold lion badges affixed like talisman. Charmed amulets. The boys turned dials and pounded exhausted espresso pucks from the metal pressure strainers.

The Debate

“Okay, I need a double latté. Short. Low foam. No whipped. To go,” the sidestepper ordered and looked back to campus, “And make them **full** shots. Is this the fastest you can go? I was here yesterday and they were going much faster.”

The cashier barked, “*Pequeno or chico, latte grande, para ir.*” When the drink arrived, the sidestepper shuffled off like a miser with gold. A moment later she charged back complaining of too much foam, “I have an o-chem test! I will not get into fucking medical school with this much foam. Do you speak English?”

I suggested she dump the foam in the bus bin and go take her test. I could have never crushed her skull with my bear hands, I would have needed a tool (Preferably one made of metal, but in all honesty there was no fucking way I would have caved her skull for complaining about foam, because down deep I’m a ridiculous coward and only indulge in violent speculation in order to feel stronger than I really am. I prey on weakness only because I know all about it.) “I have to get to class too,” I explained in all seriousness. I was about the crack up. I stared at her breasts just to avoid her head. No skull, no foul.

“Would you please fuck off?” and she smiled handsome porcelain. She knew. She could smell it.

The Beekeeper peeked over his honey-dripping boxes, and smiled the sweetest, warm sunshine, and made shushing sounds with his lips. The man who wears blue opened the locked door like a gentle host and asked, *Care to step inside? Explaining, It’s so very cold. The tile. The stainless steel. The white enamel.* The doorway was perfectly absent, only by inference could its presence be suspected: a madrigal creek at the hinge, a bending halo like heat at a distance, edged the four corners. And as I stepped through penetrating warmth, sweet surrender, from florescent to tungsten, from porcelain to sappy-pine, from Ajax, and Comet, to warm earthly imperfection, and it was all exhilaratingly endless, through the threshold.

A sensation of numb deliverance, and hovering, and just above the shoulder where my head might have been, and plaintive words, “Just because these people serve you coffee doesn’t mean they have to EAT YOUR SHIT.”

I used to think that all bad children had to eat their accidents. *No one has to eat those things, least of all the small ones*, the Blueman knew truths I could only hope to cull. I strained to watch the side-stepper, and I felt my tongue tap my teeth and lips moving together, and then apart, as the consonants escaped, and nothing more. Through the threshold I knew something must have remained behind, to save my place, so to speak (otherwise I'd never get back, and it begs the question why I'd want to, but the full escape is a terrible commitment, sort of like a marriage, and you have to be really in love to want that), and it was in all likelihood, my most vituperative weapon. Mouth. The Beekeeper loved tricks. He smiled warmly while stroking a waxy honeycomb panel, as if the cheek of a lover. He adored the Cheshire Trick and nodded approvingly whenever I performed it well.

Later, I jetted a caffeinated pace across the South Eastern bloc of campus where Wurster's Neo-Brutalism haunched heavily on rough riding slabs of concrete and steel brackets—a shit-ugly building, and one of a half dozen or so earthquake hazards at UC: imagine a jumble of bulky concrete blocks stepped upon one another like a marionette, held together with gum. Wurster may have been highly unsafe, but it was ugly as fuck. The School of Architecture resided therein. Other students strut along with their own white paper cups, just like mine, sucking down junk, sticky cream sugar, and dangerous bitter beans. The Western sun rose from the East (I get a certain feeling about that.).

Down the grassy knoll, and over Strawberry Creek on the footbridge. Some of the life underground came up for air under this bridge, and if you caught it, you could make it pay in sentience.

I loved the elegant, proud buildings. I loved the permanence, and stalwart austerity of bleached stone and mortar, and for that reason I loved this particular part of campus. Wheeler Hall wore white, fluted columns under ritually repeating corbels, like hardened pleats and rolls. Just kitty-corner, higher on the hill was proud Moses, across from ivy crusted South Hall; locked in axial view, a slender bell tower called the Campanile—the center of the Universe—appeared to glow blue on particularly clear days. The warmer, the bluer, much like the rosy hue of your hand held up in

The Debate

front of a strong fire. Blood in the hand, blue in the stone.

The lovely stone fortresses were no different from other monuments of time, such as pyramids or pantheons. They were sepulchers. Nearly without exception, the proud names adorning campus structures were the names of the dead. The few exceptions were all named for fairly old people, preparing to die, their flesh already curling up and rotting, betraying them like the stone never would. Death is all about betrayal, its sting lies therein.

LeConte Hall stood just on the other side of the Campanile's esplanade. The London Plane trees had been seasonally pruned in a style of radical restraint. Each of the branches held a grand fistful knot, yearly weighted by yet another strict pruning. The fists swelled like battered and bound fingers, and the supporting boughs sagged like unattended biceps, spent and strained. Undoubtedly, the gardeners were sadists; the authentic sadist never knows how much is too much. But this sort of pruning, make no mistake, was not an ugliness. Restraint is not ugly per-se, and within this particular context the twin rows, lined up like centurions, were noble like sacrifice, and proud like endurance.

LeConte had two sides. The most traveled side, facing the blue Campanile and her knotted trees, was vapid and plain. Stupid stone walls. Uninspired aluminum doors slammed shut with a flat bang. The opposite side, the hidden corridor, was LeConte's majesty: a row of earthy fluted stone columns, not blue like the Campanile, but touched by amber, ruddy like menses; a set of aged and waxy oak doors on each end set like wide eyes; and rectangular windows established lateral pace like a metronome. Patina dripped from the rain rims. Brassy smoked rails at the steps shone from a thousand oily hands. The backside of LeConte was as handsome as any building on campus, and it was hidden by the upstaging attraction of the Campanile.

Inside LeConte, the lecture hall stood tall, with a small figure at the bottom. Like an arena, large green steps separated each ascending row of bolt-down desks. Immobile hardwood desktops. At ten after eight, Jill Pyre looked up from her notes bellowing, "Okay, let's

get to work.” A long sable surface stretched sideways before her, where experimental displays were set up for chemistry and physics classes scheduled later in the day. Tapered-nosed faucets were fixed on a horizontal plane aside the sink. Twin eye flushers grappled the arcing faucet. These were mere precautions.

This week in Theories of Justice, Pyre worked up a defense of Affirmative Action: “If ten people are sequestered in a single train cabin they may form a democracy for the duration of their trip in order to make decisions about when to eat, when, or if, to smoke, about when it is reading time, and when it is time to listen to the radio. But if it turns out that for every decision, the wants of two particular individuals are constantly thwarted, due to the collective voting power of the larger bloc, by what obligation are these individuals required to abide by the rules of the larger democracy? If the democracy never benefits them and further, seems to consistently run opposite their wants and needs, it would seem no moral or justifiable legal force could adhere them to the larger group consensus. Such might be the circumstances for certain minorities in America. No tacit consent to the social contract may be inferred where no benefits are accrued. Only subjects that derive some benefit may be legitimately subject to law.”

By the eleventh minute Collin Coboarae raised his hand. Collin was a sophomore, a wunderkind, that Paulander jokingly predicted would end up on the Supreme Court one day (He joked with jealous acrimony. Cross apply below.) Collin was a tall boy with round, gold wire-rimmed glasses, and a hair like a young William F. Buckley. He was clean, like brushed aluminum, and handsome, and sterile. Collin may have been born right, but from his belligerence, you’d never know.

Collin and Pyre had mixed it up in the previous few weeks. (That bitch Pyre was a disciplinarian at heart. Her scolding didn’t originate from Supply Side, or Efficiency, and she claimed to be a liberal, but that’s bullshit and I’m taking it out. Pyre played on psychological stereotypes, so that at the exact moment she denounced gender inequity, she entrenched it by using a tone only your mother would have used. That’s the link to fem, and it’s eating the impact hard. She

would proclaim that all people were obliged to be treated with respect and she would say this with gross condescension. First, Double-Turn the motha, and second, hypocrisy is bad.)

Pyre raised her arm like Caesar, exhaling, “Yes, Collin?”

Collin Coboarae put down the arm he’d been holding up with his other hand, “That analogy leaves a lot to be desired because it’s an argument from interests, not principles.” Pyre argued last week that the distinction between interests and principles is that interests are things that we do because of some benefit to ourselves or our group, while principles benefit the whole of humanity. Free speech, for example is a general principle, but when one individual steals the microphone away from another, it’s done from interest. It gets more complicated, but that’s the general idea.

Pyre’s head locked at the neck, her features in sudden solidity while lips snaked over teeth, “It’s the **principle** of equality that demands all groups be given a say, Collin.” Ohhhh! Low blow, using his name, as if she had caught him playing with matches, playing doctor, playing god—a fairly responsive answer as well. It didn’t look good . . . although Collin’s eyes began to dart back and forth as if reading. His lips twitched tiny words and that meant that even though the conversation was occurring at a pedestrian pace, the inner voice had already reached the 300 plus, words-per-minute running speed. He looked like Christian three or four arguments into five.

Collin answered, as if she had not said his name, “Okay, then by that standard—I’ll take your standard—by that standard we need to placate the nazi skinheads in Mississippi because they’re on the train too, right? And their voice is not being heard, right? And they want segregation in the statutes.” A very nice answer. Instead of clashing with Pyre on premises, Collin argued for the *reductio ad absurdum*, which is to show that her rhetoric, when taken to its logical end, produced horror.

But Pyre knew all about *reductio ad absurdums* and other Latin phrases of power. She knew about all that shit. Her position in academia was predicated on eating the smaller fish, of being in the top ten percent, of the

top ten percent, of the top ten percent; after the math was done it was as if she had won the lottery, not having done so on the basis of luck, but wit. And little Collin Coboarae wanted to know about the skinheads, huh? What about that? She flushed pure hate, hands bolted to the ebony table top, arms spread like flying buttresses. (Little Coboarae wanted to know what was in her heart. He wanted to turn over the rock and expose what he'd found. To everyone. Did her mother love her with soft kisses, or shit in her mouth like a black ape? Were her insides pink and moist?—could a baby live there?—or festered and rippled with cold sludge and brown knotted semen? But when you make Law Review you're granted a full pardon and the deep blue triple chevron is a permanent palisade against in-lookers. Those were the rules. Check her credentials; she was protected. So she's killing me on the line-by-line. I'll punt at the rubicon, but I haven't a prayer. Collin was born right, so he still stands a chance.)

And about the skin-heads? Painful hate leaked through Pyre's voice, a cocked head, one eye larger than the other, "Well, their voice **is** being heard, and that's why we have Strom Thurmond, and Jesse Helms. Now, please Collin, I have only forty minutes of class left—"

"And that's good?" Collin shot back, "Is that the principled argument? If Strom Thurmond, and Jesse Helms weren't in government we would need an Affirmative Action policy to get them there?"

"No, of course not!" a spring leapt from her neck. A few, not many, prostrate heads in the old oak table-chairs swiveled eyeballs up toward the commotion. They watched the little spring bob around like a tiny antenna. The on-point analysis now: Pyre's Strom Thurmond and Jesse Helms counter-example sounded compelling at first because it seemed to align Collin with the Klan, but Collin wiggled out of that noose by knotting the argument up in itself. It was called a Turn in debate, and they were the loveliest things in god's creation because there was a purity to them, an elegant circularity, and beautiful irony, like the serpent poisoned by it's own venom.

Pyre's face lost control, and sprockets and wires jumped out, as if garbage had been jammed in the cogs.

The Debate

The Turn fucked her up. A number of students appeared concerned. One adjusted her navy wool cap; “Cal” emblazoned the front in sunshine gold. Pyre, on the slick side of time, writhed around, hands bolted in place, and then, “You just don’t get it do you Collin.” Another low blow.

The phrase was so politically charged it would take more time than Collin had to extract himself. A time suck. It was, of course, pure rhetoric, not an argument, but that hardly mattered, because the damage was real enough. A few students smiled. Then more. Giggly nervous laughter. Childish laughter; and it wasn’t because they were in on the joke, they were laughing for fear. (And it is written that the cowards shall inherit the earth. It is preordained by the life underground, and the sonic ultra-violence. From Crowley in ‘49.) And I found myself laughing along with them, swept up in the inertia of conformity, a terrible power like sea waves—would kill you if you looked at it wrong. They were on Pyre’s side. (I wasn’t on her side, this is the god’s honest truth, but neither was I ready to take on the lunar powers, not for Collin.) Their whole identity was wrapped up with knowledge as delineated by the authors, so if Pyre was ever wrong, they were wrong, and if that ever happened all the caste-power in their caps, and sweatshirts, and mugs would be mere conceit. They smiled like idiots low on iodine, and Pyre smiled too because she understood the fear and the flush of conformity better than any of them:

“Really Collin, and I’m speaking seriously to you now, if you do not question your assumptions, you will always be beholden to others.” On-point please: by framing the press in an if/then format she did not have to prove that Collin already failed to question his assumptions, but could assume so, hiding the assumption in syntax. A beautiful tactical maneuver. And just by raising the specter that Collin was in need of introspection, doubt was cast on all his opinions. God, she was good. It was an attack on unfounded assumptions based on unfounded assumptions. No one ever suspects the victim of having committed the crime. Under many subcutaneous layers the pimp was an attack on itself, and you can’t Turn it back because it’s already a complete circuit.

I craned my neck around the hall, and more of them were smiling than ever. Sitting at their evenly spaced desks, sitting evenly distributed up and down, and side to side, like pieces on a checker board. Blank slates all. A hard green floor. Soundproofed paneled side walls. A three eyed mechanical eagle hung from attachments overhead, each eye a primary color (A ray-gun menacing death, and surveillance from the sky! A technological marvel. The panopticon.)

The combined effects of those two comments should have done him in. No one survives the “You just don’t get it.” The phrase had a solid history in the rhetoric of liberal ideology, but it also had a sufficient element of hypocrisy to generate confusion. Even Reagan used a variation on the phrase. For him it came out, “There you go again,” but it was essentially the same thing. And then the “assumption” bit was so complex having to do with Pyre’s unspoken and unquestioned assumptions, and a class full of ice-cold frozen assumptions about authority and power, and grades, and sacrificial lambs, and having to do with hypocrisy, and Double-Turning backwards and forwards, nothing could get a handle on it. It was so merciless, so uniquely cynical, I was in awe of it’s black shining beauty. I was aroused.

But Collin couldn’t let it lie, “And so Affirmative Action, you would, or wouldn’t agree, is good for everyone, minorities and skinhead alike. I didn’t quite understand your position on that.” Very nice from the boy wonder. Pyre’s evasion was a clear indication of weakness, and he pressed on that issue like the soft-spot of her skull. Probing thumb on the brain.

On point please: the way I saw the matrix coming down, Pyre had only two good answers to make. The first one could have been Thurmond and Helms made Affirmative Action unnecessary for skinheads, but besides being overtly cynical, it was basically a reformatted version of the argument already offered to no avail. She could have opted to use it anyway and gone around and around on the issue until Collin got tired, but that would have resulted in a stalemate at best, and Pyre didn’t find stalemate acceptable.

The second was the historical disadvantage argument. She could have found the distinction

The Debate

between minorities and skinheads in that one suffered from historical disadvantage while the other enjoyed arbitrarily disproportionate power. The problem was twofold with this, one, Asian Americans had also suffered from recent historical disadvantage, but far from enjoying the benefits of Affirmative Action, they were actually selected against. Asians needed to ascertain a higher GPA/SAT average than European kids, to get into UC, for example. Some of the smiling idiots were Asian and their grins stretched only so far. So it was not entirely true, and we all knew it. Second, it was not a principled argument, and Collin could have sent her back to the drawing board just like the Thurmond/Helms thing, and they would have gone round and round on that one, and you would have gotten the same damn stalemate. I didn't see an easy way out.

But Pyre did. Still smiling, bolstered by populism, and rushing to answer, she went for the historical disadvantage argument, but with a little twist, "Collin, we only have so much time in lecture, so let me just say this, and then we'll have to go forward..." generating heat, getting cleaner, "It's important that you understand the **principle** behind the policy. You won't be able to understand until you give up your old oppressive ideals about way the world is, or is supposed to be through the Euro-male perspective. Let me just say that Affirmative Action is there to equalize the historical advantage that your sort of people already enjoy. Now if you cannot understand that, I don't know what to say. Now . . . in the Chomsky reader . . ."

And it was out: the sticky black serum of bowls and stomach. The retch turned icy; I was frozen solid. The class froze instantly. Frozen smiles. Hoarfrost on the black table-top where her hands were bolted firm. She was going to get away with it, and that's what you had to admire, the guile and bile, the circuitous coil, a venom nonpareil.

Collin interrupted, "I'd like to address that-"

Pyre knew better, "Now Chomsky says-"

"With all due respect-" Collin worked up a mantra.

"Please, Collin-"

"Professor Pyre, with all due respect-"

“We need to get on with the Chomsky reading, here he discusses our assumptions, your assumptions-” the cocked head induced exposition of teeth like little glimmers in a web spanning the hall. A porcelain smile.

“With all due respect-”

“Collin, I only have thirty minutes of class left. **Please! You’re not the only student in class!**” it smelled like panic; and blood.

“With all due respect,” like a locomotive.

“See me after class, Collin-”

“With all due respect, you’ve made spurious accusations against me. I would like the opportunity to respond.” The vocal resonance sung a conviction, “To assume that because some white males are racist, all of them are, is to dehumanize them.” A pause to establish that the floor was his, the very floor she stood on “And to pigeonhole me personally as a cross burner, because I share similar skin color with Strom Thurmond, is a pretty disturbing thing-”

Pyre tried to edge in with a sound, not even a full word, just the edge of a sentiment, “Yoooo-”

Collin made no space, “You know, there is a word for people who hate other people based on race, but I think there needs to be an equally ugly word for people who cry ‘racism’ without warrant.”

On the backside of time, not a sound stirred. Pyre’s head sparked where the neck met the jaw; wires were shorting out, fuses were blowing, gears were cracking under extreme torque. Wide-eyed, binder-buried, necks-a-craning, iodine heads sat aghast, confronted for the first time with the terrible weight of their own autonomy: the necessity to make an independent decision, rose like a nightmare. Apathy of smiles. Vacuum stares. Blood leaked from the bolts in her palms. And whether you agreed with him or not, you had to admire Collin Coboarae; the lunar forces were in retreat.