

## **Chapter 6 of *The Debate***

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Strada was an outdoor cafe, with a redwood bulwark shading sun, and shielding rain; deep glowing heating elements, and flowered vines hung from the upper rafters. Strada sat at the corner of College and Bancroft, across from Boalt, the Anthropology Department, and in the distance, Wurster. Wurster, the crumbling monster.

Christian and I stood in a long line that snaked out the door. Bright yellow lights made strong shadows. Italian technicolor-soda-syrup queued the back wall, behind orange espresso ramparts with lion charms, and steam rising, as if escaping from geo-thermal cavities deep underground. A short Jew kid with the nose of a crook shuffled forward in front of me. He wore a yellow and blue stripped rugby shirt with the number 12 on the back; in front of him a sweatshirt read “Cal” in handwritten script, with the “L” sweeping around to underline, and “Berkeley” reverse-lettered in that swoosh. Up further, a tie with little bears in silhouette thrown over the shoulder, a t-shirt that read on the back, “. . . but Stanford swallows,” and a tall bony woman at the counter presenting a thick plastic mug with UC seals wound around, like a barber’s pole.

Christian put his arm around my shoulder and reminded me of my promise to stay away from the spooks, to stay out of trouble. I touched the bulb below my left eye and shrugged, then looked away, “It’s not them.”

“Did you get into a fight?” he asked seriously. The line shortened. I nodded, and shuffled forward. “Who with?” his voice set soft and high.

“Collin.”

“Why were you fighting?”

I let out a dramatic sigh, “We were fighting because Collin’s an asshole.”

“Uh, huh, but more specifically.”

I replied weakly, “It’s ridiculous.”

“Yeah? What?”

“This is embarrassing,” I stepped forward and Christian stayed close, “Collin said the only reason you were my partner was to get the Senator’s Scholarship, and you were using me to get it, and that otherwise . . . . Well, what he said was you otherwise were sick of me.”

Christian scrunched up his face, “Sick of you? What does that mean?” He really had no idea.

“Sickened by me,” my legs tingled, and sound the closed in. Very quiet. My hands swelled like numb, massive dead-flesh, and old, old voices drifted around as if on hot currents.

Christian moved his head side to side slowly, eyes locked on my face. He didn’t approve of those things. He thought it was a sign of weakness. He may have been right, but then again he was born pink and healthy, and took such things for granted.

I continued, “So I socked him in the stomach.”

Christian smiled widely with bell shaped teeth, “Then what happened?”

“He knocked me in the eye with his board.”

“Skateboard,” Christian confirmed plainly. I nodded and shuffled forward, noting the floor and shadows. “Wow!” Christian drifted off into space, and then as if remembering something, “Did you smack him good though?”

I broke a wry smile and nodded slightly at the floor. Christian laughed out loud and shook me by the shoulders, “I’m buying you a latté.” I regained my hands and legs. Christian knew how to fix things, and get them even again. “Let me see your hand.” I showed him. Christian examined the back of my hand where the thumb met the first finger. “It’s looking better. Stay away from those things and these scars will be gone soon.”

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“They’re just pets,” I protested with a smile.

“Sell that bullshit elsewhere,” he articulated like a scholastic, and then giggled at himself, “No, I mean, they could have all sorts of diseases. God knows what’s in that creek.” He considered for a moment, “I swear to god, if you show up with one more wound I’m taking you to Tang.” In Christian’s world things could be good for free, and I almost accidentally cried right there in Strada.

At the counter, the familiar Hispanic boys manned the orange espresso machines like Kilroys. Lion crests. Both smiled at my arrival whooping and yelling, “*Moocho Maaaacho!*”

Christian asked if I knew what they were saying. I said I didn’t. They presented me with a free blueberry muffin, grinning on and on. They said the muffin was “*Muy bien para ti, mi amigo.*”

Christian and I took a seat at the outer corner of the garden, just beyond the protection of the redwood bulwark. An occasional car would stop at the end of College and turn left down Bancroft, sweeping headlights over the one-way signs. At Boalt, just diagonal, Bancroft inclined sharply. A block away, International House sat at the top of the hill, with a domed roof resembling the Hoover Tower. The heir apparent to the Scottish monarchy was supposed to be living there. A prince. Or so it was prophesied. I also heard he was sterile, which was plausible considering all the inbreeding.

Christian poured cappuccino into a saucer and sipped, “I **do** want that scholarship . . . very badly. I’d do just about anything to get it,” and brought his eyes up to mine, brimming, “Almost.” He giggled.

“Want some muffin?” I offered.

“No-thanks.”

“There are other ways to get to Harvard,” I pulled the crown off and blueberries fell out.

“Maybe for you. But for me the odds are abysmal.”

“You’ve got good grades.”

“Sure, but everyone’s got **good** grades.” Christian considered, “Let’s say I maintain a 3.6 or maybe even

move it up to a 3.7 or something,” Christian poured more cappuccino into his dish, making calculations, “and then let’s say I score a 97th percentile on the LSAT—okay, I beat 96% of everyone else out there—my chances of getting in are still around six to eight percent or so. But because 40-50% of admittees are from Harvard or Yale, and because affirmative action candidates are all clustered in this bottom rung,” he waived his hands around as if we were sitting in some general bottom rung, “my **actual** chances are even worse.”

I stuffed the muffin crown in my mouth, “Stop it, you’re gonna make me cry.”

“But even at six percent, do you truly, truly understand how baaad those odds are?” his eyebrows arched uncontrollably, “You’d have to flip heads four times in a row.” Christian dug into his pants and pulled out a quarter, “Here. Do it.”

I slid the quarter off the wobbly table. George Washington in a pony tail on one side. An eagle on the other, with the motto: from many, one. I flipped the coin, caught it and turned it over on the back side of my hand. “Heads,” called Christian. I felt new glee. Ridiculous. Humiliating. Again: “Heads. Halfway there,” he encouraged. Again: it turned tails. “That’s not bad,” Christian put his hand out, “You beat the odds. You were in the upper 75th percentile.”

I placed the quarter carefully in his palm, “There must be a thousand debaters who are after that scholarship. Flip a coin against that.”

“Any day,” he sipped coffee, “How many teams do you think stand a serious chance of keeping us out the final four this year?”

“Maybe five, six.”

“Sounds like good odds to me.”

I shook my head side to side, “Those are just probabilities. We don’t win debate rounds because there’s a good statistical probability. We win because we make the argument.”

“And my argument is, if I were going to bet on the future, I’d bet I was a better debater than student.” He winked and showed me bell teeth with brown streaks

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where they met. "So have you decided what to do after graduation?"

"I'm not sure. Maybe I'll take some time off and then do B-School. Maybe Wharton. I don't know."

"Right. Well, you better get on that."

"Yeah."

A girl wearing round mock-tortoise shell rimmed eye-glasses came up behind Christian, behind the boxed vines and pressed her fingers into where his shoulders met his neck. Christian inched his eyes into slender parts. The girl came around and sat next to Christian and asked how he was doing. Christian introduced me as his debate partner. I smiled and extended my hand, palm tilted upward; she introduced herself as Miranda and then turned to Christian, "You spilled your coffee," indicating the saucer, and placed the cup to her lips.

Christian grinned at me, "I know, dear."

"Ow! Hot," Miranda sipped more slowly, "What cha' boys talking about?"

"Law school," I offered her some muffin.

"Oh god, don't **even** talk to me about law school."

Christian straightened up, sat on his hands, "Did you apply?"

"Yeah," Miranda dismantled the paper ribbing and picked at the blueberries, "I'm getting answers back now."

"Good news?" asked Christian hopefully.

"No. I mean not yet."

"Were you rejected?" Christian took a deep tone.

"I don't use the word 'rejected.' This isn't dating. I say 'denied admission,' and then I take deep, even breaths. And it was Yale if you need to know. I mean, I'm okay with it-" she sipped more of Christian's coffee and then waved her hand in front of her open mouth.

Christian added quietly, "I heard there is a better chance of having the Supreme Court hear your case than getting accepted to Yale."

"Christian's obsessed with the odds," I added.

“Don’t say ‘accepted,’ say ‘admitted.’” Miranda coughed a little and began breathing irregularly.

“I’m really sorry,” Christian said in a jerky cadence.

“Oh it’s okay. I didn’t expect to get in anyway.”

“Right.”

“I mean, I didn’t expect to get admitted.”

“Did they explain why?”

“They said I wasn’t the best of the outstanding. How’s that?”

“That’s what they said?” Christian’s voice rose.

“Well, they said they had thousands of candidates, you know, and 180 open seats, and were forced—that part cracks me up, like terrorists came and threatened their family and forced admissions to pick certain people. So anyway, they were **forced** to select the very best of an outstanding pool, so I guess that means whatever I am, I’m not the best of the outstanding,” she stuck her lip out and ordered her hands down as if commanding her animal to heel. “No, but really, I’m okay with it.”

“God,” Christian held her hand, “What do your . . . What are your numbers like?”

“I don’t talk about my el-sat score.”

“Oh—why not?”

“I don’t talk numbers. We’re already numbered enough. It’s dehumanizing.”

“Oh, come on. It’s no big deal.”

“No way. Once I tell you a number, I’ll always be a number to you. If your number is higher, you’ll be dismissive and arrogant-”

“That’s not true-”

“-If it’s lower, you’ll get a complex,” she shrugged her shoulders, “Besides, they want you to talk about numbers, it legitimizes the system.”

“Fine. You win. But you’re still waiting on other schools, right?”

“Yeah. And the mailman is now my arch nemesis,” Miranda smiled awkwardly and dug her fingers into the

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bottom of the muffin, “I swear, this thing has ruined my life.”

“Easy there. Breathe,” Christian soothed Miranda’s hand.

“I’m normally, a really happy person. Can I try your latté?” she asked me.

“Sure.”

“Hmm. It’s very good. Plenty of sugar.” She finished my drink, “C’mon, let’s go for a walk.”

Christian looked to me and nodded.

“Okay, let me just use the loo,” Miranda dashed off with a black pack centered on her back.

“She’s pretty, isn’t she,” Christian sought confirmation.

“I guess.”

“And she’s smart.”

“If she’s so smart, why isn’t she going to Yale?”

“Don’t be an asshole.”

“Okay, alright. I’m just kidding,” I put the pint to my face but there was nothing there. Christian’s face wobbled and warped at the bottom of the glass, I-House behind him.

When Miranda returned, she lead us toward Wurster, with a hand behind, as if stringing along children. The night was gentle, and slightly breezy. A peach-blond cloud canopy captured and protected campus in a glass dome. Miranda hummed little complaints about applications to law school, personal statements, and being forced to reduce her entire life to two pages, double spaced. She strutted across the Campanile’s esplanade, the knotted fists, and the dull side of LeConte, then down the hill, past the Library, to LSB.

The Life Sciences Building was constructed in 1930 as, at the time, the largest scholastic building in the nation. Entwining its massive, ashen facade, was a declaration of intent. It read eight feet high, “Botany, Zoology, Bacteriology, Psychology, Biochemistry,” of which, many disciplines had either been mutated, eliminated, or absorbed into other programs. Life

Sciences Building had been under heavy reconstruction since the 1989 Loma Prieta quake. A terrific crane shot out of LSB's gut and swung high like a one-armed sentinel. Square, sunken columns swept around the sides. Gryphons squatted over the pediments with beautiful full wings. A cyclone fence marked off the perimeter.

"Allrighty," said Miranda at a shambled gate on the dark side, "No one's around, let's go check it out. You know, to see where our tuition is going." Wide eyes behind glinting glasses.

I corrected her, "We don't pay tuition, we pay student fees, and the construction is funded **privately**, not through the state."

"No it's not," whispered Christian, "It's a state **earthquake** fund." Christian and I bickered nervously.

"Who's first?" challenged Miranda, holding the chained gate wide.

"Let's flip a coin," I offered, "If you get heads four times in-"

"You two are like old ladies," Miranda carefully dropped to her knees, slipped under the clanking chain, and through the parted gate. She crouched and trotted toward a shadowed door recess, where she tested the lock and found it pliant. Entered the negative sphere, and then re-extended a pallid arm beckoning. It floated as if detached. (The Cheshire Arm Trick is no trick, but an illusion done with light and nothing else. Second, you would defer to my authors, as they have been stalwart, and reliable in the past. Third, even if it were a real trick, you would not find her so easily endearing. Yale did not, and you will accede to their judgment. The clean take-out keeps it even.)

Like a Calvinist resigned to Providence (Providence is bullshit apportioned by the sexual deviants, with the weak knees, and their scornful letter A's), Christian too swung his backpack through the crack, and knelt to follow. He held the clammy gate open, while I crouched down in the cool, hard, dirt, and wiggled through. Christian and I joined Miranda at the nether-porthole and slipped through, cold and clean.

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Miranda lead us down a hall to a staircase, and up one flight, then two, then three, and then escaped into another hallway. The rough concrete passages were lit by yards and yards of orange extension cords, strung to portable hanging lamps, like the kind hooked to the hoods of automobiles. The floor was lined in mustard butcher paper that crackled and tore underfoot.

Miranda spun through the well lit corridors, exploring half finished classrooms, witnessing many miles of exposed pipe, slabs of sheetrock, and dead-end closets, and concrete cold plazas. A spiritless metal ladder surreptitiously ascended from darkness into soft space. Miranda, then Christian went into the nothing. I followed, missing the madrigal creek, and bending heat, missing the anticipation of escape. This was different and mundane. Conspicuously absent were the signs of divine forgiveness, and endless compassion, and the sweet blue and gold love and protection. The metal ladder did not exist in the best of all possible worlds, but this one. (Can't bullshit him. Cross apply the standard.)

Everyone liked to speak—and Christian was the worst—as if anything could happen, as if at any given moment you had total freedom to do, and say everything ever possible. That, in fact, was total fantasy. There was very little you could actually do to affect in the world. Nearly everything was already set. But I would humor Christian, because he kept my secrets, and because there were rare moments when he could suck me into his pretty little delusions, (Done with light. Not real tricks.) and it would be as if I was even, born with a fighting chance.

My eyes adjusted to dim surroundings. I found myself in a sort of metal tower, that ascended, level by level until the last, where the moonlight medicine beckoned. The whole process was sluggish, as I tested each rung and each metal-level until the last one, where a barrage of junk, and alloy scrap, posed a final obstacle. At the top, Miranda waved a pallid limb, until all three came forth to see again the stars.

Christian, Miranda, and I grouped near the center of the asphalt lined roof, away from terrestrial eyes. In the distance, Telegraph trailed into Oakland's

constellation of grooving points and shimmering glow-dots.

“The evening is beautiful,” susurated Christian softly, “Look, there is Venus, the love goddess and just behind her, you can’t really see it, but just behind is the constellation of the Fishes.”

“The evening is **very** beautiful,” Miranda swelled in excited agreement.

Christian exclaimed gently, “I’m so glad we’re here!”

Miranda said, “I feel so good in my body!”

“You know,” said Christian, “I think everything’s going to turn out just fine! Look at the clouds parting . . . they’re beautiful, just lovely, and here we are where we’re not supposed to be—but we can go anywhere! They can’t stop us. And here we are . . . the sky . . .” he mumbled cryptically, “. . . wide open for us . . . aren’t we lucky . . .”

Christian ran off toward the edge of the roof where another metal ladder ascended the wall to a roof level even higher. He climbed up, reached the top, where the hard rails curved downward like hard rainbows, over the upper ledge, and swung himself.

Miranda fumbled in her black, leather backpack, until she produced a small Altoid tin reading “Altoids, the curiously strong mint,” but the “t” on mint was covered by a taped on “d.” She opened the tin, “Fatty?”

I nodded.

Miranda extracted a lighter, and fumbled with the child safety switch, while I made a wind-shield with my hands. Miranda lit, and passed it to me with bird hands. “You have pretty fingers,” I said.

“Really?” she let out some smoke, and held some.

I inhaled deeply, and passed it back, finger, thumb. The smoke was unusually minty. I released some with a cranking sound, “Here, let me see.” She draped fingers over my hand like a handkerchief. “Clearly Yale had no idea about your hands.”

“Yeah, maybe that’s what my personal statement should have been about.” She turned her hand, and mine, over, and examined the brown little marks, “How did your hand get all scratched up like this?”

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“In a fight,” I replied, and indicated my eye.

“What was the fight about?”

“Oh, you know, what fights are always about.”

“I don’t know. What **are** fights always about?”  
Miranda took another hit, “I can never figure it out anyway. I mean, not really.”

“When you fight like an animal, you’re no longer burdened by having to act like somebody.” She was utterly helpless, and had no idea. Miranda pulled her hand away quickly and trotted over to Christian’s ladder. I resisted, wondering why she walked away, wanting to punish her, somehow by staying. But that’s probably what she wanted. Traps were everywhere, hidden by the most everyday occurrences, pauses, nods, glances. You have to use reverse psychology in these situations.

On the higher roof, Christian twirled around like a Dervish, singing, “You can go to the middle and spin and spin and spin.”

“Fatty?” asked Miranda.

“Allright!” he exclaimed, and rolled his hands together singing a new song: “Fatty, you’re the one for me. Fatty you’re the one I ree-alllly LOVE!”

Christian hit the joint. Around it went. Miranda finally asked who the fight was with, as if she had balled up all her courage to do so. I told her I got into a fight with one of the Dwinelle preachers, and that I kicked his ass pretty badly.

“Nuh-uhhh! You got into a fight with Collin over **my** honor!” Christian swayed around as if attached to the end of a loose flag cable. “I love Rich,” he told Miranda. He put an arm over her shoulder and brought her near, “There’s no one like him. He sheds blood for me!”

And they began laughing and hooting and inspecting me as if I were under glass. It was a big joke, and they were howling like maniacs with shifty eyes, back and forth, back and forth, sneering with their eyes, because of the utter contempt they felt for me leaking out, and they could not help it. Laughing like wild beasts at me, cackling. They could no longer even try to hide their contempt, because they were so

swollen, and bulbous, and it all came out, the odious contempt. They could no longer even act as if they didn't smell what I smelled like.

I wouldn't give them the satisfaction. I smiled along with them and their insipid jocularity, and their horrible hate. I may have had the rot but I would never act as they were acting toward me, and so they were the odious ones.

"Hey bad boy," said Christian mockingly as if I could not tell, "you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine," he can't know and I won't tell him. I would sooner die.

"Look pale," he echoes. *Look pale*. It's an echo, "Look pale..." *I can't hear*. The noise siphoned from my ears.

"Why did you say 'blood'?" I asked very reasonably. I stretched out my arms, as if bored. He can't know, because he knows too much, and there are rules.

"Blood? Blood?"

"Blood?" Miranda joined him in ridicule. Those were the rules. They can gang up on me, once I've made the fatal error. I made it. Now they knew I knew all about the blood, and that meant they knew I knew. Once they know I know, they're allowed to act as if they either know I know (the truth), or they don't know I know (a lie), and I'm not allowed to indict them. Any attempt to confirm the truth or reveal the lie, can be countered with another truth or lie, and by then it's entirely impossible to discern the difference. And that's when they have you and that's when it's permanent.

"I didn't say blood," I clarified; I must try to stay on it. "**You** said 'blood.' I didn't even raise the word." This is at once a truth, and a lie, and any attempt to impeach will lead to their doom. Just a step away. Now I have the control, because I have It, and though Christian has It too, he's afraid to use it—at least all the way. He's afraid that once the animal is let out, he might never get it back, and then it's a bull in a china shop, or rage-blood on the monkey fur, a real mess, and you can't clean that up with the bees, not that I'd try, but some might, and Christian never would, because he was born right, and hasn't a clue as to animals and insects, the way I do. They're not as they seem.

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They're forces, like gravity, and electricity, and the inertia of a word spoken like gunfire.

"What's going on Rich?"

"I only **asked** because you brought it up!" He was trying to turn the whole thing around on me. Fucking cowards. And I began crying because it was so easy for them and so hard for me, and they had no conception of the black plasma pain, and the hell-mouth hate. The bees were a relief, but there was always a price. I never should have lived, and they laughed, with the light hearts of yellow sunshine in their cradles at me, the unthing. I never would have been as cruel as they, if I were them, and thus they were the monsters, they were hideous ones. And I repeated this over and over to myself, and it didn't fucking help. At all.

"You're not making any sense!" Christian appeared shaken. He quit the jackal cackle. They both did. Now they weren't laughing.

"But you weren't making sense, and that was okay, but you think I'm not allowed-" And then I smelled it.

A stench. It wasn't me because you can never smell yourself. It came from Miranda. Likes attract like. I've always inadvertently sought out, somehow accidentally fallen in with others with like-sickness in the rib-cage. Like magnets. Then I knew what was in her. The Blueman offered the heat warping door, but I resolved to stay my ground. Everything was going to come apart soon, but I had time. I knew Time. The sounds that run over each other were joined by Christian and Miranda's. The Blueman pronounced impatiently: *I will have to say 'I told you so.'* Not yet. I could be strong.

"See?" I stretched my arms to show how big I could be; I stayed just on top of things as they moved forward—like a wave. They contorted and screwed up lips and noses to exhibit scorn. They wanted to shame me into submission. They wanted to prevent me from showing them my size, because then **they** would have been caught in the contradiction, and they would have lost. It was a ploy, and I resolved to be strong. I asked them quite calmly to not talk over each other. Miranda stared at the

wound in my eye as if looking into my mind.  
She knew how it was inflicted. The  
Blueman made faces, indicated the door. I  
waived him off. Miranda demanded that I  
calm down, but I had her number. Her  
stench was overpowering by now.  
Undeniable. Even the worst smellers—like  
most people—could have smelled her then.  
Her secret was out: “Yale doesn’t want you  
because you have fish in the cage!” The  
Blueman was outraged for speaking aloud  
unspeakable things. The door expanded  
black space, and the madrigal creek  
became an impenetrable over-yawn, like  
the resonating string pulled across a hollow  
wood. I ran hunched over. Those were the  
rules. If you didn’t look into the door, it  
couldn’t take you. I ran in a tight circle.  
Round and round, like a gyre in the wabe.  
But the door expanded everywhere, and  
when I looked up, just for a moment,  
the sense ate recessed to pinpoint hollowness.

At home I took a very long shower to no avail. I  
masturbated until raw. Nothing came out. It never  
works. I later apologized to Christian for being rude to  
Miranda. “Don’t tell me,” he said.

“I’m so sorry. I really am. I don’t want to be hated.  
You’ll always be my friend, won’t you?”

“Rich, you make it hard on me. You have these  
problems that you don’t want to deal with.”

“I deal,” I responded lifelessly. There is never any  
way to explain it. Not even to Christian.

“No, you’re not dealing,” he said slowly and quietly,  
“Taking this shit out on me is not dealing. Just because  
I’m around doesn’t mean I’m consenting to be  
assaulted.”

“You’re right. But it’s hard for me. It’s always been  
hard.”

A pause, “You have to control it.”

I humored him, “Done.”

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In the mirror, I traced a blue knot under my left eye with a finger. Tiny red branches bundled through. I opened the medicine cabinet. A box of red polyurethane condoms were on the top shelf. I was allergic to latex. Closed the cabinet.

I masturbated again, and followed the bluish curve with the fingertips of the free hand. I visualized Miranda stripping down and begging to suck my cock. I imagined beating her with a riveted blackjack. I could see Christian dicking her in the ass while I fucked her in the throat. Her mouth full of dick, she moans and sobs. I tell her to suck harder, and her cheeks draw in.

The stuff finally came out, weakly, like a sigh, and dribbled all over the crossed lines on the back of my hand. It didn't really feel like anything.