

Chapter 8 of *The Debate* by B. Douglas Robbins

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Just a block from People's Park I circled around Collin's house and found the electricity meter. The disc spun just enough for a refrigerator, a radio, and alarm clock, a smoke detector or two, not much else. No lights, no stereo, no computer, or TV. The gas meter was still.

I began debating in high school. At my first tournament, I attended a few rounds, had lunch, and then vomited all over the lawn. I guess I remember this now, because like then, I was in over my head. I didn't know what the fuck I was doing and I still don't. I was a coward and a pawn to stronger forces and sometimes I even admitted this to myself. That, of course, soon became no longer acceptable, as new rules were ratified by the Blueman, and they became so intricate and complicated, that very little was left up to me anymore. Not much was my doing to begin with, so it was a net gain. Or so argued the Blueman.

I walked up the wide wooden steps and knocked on the door furiously, "Collin!" I tried again.

Debate seemed impossible at the time. Here were these kids speaking a million miles an hour about things I had only an inkling of. They threw around philosophers' names, Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Kant, and Spinoza as if they were trading cards. For a very short period, I thought Spinoza was a virus.

I slipped a series of keys into the hole until one made the lock pliant. I shot quickly through the lower story, ascended another flight of stairs and listened for breath. Collin's door was plastered with articles, AP photos, and stickers. The large sticker in the center read, "Some's bastards, some's ain't, that's the score." A smaller key slipped into this door knob.

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By the time I was sixteen, I had my own set of philosophers, my own crate of cards, and most importantly, I had It. For me, It wasn't something I was born with, I had to work hard. I wasn't naturally charming or confident, but I was observant, and an excellent mimic. A mime. I was also obsessed with debate. The real fire came upon me when I took ahold of a certain perspective about argumentation and truth. The fallacy of the perfect argument dawned on me. Any position, and we mean any position, no matter how clever it rang, or shiny it gleamed, had a chink. And once you approach debate with the absolute certain knowledge that no knowledge was certain, no truth infallible, once you convinced yourself of the premise that intelligence was a man made system—and humanity and imperfection are synonymous—then you found the real source of fire, not in the stars but in yourself. I found that for the purposes of debate, the fire in the belly need not be a shameful secret to be suppressed, but a source of personal power to be fanned.

His PowerBook harmonized when I hit the triangle button. I searched behind, wondering if I had woken someone. I slipped in a floppy, stepped into the System Folder, and rifled through the Eudora mailboxes, In, Out, Trash, Chico, Vermont, Cornell, UCLA I copied them all. Chirping and zipping.

By the time I was a senior in high school, I had discovered many secrets. Among them, that contrary to my initial belief, nearly everyone was far more stupid than I; that confidence was more important than truth; that if you faked something long enough you could make it so; that all arguments were arguments for premises; and that he who controlled the premise controlled the debate.

I dumped the Finder in the Trash. Hit the triangle.

A penny laid quietly on the desk. I flipped it once: heads. Twice: heads. Thrice: heads. Four times: tails.

At home I browsed through the abducted missives. In the KSU Box was a whole correspondence between Collin and David Cornish, last year's National Champion. There were S and R missives, meaning notes that were sent as well as received. Collin was meticulous. He was a meticulous bastard. I thought wistfully of smacking him in the eye at the next possible

opportunity because I was far more organized than he. It was a thought that had a quaint and warm quality to it (These are all lies. The deep black cowardice, like a tar soaked rag marred the hope. Hopes be gone. There is no resurrection or light, just soiled hands, red spots, ghost-tolls. Drop down below).

In the last note, Collin explained the thesis of Paulander's new Hasty-G, followed by a list of 15 counter-arguments answering the position. They were good arguments. In previous notes, Collin asked about the Senator's Scholarship. Cornish replied, *Better get to the Final Four, son*, meaning the semi-final round at Nationals. Cornish later responded to similar queries, *Sure, Hobbes and Vollique have a shot, if only a small one. They're not clutch, or more precisely Vollique is a nice guy. Witness the National Champions of the last five years. They are united in one characteristic, right or wrong, they were mad. Overby was mad, Beon was very angry, I was pissed as all get out. Vollique's not mad. Hobbes may have a chance but he's hobbled by an over-scrupulous partner.*

Collin wrote, *Can I be assured of your support?*

Cornish answered, *What can you do for me?* Support and gangs and cliques were very important in debate. It was not enough to be better, you also needed a political advantage. Judges were social creatures. They hated to vote for teams that were poorly regarded by the community.

Collin wrote, *Vollique will be gone soon and with the complications down south, Hobbes and I will be your strongest California ally. I could really use some heads up on UMKC's new Neg. I won't forget the favor.*

In the UCLA Box, Mary Mathers wrote a week ago, *...it is far too improbable to believe. I would apply Occam's Razor here. Speed is a criminal, Zoë a liar, and a cover-up is to follow. I know, I know, sounds like many a conspiracy theory, well, some of them aren't just theories.*

In my closet was a set of debate trophies. I extracted my favorite one, the '95 Heart of America. Heart was thought to be one of, if not the most important tournament of the year, after Nationals. Christian and I took it last year.

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I lovingly held the trophy as if it were an infant. I felt powerful grasping it with one fist. I laid on the floor and placed it on my stomach. I could have had the second place trophy except I was better and I had the first place. That year, at that tournament, no other team could beat me. I was entirely clean, burned through and through.

At the body mirror the trophy hung causally at my side like a brief case, like I didn't even notice it there. I jumped on my bed with the trophy perched on the television. Jim Lehrer from the News Hour mouthed silently below. Then Elizabeth Farnsworth with the City skyline in the background, mouthed other things. The Transamerica Pyramid behind.

I jumped off and landed in front of the mirror, panting. I carefully examined the black knot just under my left eye. It was a good, painful one. The Blueman nodded approvingly. Most of the toll had been paid with that one. It was painful and unsightly. I retrieved the trophy and flicked away a chip of dried flesh hinged at one of the oak corners. I resumed my place at the mirror. I could do the other eye, but that would be far too suspicious. I could have done the same eye again, but if I ended up in the hospital they would have to ask the questions about blood type, and shots, and how this and that happened, and in what order (This is not concern per se, as one might accidentally be lead to believe. This is a systemic process, aimed at a larger cure, or at the very least, your passing out of their particular sphere of responsibility. They can't keep you there and don't really want to. Your end in the processes is to be processed. You will not punish me for this.)

The Blueman's lips had been sown together, stitched slowly from corner to corner. He cried, and the tears leaked down his cheeks, and stung salt in the bleeding wounds. It was so sad because he did it for me. No one ever did anything for me, but the Blueman would do anything, because he loved me. He knew everything, and he still loved me.

I sat on the edge of the bed, breathing, placed my left foot on a chair, knee locked. I loved the Blueman and I would have done anything to express my authentic loyalty and gratitude. I swung the trophy with the thick wooden base up, and then quickly down. A hollow

cracking sound seemed to twang from the walls. It was painless for a moment while Lehrer lipped in earnest.

Pyre was in exceptional form: “The male ego with its obsession with conquest and gold was the engine behind European Imperialism. Perhaps only the Judeo/Christian patriarchy did more to foster the notion of male domination over nature and European domination over what was considered to be an extension of the untamed jungle, *vis*, the non-developed tribal life. These people, because their skin was dark, and the their culture was different, were considered savage.”

I whispered to Collin, “Did you see? She gets this titillated look when she says ‘savage.’” I was kidding.

“Yeah, you’re right,” Collin raised his hand, and soon it was on, “I wonder to what extent female Europeans have been complicit in the face of this sort of holocaust.”

“Please Collin. Historical examinations are not undertaken to assign blame.”

Collin giggled.

I picked up a mocha from Caffee Mediterraneum and joined Collin at noon in Dwinelle. A pleasant sun shined through tall windows, that on many nights held black panes. The room was stark and peaceful, though not too tidy. I waded through the paper carpet, strewn with the cards of Christmas past, about the horrors of DDT, and the link from silicone breast implants to the new ice age, and the dangers of Electrical Magnetic Fields, and the benefits of publicly accessible hollow point, armor piercing bullets. Bins and paper file crates, tattered around. Collin asked what happened to my knee.

“Fucking Christian.”

“Christian kicked you in the knee?”

“Accidentally, yeah.”

I searched a red, bumper sticker clad crate. I had placed the “Rebuild America” sticker and Christian had stuck “Cut Military Spending” next to it. Then he plastered “Food not Bombs,” and below I stuck “Visualize Whirled Peas.” Christian said he had visualized whirled peas once, and it wasn’t any better than the non-

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whirled peas status quo. I told him to think outside the box.

Cornell ran China that year and though their particular take on the issue was a fuck-up, China straight-up was the winning formula. Christian felt China was at the heart of the topic. The framers of the Resolution probably had China in mind when they wrote, “Resolved: The U.S. should strongly advance its human rights foreign policy,” and to appease the framers was to appease the Scholarship Committee. Also, traditional National Champions ran middle of the road topics. No judge wanted the Champion of Debate to have won by claiming extra terrestrials were breeding in the abdomens of human specimens. And at a practical level, other teams, not just Cornell, were running China or China linked Disads. China was all over the press, and the cards were as plentiful as Red Books during the Cultural Revolution. And so, to beat the argument, Christian felt we had to understand it; by running China all semester we managed to turn the issue inside out.

“You ready?” I asked Collin.

“Yeah.”

“Try to keep up.”

He grinned the hell out of himself.

I blasted eight minutes of China On the Brink, “Every single protester at Tienamen Square has been jailed, executed, or exiled.” The Plan was to boycott military owned and operated industry. “Supporting slave labor with American money, makes us culpable, and kills our international credibility from Fawn in ’95...” I also revoked MFN trade status. A very reasonable and moderate plan.

Collin’s retort was an improbable war scenario, that linked the boycott to Chinese retaliation with copyright and information piracy, to a Hollywood and Silicon Valley backlash that cut Clinton from major contributors. The impact was that Bob Dole won the Presidency and with the assistance of a hawkish Republican legislature, we entered into a war with China backed North Korea, and the whole mess terminated in global nuclear exchange.

At the next speech, I burned hot as hate, “During nearly eight years debating I think I have never heard an argument as stupid, and as thin.”

“Hey take it easy,” yelled Collin, “We’re just practicing!”

Fuck him. I hit every link with the full force of a fire storm. There was no Chinese retaliation on copyright law because they ignored intellectual property law in the *status quo*, “They can’t retaliate by failing to respect copyrights they already violate. The military already pirates US software. What are they going to do now? **Really, really** pirate it? Give me a fucking break.”

Hollywood would never pull funding from Gilman in ‘95, Bob Dole would never win regardless from Klinger in ‘96, and even if elected the Republican’s didn’t want war with an economically irrelevant nuclear power like North Korea, from, “Henry-fucking-Kissinger from this **month!** The Nobel Peace Prize winner is telling you MAD works! And if there is a war it’s not from a goddamn economic boycott! I’m cold crushing this linked-out, linkless, over-linked Disad. It’s ABSURD. The Negative has more links than China’s got chinks.”

Then I put a Time Bomb on his Underview and a Temporal Fallacy on the Interests Critique. In Cross Examination Collin’s eyes bugged from the sockets, “You say I commit the Temporal Fallacy.”

“Yes,” I replied.

“What is that?”

“That is the fallacy of assuming that just because I’m losing on the position **now**, I’ll have lost it when the debate is over.”

“But that’s not a reason why you would not lose now or later,” Collin was confused for once.

“Make that argument and see what happens.”

He glanced shiftily and put hands on his hips. *See what happens?*

For his next speech, Collin stood deliberately. His hand shook. I had let the fire out and in cleansing me it had scathed him. He had the expression of a man with an earful of lit napalm. But you had to hand it to Collin

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for holding together. In his speech he explained rather coolly that if the United States were to enact a boycott, it would produce the effect of hypocrisy in the world community, “Other nations such as Syria are guilty of far worse human rights abuses than China, argues Tajarin in ‘95...” And hypocrisy harms credibility—so it was a Turn on the credibility debate—and we would lose all sorts of backing from Western nations on issues that were far more important, such as trade, nuclear disarmament, and the ecology.

The underview argued that just as all humans act from interests, so must all nations, or risk hypocritical failure. All principles were interests in disguise and this doublethink resulted, in what his analyst called the three psychic evils of international relations, “Self Deception, Delusion, and Occlusion.” I asked about this in Cross Examination:

“So your analysis suggest it’s okay to buy products from the military machine that murders innocent students, who’s only crime, by-the-fucking-way is they stood against totalitarianism?”

“If they were strong enough, they would have won.”

“But do they deserve to die for fighting against oppression?”

“If they die, then they do. All’s fair. They’re pursuing what they want, and the government is claiming what they want. Remember the government is **more** people. That’s why they have power. There’s no reason why fewer people ought to get their way over **more** people.”

“Majoritarianism. Very heroic.”

Collin maintained a monotone, “It’s not heroic to grab what you want either.”

“So there is no evil in the world?” I taunted. I wanted him riled; something inflammatory. Most do not debate well when riled, “Why is Chinese oppression any better than Nazi oppression?”

“Are you so naïve to think that if the Axis won, we would be reading history books in which Germany is vilified? The winners write history, and history justifies power, so don’t pull the Nazi rhetoric on me.” Collin Coboarae searched his backpack, found a pack of

Indonesian Cloves, and lit one, “There’s no justification beyond results.”

“Well, that’s an interesting argument,” I sat down at an oak desk abruptly and laughed, “Win much with that one?”

“Sometimes. What do you argue?”

“Well, Christian would probably do State Sovereignty, or Cultural Imperialism, or some version of, ‘You can’t critique a people from the outside looking in.’”

“He has you on a pretty short leash,” Collin exhaled smoke and spun the wheels on his skateboard.

“I argue what I want.”

Collin said abruptly, “You ever think about another partner?” a Coboarae smirk, “I know I sure do!” and the patented laugh. He leaned back as if on a steed, staring his most normalized face. His features were remarkably bland when inanimate. He had a straight nose that stuck out just a little too far to be considered perfect. His eyes were generically round and blue, as if they were plucked from a Macy’s mannequin, and his hair was hopelessly straight, shamelessly clean. He was normal, very good looking, in essence, an idealized waif of the status quo, and he was looking at me with all the confidence of such firm backing.

“You know Christian has been pining for the Senator’s Scholarship for years,” I began.

“Yeah.”

“. . . and never, not once, did it cross his mind that I would want the thing too. I mean, what am I going to do when I graduate? I have no fucking idea, but law school wouldn’t be so bad.” I extracted a quarter from my pocket, “There’s three criteria for the Scholarship,” I flipped the coin, “the first is you have to win. Okay, fine,” heads. I flipped again, “The second is sportsmanlike conduct. Whatever,” heads. Again, “The last is leadership. Christian’s the squad President. I’m what?” tails.

“Why not **grab** it?” and he offered sheepishly, “I’d be your partner.”

“Why? What would that do?”

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“You’d at least have a chance. Christian is a **glass ceiling**,” he pronounced glass and ceiling separately and distinctly.

I recreated Collin’s careless smirk, “No offense of course, but you can’t debate your way out of a fucking paper bag.”

“Sure I can,” he laughed and held his stomach. If nothing else, you had to respect the strength of his proclivities, and the sheer wastefulness involved. He knew what he wanted, and had the balls to go after it, because he had always gotten it.

“You’re a real prick, you know that?”

His comeback was seamless, as if he’d been told this before and had prepared an answer, “I can be a prick and still be right.” He looked plain and lifeless, as his face relaxed. Status quo. He stood his whole six foot something, stretched like a terrific sized polar bear, white and cool. His face came back to life. Smiled broadly, a smile he’d flashed a hundred times at the right time, at the right place, to the right people, and gotten what he wanted, “Weak knees?”

“Shut-up, Collin.” He continued to stare at me, as if under observation. Maybe it was just a matter of how staunch one’s knees were, a simple matter of mechanics, as if the physicality of my knees were, and always have been, less than robust, and that would explain why I was never all that good at sports. My knees. And it would explain other things.

Under the nine bridges lived the life underground. I set little wooden traps. A better mousetrap. No such thing. And usually they were so large that even if you broke their legs they still survived for days in that miserable state. Under the uppermost bridge near the faculty club I found a new one. Vicious, desperate little creatures. And when you grabbed hold of them, they clawed your hand to red striped agony, even with their legs shattered, even with all hope obliterated. You had to sort of admire that kind of fight in the face of utter futility. That’s how they were made. They didn’t really have a choice.

I took the life underground, body in one hand, tiny head in the other, and stretched it out, and ripped a tiny snap like something barely noticeable at all, and off it goes. All the fury and indignity, the squealing sound, truncated and done in such an inauspicious movement. A tiny snap. What was the fuss? The world was still there, all around. All life is irrelevant that way.

I pet its tiny fur body. Hair like mine. Small eyes. Little nose with pink dimples etched across the surface, tiny hands just like mine. Unmistakably a creature, a thing in the world, like I was a thing in the world. An object. The skin stained brown in places, and pallid in others, like a floating ink stain under the fur. A secret sign. I ate its head, gnashing the hard skull in teeth, until a hot raspberry center squirted out and the bits became sharp as glass. The animal was stupid while alive and bitter dead. A revolting creature in my mouth, yet I ground it up, and reduced the starchy bone meal, and put it in my stomach where all the sad and pointless hate must go. And I cried for an hour for that damn life underground with the dimpled nose. To be so unremittingly idiotic, and helpless, and a victim, and a thing of ridiculous pity. I wouldn't have cried if it stood even the slightest chance.