

The Great Debate Debate

“This age will reinvent hell,” says one monk.

“Better us than them.”

“Do we need hell?”

“I’ll take hell.”

“Which one?”

“I say *bell* is hell.”

“No, hell is *bell*.”

“We’ll put it on the agenda: *bell* is hell or hell is *bell*.”

“I’m game.”

“Put me in.”

“Bets close in five refrains.”

“Hold it. I thought bets were open until eight.”

“That keeps things even.”

“Not exactly.”

“We’ll debate that first thing.”

“Most important always goes last.”

“Business is that bad?”

“I’d say we better debate that—before it’s gone completely.”

“What are we debating now?”

“I can taste punishment already.”

“How to punish always takes so long. We’ll be asleep by the time we get to the next item on the list.”

“I taste a conspiracy.”

“A list is always a conspiracy.”

“I’ll raise you ten lashes.”

“What’s wrong with conspiracy now?”

“Blow me. Just blow me, will you? That’s the best way to find out.”

“You mean blow me off.”

“Order. Order. The debate, the debate.”

“I’ll see you twenty-five lashes and raise twenty-five kicks—and the final hexagram of the *I Ching*.”

“Is someone taking notes?”

“I’m making copies.”

“Even better.”

“Splendid idea. We’ll have two lists.”

“And all those copies.”

“And you, Reselda?” says Beatrice, turning to me. She’s on my left, and Sister Mar, the monk with the softest

voice in the monastery, is to my right. At a long table filled with monks and friends, we're sitting somewhere in the middle of about twenty tables filled to capacity. Across from us, Lenny is in a heated debate over the odds of keeping punishment as the first option of revenge. Ob, at the end of the table, wears a bookie's hat and shades, and is dressed in shorts and a shirt.

"Are you gambling?" I ask.

"We're all monks here," says Mar.

"Did you dream last night in your replica trailer?"

Beatric finally gets around to finishing her question to me.

But before I can answer, she turns to the six or seven other monks in earshot, and she says, "Did you know Reselda is a dreamer contortionist?" Then back to me: "It's rare here. You'll be sought out once word gets around."

"I'll take three dreams about rivers made of tea," says an old monk on the other side of Beatric. "Complete. I want all three complete. I'm from the old school."

"I had a sliver dream last night," says this very tall and shiny monk with fish eyes. "I'm a bit like that Edison who slept in naps. Keep that in mind. We need not all be circles. Some of us can be overlapping and extending lines. Civilization needs mathematical variety—I'm glad to accommodate keeping the tradition of Edison-while-napping going."

I never get around to telling Beatric that I dreamt of the sound of crickets all night. Millions of crickets, singing a melancholic tune in the unlocatable darkness as the sky wept darkness. The crickets sang all night as I, stumbling over rocks or bodies and walking through water and over ashes, searched for them, mesmerized in wonder over the tune and the continued darkness. I think I was inside of a department store with real dirt in some of the

aisles. And because the crickets seemed everywhere, they were nowhere. I think one wall was open in the department store and led to this Monastery C. Even the ground or squeaky floorboards beneath me kept receding from my fingertips. The last thing I remember I was tripping over a gopher hole and coming face to face with a shrieking baby cricket as lost as I was. Before I could find out why the sky wept darkness and the crickets sang mournfully, the little cricket turned into a small dog and bit my cheek as I woke up.

"How many items are on the new list?"

"Put it on the agenda."

"Oh, come on. He's bluffing. Anyone can see that."

"Deletions were closed an hour ago."

"Which list are we talking about now, the old one or the new one?"

"Let us pray."

All the monks throughout the courtyard begin talking at once, causing the entire monastery to sound as if it's under water. At my table, six monks are arm wrestling while others are pounding the table in indecision. There's nothing to stop them until the fattest monk that ever lived rushes up to the stage and yells into the main microphone: "Order, order. Stop praying. We'll debate the nail first."

"How did he get a hold of order?"

"Put order on the agenda."

"When is it my turn? If I don't get a turn soon, I won't be the only one who gets aggressive around here."

"Who's got the new list? I haven't put initials on it yet."

On the main platform in the courtyard, that fattest monk that ever lived introduces the debate over

and over with cymbals so loud and brash that one hundred hands lift to cover their ears while chanting, “stop the noise.” Their chants are so loud, bells in towers seem to shatter. Before starting again, he pauses for long genuflects with hands pointing skyward. Then he’s at it on the cymbals, again.

“That does it,” says Lenny. “I’m going up there to join him. It’s starting to rain.”

“Lenny’s right. Already it’s pouring at the front gate. We haven’t much time. If we lose a day, it’ll be just like last year. And the unpredictable will fade.”

All the monks in the courtyard resound in agreement.

Ob is beside me now. In my ear, he says: “While hearing a shrieking red lynx on a winter’s solstice in which there’s no moon and there’s three pedigree hounds chasing the cubs of the lynx at about nine o’clock at night eastern time although you’re on the pacific coast and your cell phone is ringing while the lynx is coming straight for you and the hounds are right behind and it looks like the lynx is going to jump onto your head for safety and the ring of the cell phone indicates an emergency and there’s only two rings left before a service picks up the ring and that service cannot be gotten to except from another home phone which you cannot get to in time and you’ve dropped the bow and the cell phone in the stink—can you play then?”

“Easily,” I say.

Ob laughs and does six cartwheels back to his seat.

“Stand, everyone stand. Stand and sit. That’ll get us started.”

“What if we sat twice and stood once?”

“One more thing,” whispers Ob. He’s back again behind me and at my ear. “Get out now before you’re locked into the engine of this debate. Only beginnings are easy to leave.”

I pick up my violin and start playing Nonsense until the music drowns out Ob and everything else around me. From the corner of my right eye, though, I see Ob rolling on the ground laughing. Then he’s back for a final assault: “We’re both imposters,” he laughs, just as I try to lift the bow to play. No good. No song stays tuned in this place.

Dodging a possible assault, Ob does his cartwheels back to his end of the table. I play harder and louder, the sweat stirring up desires until I can no longer stop playing, even as Beatric puts her hand on my arm and tries to calm me into stopping. In fact, her attempt to stop me only pushes me deeper into the music, and I begin to slip between the out of tune notes, a place of refuge, lifting my arms or bowing my head as the notes dictate. I stand up to get the best grip on the music, and play with my heart as if to not will keep me here against my will.

Meanwhile, four tables of monks begin chanting, “Debate, debate, debate, debate, debate, debate, debate, debate, debate, debate.”

Beatric grabs my hand and pulls me back down: “You’ll miss the beginning.”

The clouds overhead are racing together into the darkest looking sky I’ve ever seen.

“Everyone, everyone, stand and raise your hands in the air.”

But the monks at the tables mostly keep on talking among themselves.

“Come, come. If we’re going to modernize, we have to keep the human active.”

The whole group bursts into laughter.

“Modernize? He can’t be serious. You can’t modernize the human.”

“If we got any more modern, we’d be in the next century.”

When no one gets up, an air raid alarm startles all of us to our feet.

“I thought we were going to start putting everything on video and just play the videos back. I’ve got prayers to attend to.”

“You mean tomatoes to plant!”

“Here it comes. Just like last year.”

As the monks chant their prayers or argue their ideas, the interfering rain falls harder and louder; and the more it rains, the louder the monks get. The whole courtyard seems drenched in euphoria. But when the rain turns into a thunderstorm with large flashes of lightning crashing into the pavement, before even punishment can be debated, monks on the periphery of the debate, closest to the lightning, take off running for shelter. The whole debate gets broken up now as tornados seem to swirl closer to the courtyard. The chaos sends tears through everything.

Nearly alone with Ob in the courtyard, I sit under a short overhang outside a chapel to watch the storm. I don’t mind the rain banging against my skin or the wind forcing me to hold onto a railing. But as the morning sky turns black and a fountain is lifted into the air, Ob and I don’t think twice. We head inside a chapel for shelter.

“What’s with the fading around here?” I want to know after Ob and I are safe inside the café on the bottom floor of one of the chapels.

“Nothing better to do, I guess,” Ob answers. “Keeps us busy.”

And the two of us pick up our violins and play neither a duet nor a solo but something in between in which we harmonize on the low notes.

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“Who’s to say pointing isn’t the superior language?” says Mar.

“Then why does Crocket talk at all—on whatever day that is?” Lenny says. “Not that we understand a word he says. He does more than point, and that’s the point. Even we don’t understand.”

“I understand the words.”

Mar picks up her pencil and jots down her thought: “superior language on hot seat.”

Today we all have been given paper and pencil to write down anything we want to preserve.

This Crocket worries me. Every few minutes he jumps up and down and points wildly at nothing and everything while mostly laughing at the end of a good look.

“He’s chewing on his ropes,” I say.

“Rope stew,” says a monk as tall as a doorway. “We coat them with cranberry juice.”

A long rope around Crocket’s waist is tied to nearby loops in the ground. In his hand, Crocket clutches his bag of bones, which no one can tear lose, and the bag he and I are supposed to bury someplace not yet known. With his other hand, Crocket turns and salutes.

I salute back.

“Are you trying to keep him from fading?”

“Oh no,” whispers Beatrix, “we’re trying to keep him from climbing.”

But before I can ask the why and why nots, I spot a monk filling the water jugs at our table. A wave of such gigantic proportions rushes up my legs and into my chest that its force could knock me into another country. I forget my name, my mother’s name, the color of sparrows. I couldn’t tell who or what I wanted revenge on. If you asked what day it was, I wouldn’t know what to tell you. In any mirror, I’d see a stranger looking back. This is no exaggeration; this is one of those rare times in which a sensational moment shifts things around so fully that it changes the rest of your life. He’s about five feet nine; thick brown curly hair; fingers long and back strong. His body nearly naked under his white gown moves like air. I swear he would make Michelangelo weep with desire, and Pucacello sell his soul to get him on a billboard. His brown hair falls full and wavy around his face, which is covered by a light silk veil.

“Be sure to try his water,” says Mar, almost in a heavy whisper. “It’s always the right temperature.”

I grab my pencil, and on my pad of paper I write: “This is no replica. I must be dreaming.” I occupy myself with drinking a glass of cold water while a new kind of abandonment begins to take over my body; and as dizzying as this moment is, I can’t help but feel thankful that I was abandoned. “Who is he?” I wonder. Not taking my eyes off of him for fear of losing him, the whole courtyard turns into a maze, an obstacle course to keep my eyes on him; even the water is a means to an end. No man or woman has ever aroused such feelings in me, and I can only believe that love has finally come.

“His name is Morrison,” whispers Mar.

“Why does he wear a veil?”

“We don’t want to see that face.”

“What’s wrong with his face? Is it damaged?” I want to know.

“Damaged?” Mar laughs

“The last reincarnation,” a monk across from us says.

“The first identity,” another adds.

“I could’ve used a face like that in my myth.”

“It’ll fade. You can be sure of that. You can’t keep a face like that veiled without it going extinct.”

“I’ll drink to that.”

“I wouldn’t test it.”

“What does he look like?”

“I hear it’s a replica.”

“You figure it out.”

“I could have used a face like that when I was twenty-one.”

“Not for that price.”

“A face like that!”

“You don’t want to see that face.”

“Not without having your nose fall off.”

“Not without getting the plague.”

“I could have gotten far on a face like that.”

“What about the ones whose tongues froze in place?”

“Those living with continuous rolling eyes?”

“In one town, people have to be force-fed because their curiosity got the better of them. In another, the whole population is on suicide watch; one entire city has lost its sense of north and south. His face is not for us; jealousy has short borders.”

The monks burst out laughing.

Limp with desire, I can barely hear anyone talking. Every dry leaf in the garden looks wet. “Love at

first sight?" I finally write on my pad: "This must be it,
and why I'm here."

A thousand times in a thousand ways I write his
name: Morrison.

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