Even if you beat me

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I knew most of the other passengers, and we chatted together in English while we waited for the police, laughing in the slightly hysterical way that follows frightening events. It was late December, just a couple of days after Christmas, and we were in India for the World Universities Debating Championship. The bus service had been provided by the competition organizers, to take us directly from the airport to the hotel where we'd be staying free of charge for the duration of the tournament. The accident was an unexpected interruption of this schedule.

This wasn't the first time I'd travelled overseas for a debating competition. I was familiar with how unlike ordinary travel it felt. A tight, transparent seal separated the competition from its setting: as long as you were in a place only in order to debate there, you could expect to encounter only the same privileged, English-speaking university students you had seen on the previous trip. You could also expect immaculate accommodation and relatively fast Wi-Fi. In Manila, two years before, a police escort had chaperoned our air-conditioned buses past roadside dwellings made partly of cardboard advertisements. No one failed to notice this fact, but what was there to say about it?

The bus driver in India was either unable to speak English or understandably reluctant to do so. Chennai is not a wealthy city, and he was not driving a bus full of gum-chewing college students to a luxury hotel at four in the morning for the good for his health. The passengers, a few of whom were American law students, complained freely despite his inattention. The legal responsibilities of the competition organizers were discussed. Formal avenues of redress were mentioned. Though I was slightly embarrassed at this posturing, I didn't do anything about it. We all felt overwrought, not because the accident itself was so bad, but because something we had taken for stable was now not stable; the little seal of protection had ruptured. This didn't feel like something we had agreed to.

Once the driver had spoken to the police, a new bus arrived. There was daylight by then, though it was a foggy urban light, as if filtered through milk. The driver helped us to move our luggage, but he did not accompany us on the new bus; we left him behind with a wrecked vehicle and two traffic police. I knew he had endangered our lives by falling asleep like that, but I still had the sense he was probably the most sympathetic figure on the scene.

When I was twenty-two, I was the number one competitive debater on the continent of Europe. After that I quit competing for good. In Chennai, I was just working as a volunteer in exchange for the cost of my flights and accommodation. I hadn't really wanted to attend, but I found myself repeating phrases like 'It's a free trip to India', until eventually I accepted the offer. When we got to the hotel that day I went straight up to my room and fell asleep. I woke up hours later, with all my clocks still on Irish time. It was after 10 p.m. locally. I

padded downstairs to the lobby on my own, past the enormous Christmas tree and out the back entrance to the pool. Nobody else was outside, and the only light came up from underwater, the sting of blue chlorine. The pool was surrounded by trees. I sat on the tiled rim with my feet in the water for a while. In hotel rooms overhead, I could see people opening windows and switching lights on and off, but I couldn't hear their voices. I heard nothing. And eventually I went back inside alone.

College debaters are just students wearing ill-fitting formal clothes, and most of them aren't even very good. But, crucially, some of them kind of are. When I first started attending college debates, I was a nearly friendless teenager living away from home for the first time; for me, the most talented speakers seemed to possess a subtle power and command that was almost glamorous. I started watching debates every week, just sitting in the audience, mostly on my own. I studied the speakers' retorts and gestures, and tried to replicate them in everyday conversation. I even nursed intense romantic obsessions over droll counterfactuals.

College societies always need new members, so it wasn't difficult to insinuate myself into this environment. Very soon I was making friends with committee members, staying out late after debates, and laughing sycophantically at everyone's jokes. This kind of social landscape was different from anything I'd encountered before. For one thing, its structure was very clear. Popularity was not a mysterious arrangement of personal loyalties within a social code I didn't understand: it was essentially just the same thing as success. Successful people were popular. You knew whose jokes to laugh at, because they were the people who gave the best speeches and said the cleverest things. I found this transparency encouraging somehow. The allocation of points in a debate was something clear and definable, and its effects on the distribution of social capital seemed clear and definable too. The more I observed the structure of public debates, the more I thought: I could do this. I could be successful and popular too.

Debating competitions take place at weekends throughout the academic year. To speak competitively, you need a partner: British Parliamentary style, the kind of debating common to the European and World Championships, requires teams of two. The bigger Irish tournaments host sixty or seventy such teams, as well as adjudicators, over the course of five group rounds, in which all teams participate, and then semi-finals and a final. An extensive specialized vocabulary exists to describe these relatively ordinary events. The rankings of teams and individual speakers, for example, are called 'the tab'. When the tab is released at the end of a competition, either in stapled paper copies or online, everyone searches for their own name, and then their partner's name, and then the names of people they especially like or hate. It doesn't take long to pick that up.

At first I found the competitions almost unbearably exhilarating. I suffered from such intense nerves that I often couldn't eat anything until the debating was finished. I also lost most of the debates I took part in. At the time, I was happy just sitting in the audience for the final and applauding at the right moments. I was self-deprecating about my own abilities, and sanguine in the face of defeat. Judges told me I had potential to improve, and obviously I felt this prospect was worth the continual low-level humiliation of failure. It's hard to imagine my way back into that mindset now. I don't think I will ever again want something so meaningless so much.

I was nineteen when I started debating competitively, and it's probably fair to say that most things I did when I was nineteen were motivated by a desperation to be liked. I wasn't only willing to lose debates: I was willing to tell all my secrets, to lend money when I couldn't afford to, and to date anyone who showed an interest in me, no matter how dull or aggressive. I had low self-esteem and a predilection for hero-worship, and I was extremely determined. This was probably the perfect cocktail of tendencies for the novice debater. But by the time I could see that, I wasn't a novice anymore.

Competitive university debating requires of its participants a particular intersection of personal qualities. You have to enjoy talking out loud in front of people. You need to have a taste for ritualized, abstract interpersonal aggression. You have to be willing to tolerate physical and mental discomfort: weekends of sleeplessness, bad food or no food, and interminable group conversations about how tired and ill everybody feels. And you have to learn how to lose.

Thousands of students, probably tens of thousands worldwide, get involved in college debating every year; but few persevere, and so at the highest levels it is a relatively small community. At the big international tournaments, all the most accomplished speakers and judges know each other, and other people constellate around them in order of status. It is, at every level, a hierarchically organized activity. The more successful you are, the more people will stand around listening to you when you talk about how tired and ill you feel.

The economics of college debating are a little mysterious. Student societies collect membership fees, and raise money from sponsors and their universities in order to cover the costs of registering for competitions. The major competitions are also funded by corporate sponsors and by the host universities. Travel is often heavily or fully subsidized. Meals of varying quality appear on plates. Alcoholic beverages disappear from white tablecloths. Attendees need spend little or no money in the course of a competition.

Having established themselves on the competitive circuit, the most successful debaters are often offered funding to judge competitions in other countries. Sometimes you'll get a spare room in a fellow debater's loft apartment, sometimes a double room in a hotel. If you're wise, you ask the organizers to book the flights for you in advance. You are almost always flying alone, and soon become skilled at asking strangers to place your luggage in the overhead compartment. Every person at the event will know your name; some of them will even want to talk to you. At a certain point, you are turning down more free trips than you take.

There's no use joining a debating club with this jackpot in sight. Most debaters will never be invited on fully-paid weekend trips to Paris or Berlin. After logging a year or two of boring, thankless attendance at local competitions, most people generally tap out. Only the perverse few continue, slowly climbing up the rankings, trying to sleep through 4 a.m. flights, falling behind on academic deadlines. A very small handful, generally from a particularly elite background, are successful from the off. But for most, the cosmopolitan, nomadic existence of the minor celebrity debater is out of reach. There are probably only a few hundred of them in the world.

You get your topic and your position, you and your partner go off and sit in a corridor to talk about austerity or the Iraq War for fifteen minutes, and then the debate starts. There are four teams of two in every debate: two proposition teams, and two on the opposition. You have no say over where you end up. A speaker from the first proposition team proposes the motion, then one from the first opposition team responds. Then it's back to proposition, and so on. You must be clear in your attempts to get the better of the teams arguing the opposite side of the question, but subtle in undermining the other team that's arguing your side. It's against the rules to contradict them openly. Instead, you need to emphasize at every opportunity that your arguments are the more important.

For me, the speaking part was easy, something like the experience of particularly quick and effortless typing: you think the words, and then the words appear on the screen, without any real awareness of the intermediary process. You think the concepts, and then the concepts express themselves. You hear yourself constructing syntactically elaborate sentences, one after another, but you don't necessarily have the sensation that you are the person doing it.

There are a lot of different names for this state of immersion. The psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi would call it 'flow': that form of focus so clear that all distractions, even the ego itself, fall away. Fast Eddie Felson, the pool-playing protagonist of *The Hustler*, talks about it too. 'You don't have to look, you just know,' he says. 'You make shots that nobody's ever made before. And you play the game the way nobody's ever played it.' Hitting that perfect rhythm while speaking, connecting concept to response, drawing examples out of thin air, you feel just like I imagine a pool shark must. Complex things become simple.

For my first couple of seasons as a debater, the word I heard most often from my adjudicators was 'passionate'; another word I heard was 'forceful'. These weren't insults: judges genuinely seemed to appreciate my passion and forcefulness. But I didn't want to debate in order to express passion: I wanted to be aloof and cerebral like the speakers I most admired. Nothing had prepared me for this encounter with my own apparent ardour. I had been given the very straightforward task of improvising some arguments and then expressing them to various groups of people. So what kind of impassioned person had I suddenly become?

Maybe this kind of performance – pretending, weekend after weekend, to be passionate about whichever side of a debate I happened to be on – had some subconscious purpose. After all, debating is competitive, and competition necessitates a kind of aggression. Maybe faking conviction is how I learned to control and direct that aggression, to hide my ambition behind concern. Or maybe I knew that where aloofness in men is seen as mysterious, in women it's seen as cold. If you're a girl, judges don't just want to know you're smart; they want to know you care. Perhaps I was a better strategist than I knew.

Competitive debating takes argument's essential features and reimagines them as a game. For the purposes of this game, the emotional or relational aspects of argument are superfluous, and at the end there are winners. Everyone tacitly understands that it's not a real argument. Imagine if all conflict was like this: you don't have to get upset or angry, everyone will listen to you even if they don't want to, and at the end of the discussion a nice

man with a British accent will tell you that the game is over now and you've won. I think in a way it was this fantasy of invulnerability, of total control, that made me keep returning, weekend after weekend. All the pleasures of conflict without ever really showing my hand.

At the end of my first year of debating, I took part in a competition at Dublin City University. My partner was a vastly accomplished debater called Niamh, who looked on me as a kind of mentee, and told me what to say in the round about the International Criminal Court. I was awarded the prize for the best novice speaker that night, the first thing I'd ever won debating: a large, luminously green bottle of absinthe. Niamh and I also shared a modest cash prize for best team. Later that night I stood outside someone's house party with the other novices and took turns drinking from the bottle until my vision started to go blurry and everything was amusing. Then we got a taxi back into town, which I paid for. I had never felt more popular or wealthy in my life.

To participate in an international competition, like the European or World Championships, you often have to try out first. The number of teams that can attend is limited, and because of the prestige and the funded travel, demand usually exceeds supply. Some debating societies allocate these team spots on the basis of past performance, while others will hold special trials over the course of a day or a weekend, ranking and matching up the best speakers who attend. Once you secure a place, you're expected to take it seriously. Your college society might hire a coach, or at least put together a training schedule; they will almost certainly expect you to run practice debates and fly to other countries for prep competitions. After all, they're paying, and their international reputation is at stake too.

This period of preparation before a major competition is exhausting. You are perpetually taking the cheapest, latest (or earliest) flights to dull university towns. You spend incalculably long stretches of time feeling cold and tired with people who are not in any meaningful sense your friends. Meanwhile, your ordinary life continues, as if at a different speed. You miss various birthday parties and academic deadlines. It is difficult for even the most avid novice to sustain their enthusiasm through this period; it was impossible for me. That seven-minute interval of mild euphoria during which I actually delivered my speech came to seem like a tinier and tinier oasis in a desert of spiritual exhaustion and food served in plastic wrap.

It's also hard to stay impressed. By the time I was attending major championships, the speakers who had seemed so formidable when I first started out had graduated and left debating behind, or stayed around for long enough to become unremarkable. The machinery that drives effective speeches isn't lastingly mysterious: observe it for long enough and you can see the moving parts. The harder I practised, the harder it was to recapture that sense of glamour that motivated me in the beginning. And where, sitting in the audience, I used to burst into applause, now I found myself thinking: That seems like an overly broad generalization. Or: Must so many male speakers really use rape as a metaphor for something else?

When I first started out, I knew nothing at all about the outside world. I didn't know when the war in Afghanistan had started, or what the Patriot Act was, or where exactly the Arab Spring was happening. In the very beginning, I accepted defeat in debates on such

subjects with good humour; after that, I made some disastrous attempts to fake my way through them; eventually, I just started reading the news.

The year I was twenty-one, the European Championships were held in Belgrade. It was August, and temperatures reached forty degrees in the city. We debated in classrooms, often without air-conditioning; the organizers gave us free plastic bottles of water between rounds while everyone discussed the rumours that someone had fainted mid-speech. My teammate Adam and I made it to the quarter-finals, where the topic concerned the secession of Republika Srpska from Bosnia and Herzegovina. I knew almost nothing about Bosnia, but Adam had brought some handwritten notes which we read during prep time. These knock-out rounds are staged in lecture halls or auditoriums rather than classrooms, and attract an audience of eliminated speakers, idle judges and off-duty volunteers from the hosting university. As a result, quite a few of our audience members that day were Serbian debaters. Maybe they sat there, appalled and insulted by our ignorance, or by the composed self-assurance with which we fabricated the history of their region. More likely, they were just used to it. It wasn't our intention to be offensive. We sailed into the semi-finals that year.

The European and World Debating Championships are held in English, and though there are special categories for the recognition of speakers for whom English is a second language, Anglophone countries dominate the main competition. At first this convention seems arbitrary: debates have to take place in some shared language or not at all, and debating about France or Germany through English had never particularly bothered me. But now my English-language upbringing had deposited me at the top of a lecture hall in Belgrade, where I was falsifying the history of a devastating and prolonged conflict while student volunteers prepared to hand me free bottles of water. This was not the first time I had debated a weighty issue of which I knew little. I understood that debating was just a game. But to play that game on this subject, in this place, felt different.

The most ambitious debaters go out of their way to absorb information about sexual violence, racial profiling, police brutality: issues many of them will never experience firsthand. I did the same thing. Did it make me more empathetic and self-aware? Or did it just continue to affirm the idea that if I were smart and competitive enough, I could speak for anyone I wanted?

Competitive debating is, predictably, male-dominated. About two-thirds of the participants in international competitions are men, and an all-male team has won each of the last four European Championships. Official forums and meetings on the status of women in debating are held frequently and at interminable length, so that the problem of sexism can be identified and then not addressed and then identified again after we failed to address it the first time. Judges continue to advise female speakers on their tone of voice, the speed of their delivery, and the absence or presence of 'passion' in their performances; male speakers are typically just advised about their arguments. In *Sorties*, Hélène Cixous writes: 'For woman speaking – even just opening her mouth – in public is something rash, a transgression.' In a world saturated with the sounds of male authority, there's always something 'not quite' about a woman's voice in public. I could even hear it in my own.

Confronted with my own minor successes, I mostly felt embarrassed. I wanted to be seen as deserving, but I didn't want to say I was deserving. As a result, I vacillated between a weird self-righteousness and a deceitful kind of self-deprecation. Eventually, I got better at deflecting. There was always a man, somewhere, who could be credited with my achievements: if not my teammate, then my coach, and if not my coach, then one of my previous teammates. So I learned how to thank them. And then smile.

After Belgrade I took some time off competing. Really I just was bored and tired, but this expressed itself as suspicion and bitterness. I no longer found it fun to think of ways in which capitalism benefits the poor, or things oppressed people should do about their oppression. Actually I found it depressing and vaguely immoral. Still, most of my friends were debaters and at social gatherings the conversation always turned back to the same list of names: who had won which competitions, who was pairing up for the next European Championships. And I still thought: I could do it. That could be me.

In 2013, the European Championships took place in Manchester. My teammate that year was a precocious first-year called Michael who nobody on the international circuit had really heard of. Our partnership was, in the fond gaze of retrospect, almost flawless. When we prepped for debates we seemed to inhabit our own private time zone, in which everything we could possibly say or think of was exchanged effortlessly, to a degree that amused even us. We finished the competition on a record number of points, which also at the time seemed amusing. And on the individual speaker rankings, he placed second and I came first.

'Anything can be great,' Fast Eddie says. 'I don't care, bricklaying can be great.' But you don't lay bricks with the intention of accumulating a record number of points, and you certainly don't do it to attain some kind of phoney celebrity. For flow to be authentic, it has to be for its own sake. The ego has to fall away. This is not so difficult when you're immersed in the task itself; but when the task is over, all you have left is a list of accomplishments. So maybe for a while you start believing there's something great about those.

Personally, I didn't cope very well with all the affirmation. I'd been accepted into a Master's programme I felt uncertain about, starting the month after the European Championships ended. I'd given up competing, but I accepted almost every judging invitation I received, and spent weekends away giving detailed feedback to people I would never see again, while essay deadlines crawled past. In November I dropped out of my degree. I took on a part-time job as a debating coach and told myself I would use my free time to learn new languages or musical instruments. Inevitably, I did not use that time for any of those things. At the end of the year I accepted the volunteer job in Chennai, and rang in the New Year drinking white wine in a luxury hotel, surrounded by people who knew who I was. Some of them had probably watched YouTube videos of my speeches. As you might have guessed, I was miserable.

Coming face to face with the irrelevance of your own strivings demands some kind of response. You can wallow in the pretend celebrity if you want, continue attending competitions every weekend and dutifully appearing in selfies with beaming novices, in the belief that you are actually important. Or you can self-justify in the guise of getting some

perspective: maybe try thinking of reasons why your particular niche is actually of great cultural significance, or ways in which your skill set applies to ‘real life’. People say that debating helps you in job interviews: that’s one particularly egregious example. But even if any of that could explain why you do it, it could never explain why success matters. Participation in a game, any kind of game, gives you new ways of perceiving others. Victory only gives you new ways of perceiving yourself.

Success doesn’t come from within; it’s given to you by other people, and other people can take it away. In part, this is why I stopped competing. I didn’t want to give up the feeling of flow, that perfect, self-eliminating focus, but I didn’t want to perform it for points any more. Academic life had presented me with much the same problem: I thought about things only as hard and as thoroughly as my grades required. Maybe I stopped debating to see if I could still think of things to say when there weren’t any prizes. To a greater or lesser extent, I am still working on that.

I still get invitations to judge, even occasionally to compete. It’s hard to explain that you’re turning people down because it would interfere with your attempts to get some perspective: who needs perspective on a game you play at weekends? So instead I usually just say I’m ‘not available’. I refrain from getting involved. I even try being humble. After all, nothing in the outside world has changed as a result of my accumulation of debating accolades. I haven’t contributed to anyone’s understanding of anything, except maybe my own, and that only partially.

But I did it. I got everything I set out to get. I was the one delivering the offhanded refutation. It was me sipping water while I waited for the end of the applause. I still occasionally feel an impulse to attribute all my achievements that year to my perfect teammate, or worse, to good luck. But I’m not nineteen anymore; I don’t need to make people feel comfortable. In the end, it was me. It may not mean anything to anyone else, but it doesn’t have to – that’s the point. I was number one. Like Fast Eddie, I’m the best there is. And even if you beat me, I’m still the best.