

Chapter 10 of *The Debate*, Vol. 2 by B. Douglas Robbins

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I spent the next few weeks with Hailie. I attended classes and prepared for finals, and in the evenings I would gather myself toward the green lamp. I wondered what her parents were like and what would become of her. Many times I thought of calling social services. It would be for her own good. She wasn't attending school, she wasn't socializing with kids her own age, she lived all alone in the attic of a university museum. It wasn't healthy. Then I argued the other side, as I was prone to do in reflex: social services would lock her up and throw away the key. They would send her to a mental institution, probe her, and poke her, and wring every non-conforming, square peggish, beautiful and original idea out of her. They would splay her guts out onto the cold linoleum, tromp around, dissect auto-erogenous narcissism until she was a self-assured mass of Greek mythologies. Pronounce her cured. Empty headed, down the middle, drive on the right, register for a major political party, buy Teflon coated pans, and go into debt for a shiny new K-car **cured**. If she wasn't committed she would have ended up in foster care. I read the cards. An overwhelming majority of convicts were Foster Kids; a ticket to the slammer.

I thought on. Every possible scenario involving the authorities ended in tragedy. I couldn't turn her in and kid myself, not for a moment, I was doing her any good. She was already light years beyond the average fourteen year old in terms of her general knowledge and analytic sophistication. I figured she could quit school for a few years and **still** be at the normal grade level for her age. The reclusion was unlikely to do her any harm.

But probably more to the point, I needed her.

She was my only friend, and the things she knew, they never teach you in school. I was in a bad place, and she was there.

One late evening in early December, I inveigled Hailie out of her attic to walk with me in the warm gusts of an impending storm.

"They'll find me," she protested.

"No one will find you. I'll protect you," which was lie

because if anything, Hailie had proven herself more resilient, more self-reliant, and if anything, much more my protector than I her's.

Still, she believed me, "You promise?"

"Uh-huh."

We strolled around campus while hot air blew against us, moving her hair demonically.

We sat at the underlit Rodin Garden, just outside the Museum among big twisting torsos and sexy black sheened nudes, and the overwrought but unfinished Gates of Hell—Adam and Eve on each side—all out in the open to touch, and writhe.

Hailie held onto my arm like a frail and frightened sea horse. I kidded myself into imagining myself her brave knight, prepared to defend her life and honor, though inside I was a wreck.

That night Hailie sat on the extended leg of the fallen bronze Martyr. The black figurines spun round us as memorials to passion and the senses. The Burghers of Calais bulged massive biceps and terrific feet. The Spirit of Eternal Repose was a waif at the top of a column that seemed to have spun itself into oblivion and was on the verge of toppling when Rodin captured his semblance. The lighting came up from the fine dirt as if from the underworld. Hailie asked me, "How did you get so sick, Ellie?"

"I really don't know. Maybe I ate something."

She clutched my arm tighter, "I think someone hurt you. I think someone told you lies."

"Well, that's true, but that's not why I got sick," what a funny intuition she had.

"What happened when they told you lies?"

"Then everyone else thought **I** had told lies," I cringed.

"But you hadn't."

"I hadn't."

She sighed and re-balanced herself on the leg of the Martyr, "And this happened when you debated?"

"Uh-huh."

"Debating is just arguing."

"Yep."

"You liked to do it for **fun**?"

"Yeah, it was fun."

“Eeeewwww—why would you argue with someone else unless you **really really** had to tell them something? I mean what’s fun about fighting with someone over nothing?”

“It’s not nothing. It’s to find out how good you are.”

“How good of an **arguer** you are. But if you’re just arguing over who’s the better arguer, then you can **win** and still be wrong. That’s not winning anything.”

“If you win, you are right.”

“That’s not true.”

“Oh really? Who has ever lost but been right?” I charged.

“Lots of people!”

“Like who?”

She crinkled her forehead and rolled her eyes around the sky for a moment, “Okay, you win.”

“See?” I sat back confidently. I had beaten a post-pubescent, and I felt good about it.

She smiled at me, “You know, you just lost...”

“Lost what?”

“Our argument.”

“No I didn’t. You conceded I won.”

“And that’s an example of someone, like me, losing an argument but **still** being right.” I had been double turned by fourteen year old. She said, “Are you sure you were a very good debater? I mean even **I** can beat you.”

I giggled like a supine lover, “Yes, but you’re much smarter than most of my opponents.”

“Really?” she was taken with the idea.

“Yep.”

“Hmm...what exactly happened Ellie?” she stood on the body of the Martyr like a general claiming land.

“You mean who lied to me?”

“Uh-huh.”

So I redredged the whole sordid affair. How my best friend had committed the odious sin. How he had lied to me. How we lost the U.N.L.V. Tournament in utter humiliation, and how he tried to mar me with the scandal of his black choking cheat.

“I’ve been trying to be philosophical about it. I mean shit happens, right? Sometimes **really** shitty shit happens. Like, I don’t want this to get to me. It’s no big deal.”

“It is **too** a big deal,” Hailie stamped her foot, “This is typical Ellie Grundle behavior, ‘I can handle it. It’s no big deal,’ but it **is**. You’re very sick inside!”

I protested, “It **shouldn’t** matter. I should be able to just let it go. Jeezus, if I let Jared get under my skin...I mean we live in a shitty world, I know better than to think otherwise. I shouldn’t be appalled.”

“But you are! and you **shouldn’t** shouldn’t yourself to death. Jared did a very bad thing, and ignoring your emotions won’t change that.”

“I’m not ignoring my emotions, I’m letting them go...Here-” I pulled a black book out of my blue back pack entitled *What the Buddha Taught*, “I’ve been reading this book by Rahula,” I opened the book, “‘He who’s mental health is perfect does not repent the past nor does he brood over the future,’ [p. 43] See? Like that! And here it says my suffering derives from worry, so I’m supposed to give it up. But I’m so **baaad** at it though. I should just let it go.”

“No!” she bawled, “You’re misreading it! It says give up your attachments to sorrow, not to give up sorrow. It says to be **mindful** of your suffering and your worry, don’t identify with it, give up the identity. There is no sufferer only suffering. No one’s home. Look at yourself. Think about what you’re feeling but for gosh-sakes, don’t worry about worrying!”

“No-look!” I bowed to my book, reading to myself, [p.73] *We must admit that very often we are afraid or ashamed to look at our own minds*, and then, *There is no attitude of criticizing or judging or discriminating, between right or wrong, good or bad...You are not a judge but a scientist*, she was right! The more I read the more convinced I was that she was absolutely right. “Uh-wow. I think you’re right.”

She was silent. She wrapped herself around my right arm. A warm, dry gust swept through us; Hailie smelled musty like little kids packed onto a bus, but she also smelled earthen, like a woman. It was a pleasant and reassuring scent.

“Where did you learn about Buddhism?” I asked.

“From my brothers. They taught me Theravada, and Taoism and eventually Ch’an, you probably know as Zen. I can recite the Eight Fold Path by heart, and once I meditated in the

lotus for twelve hours straight. I haven't done that in a while."

"What else do you know about Buddhism?"

"Oh, I don't know..."

"Come on."

"Talking about Buddhism isn't Buddhism. Buddha doesn't talk about the bridge, he just builds it!"

"I know, I know, but I want to **understand**."

"Zen says you should understand your **own** mind not some old philosophy," she could tell I was disappointed, "Okay?"

"Okay," I said.

"Can I tell you a story instead?"

"I would love to hear a story," I raised my head while wind blew through the Spirit of Eternal Repose at the center of the garden. His underside was lit dramatically, up a ten-foot column in crazy fire shadows. As Hailie began her story, her cherub voice churning and her small body pressed to my arm, I grew happier and more content than I can ever remember feeling since I arrived at Stanford.

She sat back down on her Martyr, singing:

"In the middle of a Chinese Empire, a long long, time ago was a tree. As long as the tree was healthy and all, and had all sorts of blossoms and yummy fruit, then the kingdom was all good to each other. Okay? But every hundred years the tree needed the heart of the most frightened man in the kingdom. Man or woman, **really**, but back then no one could kill women. No one had the stomach, so they just killed men, I guess. Anyhow, the tree **needed** the heart of the scared man to stay healthy and all.

"So here comes a hundred years, and the tree begins to wither and sag, so the Emperor immediately orders his son, the Prince, to search the kingdom for that man 'of most fright.' They talked like that back in the olden days. They would say 'most fright' and 'jolly good.'" She tried her best at a terrible British accent.

"Anyhow the Prince searched high and low, north and south, and bagged a whole bunch of men. Then he brought them to the tree and cut off their heads, or something, and just killed them and took their hearts out all bloody and messy, and planted them at the base of the old tree. This was to no avail; the tree wilted even more and more.

"In the mean-time, the Prince fell in love with a **beautiful**

girl. I mean she was really beautiful and everything and she had really pretty long hair and she was royal, somehow, just like him, so they had something to talk about, because my brother says if you don't have something in common with a girl then you don't have anything to talk about. So he wanted to marry her and make her a princess so he asked his father if it was okay. His father exploded and just about killed the Prince, he really did, and said he would **never** allow the Prince to marry as long as the tree died. And then, and this was really mean, the Emperor said that maybe the Prince **wanted** the Empire to collapse cause he didn't really love his father or anything.

“The Prince tried to explain to his father that he'd done his best, and he scoured the country capturing men who probably weren't even frightened because he just wanted to be thorough, and really sure. And now the Prince was feeling guilty for killing all those men and none of them were even the frightened ones, just to satiate the bloodthirsty tree and save his father's throne and all. ‘Sate’ means to satisfy like after you drink all the tea and you're not thirsty anymore and you feel full.

“Anyhow, the Emperor would hear nothing of these ‘lies and excuses’ for slandering the royal tree. Then he bellowed, ‘Treason! Treason!’ so loud the royal doctor had to medicate him after he got all hyperventilated.

“The Prince was all bummed-out and confused, so he consulted the wise men who told him that while it would be a great disgrace to marry without the Emperor's permission, it would be an even greater wrongness to not have a son to carry on the crown.

“So the sad, sad Prince secretly married his beloved, and together they made a cute little baby boy. A baby Prince to succeed the throne!

“The Prince and Princess were very happy with their new baby son, but the Emperor was so upset by now because he still couldn't find the fearful heart, and watching his poor tree and his kingdom decay and everything, took the new baby and had him beheaded: ‘Off with his head!’ Then he had the little baby's heart buried at the base of the tree, like it was the **little baby** who was wicked and everything, and then he threw the body out onto a field for the buzzards to feast.

“The Princess, so overwrought, went to the Emperor and begged him to at least let her bury her son's body with dignity, as a member of the royal family. The Emperor flatly refused, saying that her marriage was invalid and the baby was no better than a bastard conceived in a nest of vice. That's what he really said. I

remember because I couldn't believe it!

"The Princess was devastated, but she knew deep in her heart that the old mean Emperor did not speak truthfully and most importantly, she **knew** what she had to do for her dead son. See? And she didn't even ask anybody, she just **knew**."

"So in a fit of mindless rage and despair, searching for help, she found a really sharp dagger."

"The next day the Emperor was found dead in his bed and the Prince and Princess were named Emperor and Empress. The Empress' first royal demand was a retrieval of her child's body and a proper burial for him in the royal cemetery, or where-ever they bury dead people in China."

"And you know what? The dead Emperor was found that morning—missing his heart. He had a gross bloody hole in his chest where the organ once sat, while out his window, if you looked, in the courtyard down below, the Tree began to revive, blossom, and spring fresh fruit all anew. And the kingdom, likewise began to heal and bloom."

"That was beautiful, Hailie," I'd never heard such a thing from such a young girl. I suddenly felt very old and younger still.

"Thank-you. The part I like is where the Princess just knows what to do. She doesn't think about it or anything, she just **does** it."

"Why isn't she imprisoned for treason? Why isn't there an investigation?"

"I don't know! Gosh, Ellie, you make everything **too** complicated. She just does what she **has** to do. Don't you know what that's like?"

"You mean she thinks it would be best to kill-"

"No! She just **knows**. See, she's the Princess and she's committed body and soul and everything to all she is, and someone takes a **part** of her and she strikes out like a bolt of thunder or something," Hailie held out her palm and slammed a downward fist into it. "Because she's **in it**, and if her baby isn't true then nothing is. She's **got** to save him!"

"But he's dead!" I said excitedly, "She can't save him."

Then Hailie said, "You don't understand **at all**," and that really pissed me off somehow. I mean, I'm a pretty intelligent person, and to be told by a fourteen-year-old that I don't understand **at all** was just—I don't know. Normally, I would have found the whole thing funny and cute, but she was really stepping

out of line, “Listen, I understand a lot of things. At the first level, you don’t know me well enough to say what I know and what I don’t. Second, saying I don’t understand is just a cheap *ad hominem* attack and I don’t appreciate it, and third, at the substantive level, you haven’t explained to me why I’m wrong, so I take your silence as acquiescence.” I had just three pointed her, my only friend, the sweetest girl on the Peninsula, I had just trashed.

She was silent, then, “Ellie, why are you angry with me? Why are you so mean?”

I felt terrible, “Cause Hailie, you just think you know everything.”

“I do **not**. I do **not**. You asked **me** about all that stuff! I thought I was helping, but you act like I was trying to attack you or something.” She was clearly sad. Her voice cracked and she slunk away from my arm. A cold settling sunk my stomach, but I couldn’t apologize. All my trying amounted to:

“Well, you shouldn’t say I don’t understand things because I do.”

Then she did something subtly amazing, beyond surprising, she darted through the low junipers and began to scale the Spirit of Eternal Repose, “Say you don’t understand,” and climbed higher. Her brown jacket and resplendent scarf whipped charismatically from the warm gusts, while the underlight conferred a seraphic effect. She was climbing into the unknown, “Say you don’t understand and say you’re sorry.”

“You’re being crazy Hailie! Come down!” I tried to reach for her worn Reeboks, but she was beyond my grasp. I was anchored to the Earth like a white and weak skeleton.

“Say you’re wrong! and apologize to me **nicely**,” she yelled into the figure’s legs, clasped at the ankles. Her gaze was starbound, repeating herself, “Say it. Say you’re sorry for being mean! Say you don’t understand! Say it,” she hoisted herself into a chilled embrace with the unbalanced elf.

“Hailie, come down!” I was really panicked. I paced all over the foot of the column.

“**Say it!**” She blasted into the air like a kindred element.

“Okay, okay! I’m sorry! I didn’t understand. I’m sorry. I won’t be mean.” Instinctually, my stomach untied, warmed itself and radiated out to my twisted shoulders, and my icy numb hands. Ironically, I didn’t understand. I didn’t understand what she was doing. None of it.

She looked down on me with all the love and acceptance in time. Like a perfect circle, while the lights beamed on her swaying shape. The amazing thing, of course, the absolutely stupendous thing was she didn't give up on me and forced herself, no forced isn't quite right, more like allowed herself through her own hurt, and held on to that cold stone figure until she pulled me through the gates to the other side.

The rest of the night we were best friends, inseparable. Having a friend, like a real friend is such a powerful magic I can't describe it even at my most maudlin. We strolled up the mall and stopped at the Co-Po, the Corner Pocket, where I bought us each a slice. She had the vegi and I had the special garlic, onion, linguisa catastrophe and then I picked all the cheese off. We ate among the late night fuzzies in Tresidder's dark emerald booths. She told me about her family.

She used to live with her mother and Uncle Barley, her father's brother. She never knew her father as he disappeared before she was born. Her mother thought he was killed, even without evidence of a body. He taught East Asian Studies at Stanford until J. Edgar Hoover black-listed him during the McCarthy era. Coincidentally, another Hoover's name, Herbert Hoover's was embroidered onto the University's central icon, the prestigious Hoover Tower. It served to unintentionally remind Hailie of her father's enemy on a daily basis. Hailie's father was forced to escape to Canada and then Asia, and only briefly back in America during the late 70's, when he met Hailie's mother, a woman much younger than he, and they had a brief love affair. A big scandal erupted, as Hailie's mother was already married to Uncle Barley, her father's brother. "He doesn't like me because of what my mom did," explained Hailie, "I don't think I would like me either if I was in his place. I really wouldn't like me **one bit**."

We walked back to the Museum, through the Main Quad, more black twisting figures. On the sidewalk the mulchy Autumn leaves were mashed fine from so much harried trampling. Indian summer. Fall came late. Burnt scarlet and well shined orange languished our process like something precious thrown away, wearing away underfoot. I could smell lemon and comfortable decay, as natural as an inevitable love warming the back of my scalp. Hailie loved that smell.

"I can smell everything going home," she said.

Hailie asked again about Jared. I tried to explain what happened in Las Vegas, and the Witches case and what it meant to fabricate cards. I tried to explain what debate was and what it meant to me.

“Then you got sick?” she asked me, lower lip extended.

“Later. Yes.”

“And you got sick because of all the debate stuff?”

“I don’t think so. I don’t know.”

“I think maybe you did.”

Though I didn’t entirely agree, I didn’t argue.