

Chapter 12 of *The Debate*, Vol. 2 by B. Douglas Robbins

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By the end of the first week in December, Dead Week, rain fell hard all the time. You might as well have kept your sleeping hour fixed after midnight, during that week, as the Primal Scream, a vicious, blood boiling howl enjoined by the entire campus community, was scheduled at that late hour. Even my apartment complex, the less than rambunctiously social Mirrielees House, participated in its own tattered and conventional way. The Primal Scream, it seemed to me, was a biting indictment against the sort of information overload that Stanford was so much about. Of course it wasn't just Stanford, and it wasn't just about information, though those were the tangible things, it was all about the ways in which we connected or failed to connect with each other, and it was about our fractured and charred mythology, that, like a sick Santa Claus promised everything but delivered next to nothing. I mean what were all those kids screaming about anyway? Were they hungry, or cold, or being threatened with deportation or excommunication, or being stretched on the rack, or beaten as slaves? They were not. They were, however, the best nourished, the best educated, the tallest, most talented, in short, the most fortunate kids, with the longest life expectancy, and brightest future of all the people in the world, in the whole history of the world. By material standards, each and every one of us lived as princes and princesses. The problem, no doubt, was with the standards. By the screaming standard, we were paupers.

The Scream, I believe, was the pressure release valve for, essentially, being sold a bill of goods. The kids I attended school with were, without exception, the most brilliant collage of genius and talent anywhere. Perry Timmcock, for example was a quiet kid, wore silver glasses, who attended American Economic History with me. He was a published author. At nineteen he wrote articles for *Newsweek*, and *The Economist*. Sylvia Starscher was the girl next store when I lived in Flo Mo. She was a silver medalist in skiing from the 1992 Olympic Games. Will Castecta graduated from high school at age fourteen and then spent two years flying food relief to Somalia before coming to Stanford. The sons and

daughters of presidents and kings were not uncommon additions to any given graduating class. Uniformly, for all their limitless achievements and honors, they had a single, mundane infirmity: they'd been sold a bill of goods.

They were each told, in their own special way, that if they were good enough, fast enough, smart enough, if they persisted enough and sacrificed enough, waited long enough, and denied themselves enough, they would be told the Magic Word, and in some cases, they would be worthy of Love. The Word, having never arrived, the Love never being forthcoming, the Sun always setting before they could have grabbed it, and then coming up behind them again, and the connection to others being nothing but competition and cutthroat loneliness, the Word mutated from that of creation and beauty to that of the Scream. And thousands of screaming voices finally found Union.

Make no mistake, I was one of them.

I had gotten into a few petty fights with my roommate, so I was spending my days in Green and using the overcrowded Mac Lab in Meyer just to avoid him. I was preparing for finals. Though surrounded by other Screamers, I felt quite alone. The more kids crowded around me, the more isolated I became. Luckily, I was not as lonely as before. I had Hailie, and unlike my peers, she possessed an insight and sensitivity that went beyond backlashed panic-screaming. If she were screaming she would have known precisely **why** she was screaming. I, on the other hand, was still in the process of screaming at everything. Intuitively, I sensed it was not right to despise my neighbors for running off the cliff like lemmings, or for blowing up at my roommate for having the emotional sensitivity of plant matter—even the grass has Buddha nature—but I was still in the muddy passage, creeping along in my own sludge. I was afraid that to deny any of it was to deny what little mindfulness I could scrap ahold of. I make the process sound ugly, but honestly, there is something gratifying about eating a great plate of your own shit. At the very least, when you're done it's gone for a while.

A week later I took my last final for Poli Sci, 100W, Politics, Economics, and Welfare. The three hour essay question asked: *Modern economists tell us that "inter-personal comparisons of utility are meaningless." What do they mean and what are the implications of this claim for the utilitarian argument in favor of equalizing the distribution of wealth in society?*

It was a pet fascination of mine to ruminate about the great mythic and social movements that suggested that opulence was the answer. It began as an elitist proposition in empire building and

imperialism, but more recently the dream had mutated into an egalitarian motif, riches for the masses. The American dream is a good example. It was always: *if only we had enough technology, or enough labor saving devices, or political parity, if only we had just a little more CONTROL!* But even redistributing Control turns out to be paltry in the end. Redistribution's great failing is that it never makes clear what the hell people are supposed to do with the valuable things they get.

I didn't write about that, of course. I wanted a good grade. I answered as they wanted, making the appropriate references to Dworkin and Nagel and Scheffler and of course Bentham and Rawls, you had to mention Rawls or the T.A. will never get off. I turned in my Blue Book and promptly forgot it all.

I was elated to finish my last final for the quarter. I did pretty well, all considered. I had no one to celebrate with though, and the elation soon faded, and that was that quarter.

That evening I visited the green lamp.

"Hey Hailie!"

"Hi Ellie," she was solemn.

"What's the matter?"

"While I was gone, someone was here," she scanned around.

"In the attic?"

"Yeah. They moved my stuff."

"Is anything missing?"

"I don't think so."

"Nothing's missing? Are you sure your stuff is moved?"

"Not exactly, but-"

"It's probably nothing. Hey! I finished all my finals. Let's go drinking."

"I can't drink. I'm too young."

"I know a place that won't card you."

She raised her stealthy chin like a fed cat, "Okay," and a grin.

On the way to University Avenue I noticed her hair was no longer matted and her face shone more clearly. She looked rather beautiful, deep-set eyes and a simple flat lined mouth glistening wet lips, "What happened to your hair" I asked clumsily.

"Oh! I just took a shower at Branner," Branner was a

House. A nice one at that.

“They didn’t hassle you?”

“Nope. I guess everyone thought I was someone else’s guest or something. No one said anything.” I could see why. Her tiny frame effused regal confidence and bemused the natural grace of a burbling spring. Hopeful brown corduroy pants draped from her hip, and her flappy, button-down sweaters couldn’t bundle up all her brimming. Shining waves of brown and sand hung from her tilted head. She caught misty rain on her extended tongue:

“Yunnn. Is sweeee! Hmm!”

Under dark, we moved up the eerie man-made street lights as fine rain fell slowly like in a shook-up glass ball. Occasional clumps of students marched past in the opposite direction, wearing their smiles across the entire avenue, finals probably being a memory for them as well. The sometimes over-sauced freshman galloped at top speed over the wet sidewalk screaming obscenities, waving arms as if to signal the landing. Finals’ stress affected everyone differently; like a snapped sling shot, the over-drawn, and over-worn ricochet backward in a deep alcoholic well, and freak out, and break their nut on another wilding.

The Last Chance Saloon was a Mexican old west style “Eating and Drinking Saloon” down from the Schmidt Building and kitty corner to Gordon Biersch. It was the diveyest drinking shack in the immediate University area, and that’s probably why I loved it. It wasn’t divey in some manicured way either, like a lot of the yuppified bars in the area that made worn-in and used a **theme**, replicated in authentic styro-petro and fixed forever under a shiny glop of hardened Lucite; the Saloon was really fucked up. It was a rambling, one-story brown shack with hitching post for your horse and everything. At the front was a shambling gated out-door patio for warm nights and sunny days. The drizzle kept everyone inside, but Hailie and I sat outside on the wet benches under streetlights and creepy red neon lights. The Tecate sign. The Tres Equis sign glared from mist.

Lunatic screeching and deep booming music grew from the dilapidated shack, and I bought a pint of Tres Equis and a Cider for Hailie.

“I’ve never really drunk anything before,” she said shyly.

“Oh—I hope I’m not corrupting a minor.”

She giggled, briefly betraying her age.

We drank, talked about her mother, and my family, and mean people, and school and what you can and can’t learn there,

and grew warmer and sloshier. Eventually the subject turned to debate: “I don’t think I’m ever going to debate again.”

“Why not?” asked Hailie sipping.

“I have such bad, bad memories.”

“Oh.”

“Is that a dumb reason?”

“Oh, I don’t know. I think you ought to find out what you like and what you don’t and listen to what you’ve learned. But at the same time you shouldn’t **run away** from hard things.”

“I don’t think I’m running away. I have already left,” I intoned in a low voice. Misty slow-mo gleamed white and yellow. I filled my mouth with thick bitter beer, “I think about debating again and all I can picture is some faceless partner turning on me. It’s grim. I don’t think I can handle something like that again.”

“Maybe that would happen again. There are no guarantees, Ellie. But maybe it won’t.”

“So you think I ought to debate?”

“Do **you** want to?”

“Yeah, I want to. I miss it like hell. I argue with myself all the time in little mock rounds, I miss it so, but the **investment**—Jeez! When you debate you have to be all in. You can’t hold back, and I don’t know if I’m ready for that. Maybe it’s a closed chapter.”

“You once told me all about your idea of the hero and how you hoped to be one.”

“Yeah.”

“And the hero does what he does **because** it’s hard, and he has no regrets.”

“Well that’s right, but you know Hailie, that’s an **idea**—you can say that stuff but a lot of it doesn’t work because there are realities involved. Harsh ones.”

“Such as?”

“Such as, I am **not** a hero-” I insisted.

“Not yet. No one’s a hero until they are.”

“No, I’m not saying that! What I am saying is to overcome your environment you have to have the strength to do so, you know?”

“And you don’t have that?”

“I don’t know. I might not.”

“Where would the strength come from anyway?” Hailie raised her gold flaked eyebrows sponging sparks and dew, “**I** like to say something cheesy like strength comes from within, cause it’s **true.**”

“That sounds good, but what does it mean?” *It means absent any information to the contrary one ought to assume so, hope so, believe so, and act so. That premises find their own conclusions. That the surest way to any outcome is to believe it is inevitable.*

“You **know** what it means—**goddamit!** Gosh-damn-you Ellie Grundle, if you’re trying to test me!...if you’re trying to make me quit you, you’ve got another thing coming! I’m not going anywhere no matter how stupid you play!” She took a big gulp of her yellow cider and wiped her mouth with the back of her arm wrapped in ever dampening sweaters.

“I’m done debating,” I said, “I’ve had my fill. I’ve learned my lesson.”

“Okay then, that’s fine, but I don’t want to hear any moaning later.”

“What’s to moan about? It’s a stupid game played by people with oversized brains and shrunken souls trying to prove something to each other and no one’s listening. It’s asinine!”

“Is that what you really think?”

“Sure!” I had so forgotten how good I was at persuasion, I was buying into my own collusion.

“Okay.”

“Okay.”

The blue-white mist fell faster, building a thick, wet coat over us, first dotting then permeating through a cool spread. Hailie looked around as if for the first time, “Ellie, I’m going to leave soon.”

“Is the time late?”

“No, I mean I’ll be leaving Palo Alto.”

I sunk in my gut while my light head bobbed, “Oh...really? Why?”

“The quarter is out. I can no longer blend in. The cold is descending. I should go south.”

“Where exactly?”

“I don’t know, maybe to New Mexico, maybe Arizona. I always wanted to see the Hoover Dam and the Kofa desert.”

“The Kofa?” I had never heard of the Kofa desert. I was swimming and confused, “How will you get there?” I was probing for a flaw in her plan. There was always a flaw—unless, of course, there was no plan.

“I don’t know. Maybe I can hitch-hike, maybe I can find a drive away service.”

“For a 14 year old? No way!”

“Well whatever.”

She could stay with me. I could protect her, “I think you’re too young to be traveling alone. You could get hurt.”

“I can get hurt anywhere. Oh Ellie I don’t **want** to leave you, but what can I do? I can’t **stay**. Someone will find me soon!” She began to tear softly. The oily salt mixed haphazardly with the bluish mist on her cheek, “You could come with, you know.”

“No, I can’t. I have school and everything,” and then I felt like crying, but I knew once I started I wouldn’t be able to stop, and I did not want her to see me like that. I was sure this was hard enough for her already without having to rescue her gown-up friend from his own emotions—again. My face churned like the weather.

“Don’t be sad, Ellie. This must be so hard for you.”

“Hailie, **you’re** leaving. Even now you think of me before you think of yourself. It will be your undoing.”

“No, no, you’re wrong. I **love** you Elric! I **love** to be there for you. It keeps me **alive**.”

I would have to say, of all the wondrous things Hailie showed me, of all the insights she shared with me, **that** moment changed me like no other. I was a solitary tree in a vast landscape of coal and then she showed me the sky, the horizon, wisping clouds, shouting clouds, yellow and crimson and deep azure, and then violet sky smearing into a million feckless stars, and the exigencies of a full moon all above me all the time. The horizon. The North and the West eleven times over.

I almost couldn’t bear it, “Don’t say that Hailie!” as tears welled.

“You’re going to have to take care of yourself now, Ellie; you **must** do a good job, you absolutely **must** promise me.”

“I’ll be fine. I’m worried about you.”

“Don’t be. Don’t worry about anything. Be here and now and **promise** me.”

“I promise, I promise,” I would have promised her anything. I heard my own voice deep and cracking and in contrast to her anointing chimes, I sensed the overwhelming difference between us and somehow it became insignificant. I wanted to be so strong for her. I could feel dry wood cracking inside, the kind that squeaks under stress and breaks before it bends.

The next morning the sun rose defiantly. Warmth spread over the buff sandstone and red tiles and the greening foothills in our December. With only a few final days left, most of the student body had gone home for the holidays. The few left were either studying or preparing to move out. The ghostly space entertained a few thinning throngs of frazzled students in sweat pants and soft Nike Airs, unbathed and unshorn. Heads down they grazed *Water supply and Waste Treatment* and *Beowulf* alternately, and walked the stone and concrete intersections just beyond the fuzzy/techie line, (an area of campus that geo-spacially divided the fuzzy disciplines, humanities and social sciences, from techie studies, the math and sciences) clocking into each other to everyone’s surprise. Imagine that! And off again. Grazing.

I spent the day running errands, collecting papers, checking midterm exams, clearing up fines, returning library books and taking care of all other sorts of minor responsibilities and annoyances of living in the modern world.

That cream yellow afternoon I smacked Hailie’s door. No answer. And again. No sound. Terrible ideas raked across my mind. I thought about what Hailie had said about someone rearranging her belongings, and how I had callously disregarded the portent. I had to get in. I would get into the attic through the front mouth of the sleeping stone whale.

I slipped through open gates that warned Authorized Personnel Only. I crept carefully up the stone steps upon which rested fluteless columns and a bold pediment that proclaimed the presence of the Leland Stanford Jr. Museum. Flanking the classical neo-ruins were various images from history captioned Cyprus on the immediate right, and Egypt on the immediate left and then trailing off into more general aspects of study, Architecture, Sculpture, Painting and like that, among terrific wall cracks. One of the strangest things about the Museum was that while it was supposed to be an unsafe structure, a bureaucratic office was set up in the south wing. I couldn’t understand it, but it didn’t matter.

The front door was open.

I snuck inside the crippled structure where the foyer met me grandly with marvelous ruby marble columns and Athena marking the wide splitting staircase. Generous sunlight expanded the open space, acres above me and all around like God's creation, and I was tempted to yell out just to hear the boom of my own voice. Of course I was in imminent danger. I was trespassing in an earthquake damaged building and in the chamber off to my left the sounds of bureaucrats and their scurrying administrative assistants, a sort of scratchy bubbling sound, echoed into my sanctuary.

I found the top flight after backtracking through marble steps and dusty opulence until I came upon a door and it was unlocked. I went in. The wooden attic. Some sunshine filled the empty space. I had never come in from this way. Moving past the main post and the fake Christmas tree, I stood still, scanning the room carefully with my eyes not my head. The room was empty. Her cooking equipment, her toys and togs, blankets and shoes, all gone. The red pentagram had been erased. She left. She didn't say good-bye.

The entire scene was wrong. She wouldn't leave and not say good-bye...

A fuzzy chill shot up my thoracic torso bearing pain and pressure to the back of my heart and lungs. A back ache at the front. "No, no, no, no, no..." I whispered comically. The suppressed rage in my voice frightened me.

She was taken.