

Chapter 13 of *The Debate*, Vol. 2 by B. Douglas Robbins

douglas@medialawgroup.net
bdouglasrobbins@gmail.com

Copyright © 2000 by B. Douglas Robbins.
All rights reserved.

For a day I wandered, stunned. It was like being violated all over again. Like Jared, but worse because Hailie was taken **against her will**. I felt impotent, as if I didn't matter. I couldn't protect the most important person in my life, so what good was I? I felt like I was being punished, like it was my fault, like I'd been duped, like I was a fool and deserved what I got. I was worthless, and I cried a lot. An indication of how pathetic I was. It was like that until I decided to do something about it. It was more of a plan of distraction than anything.

Government bureaucracies were difficult enough, but as December 25th approached they achieved a level of über-incompetence, and thick witted tar braininess unmatched by the dimmest of reptiles. Then after Christmas, forget it.

So I was up against that.

I spent days searching through catalogs, documents and triplicate reports. The Palo Alto Police, San Mateo Social Services, County Hospitals, "Are you a relative of the patient?" "I don't even know if she's here!" "Are you a relative of the patient?" "No." "Then we cannot release that information." Hours in the Crown Law Library researching and photocopying. What do people do when they've lost somebody who shouldn't have been "out" to begin with? "How long has she been missing?" "Well, I haven't seen her in five days." "Are you a relative or a spouse?" "Yes." "Do you have some I.D?" "Okay, I'm not a relative, but she needs help! Can't you help? Don't you serve and protect or some shit?" "Watch your language sir. Where did you see your friend last?" Squatting on private property? No. Drinking underage at a saloon? *Finals are over. Time to party. Jell-O shots 50 cents.* "Uh, on campus: Stanford." "Is this person a student?" No a runaway. "No." "What was the individual doing there?" "I don't know. Is she here? I just need to know." "Age?" "Fourteen." "Last name?" "Goldbaum." "Here, look through these.": A stack in triplicate of all the "G's" in the county, unalphabetized. Christ. Halfway through I noticed the first names

were male, “Gregory, Grant, Christopher, Michael, Timothy, Steven, James, Robert...” “Excuse me.” “May I help you?” “That officer over there. Yeah, him. He gave me the wrong stack. These are males. I need females.” “Hailie is a female?” Then the females stack: nothing.

I called mental hospitals. They were bound by patient confidentiality. If it wasn't that, it was her status as a minor. No one was authorized to divulge information. I posed as a reporter for the *Stanford Daily*, I posed as a member of a police watch organization, I called posing as a family member. They wanted identification, they wanted verification, they wanted to talk to their supervisor.

I was exhausted and defeated. I had no idea what to do. I began to wonder about the weirdest things, I wondered if she was even real in the first place. Could I have made her up? It was wild. Was there a single thing of hers that I still had? Did anyone else ever see her? I thought about it for days. There was no material evidence, no pentagram, no lamp, and how was it that she could live in that crazy attic and no one ever saw the green lamp?. No one ever heard her. Ever.

Christmas came and the public institutions shut down, and so my search was blunted. I flew south to Inglewood and spent Christmas at my parents. I was in a haze, not a noticeable difference from my normal state I am to believe from my family's phlegmatic response. Fine by me. No sense in talking about things that were none of their business and wouldn't have cared to know anyway.

My first night at home I had the most vivid dream ever. I was convinced at the time that if anything was real, it was. It was set at the Napa State Mental Hospital. I had cut through a cyclone fence, ran across a field to Hailie's window. I was going to break her out.

“Hailie! Hailie!” I whisper quietly. Very scared.

*The window opens and Hailie's washed out face appears shadowed in parts, “Ellie, what are you **doing**?” she says slowly in a voice deeper than I am accustomed to, “Get out of here!” black night. On a heath. One cell in a vast landscape of shiny black rock.*

I yell in the wind, “Hailie are you okay?”

“I'm fine. I'm fine,” she is completely confused in a small cell. Green light from behind.

I pull hacksaws across the bars to break her out. Popping

and clanging, and small bits in my eyes, the wind freezing me to death. The earth is very hard and cracking like an accelerating salt flat. Like the face of an aging magician.

“No Ellie! No! What are you doing? I’m not locked up! You’re locked out!” she opens the small cell, no longer a cell. She opens the mouth of the small nutshell like a clam and stands in the saucered center. Holds a green lamp swinging in the wild wind. She wants me to come in.

“Don’t cry Ellie, please?”

“I’m not crying, I have a runny nose,” I tell her in the wind.

“What?”

“You don’t know what I’m up against,” I murmur, “They have drugs that can change my mind!” I point to my head.

She invites me into her nutshell. Too small.

“Come outside!” I yell and wave my arms around and spin around to make it look like fun. I lose balance and fall over. The wind and the sand bury me quickly. Hailie reaches a hand into the dust-pile and hauls me out. We’re at the top of a huge pile of ash and dust.

So I begin eating sand and it is abysmal. I have never felt so retched and I vomit and then eat some more. I hate doing it but I can’t help it. I need to eat the sand. Gritty cheek pouches. Chewing on the grind. Then vomit. I try to get Hailie to eat the sand. I pat the earth next to me, inviting her down. She gives a funny face, and digs a hole in my mouth. She shovels a mountain from my cheeks, then yells into my ear, because it’s the only way, “One day we’ll all be dead and we’ll laugh about this. Really we will.”

“Who took you? I’ll come and get you!” I am cold.

“No-one took me. I left.,” she shakes her head, beautiful hair flying, the sun coming up in quicktime. The sun runs off her mane. I still have a hacksaw in my hand. I forget what it’s for.

“It is your turn Ellie to find out things by-yourself!” she ducks back into the dark cell. Green light closes on a center point. I stand covered in damp hell. A wet face stung and bruised. I can barely feel my hands anymore. Grim and black night. The mental hospital for the insane. Dark, wet night in still air.

I pack up my equipment, the hacksaw, the chains, limitless links. I can’t get them all into my satchel, More and more equipment spread over the damp lawn, hammers, mallets, vices, cables, large boulders, hard stones, rope and fuel. There’re

coming soon. They'll take me back soon. I have to leave it behind. I'm a snake through the grass. They can never touch you when you're like that.

January ninth approached as students migrated back to campus in anticipation of the Winter quarter.

I sat in the Law School Café occupying myself with a latté and the *Tao Te Ching* in the midst of the law students and their proud families. For example, little Tommy sat with his big brother at the red-deco tables and glass disk lamps where he was punctually ridiculed for expressing an interest in attending Notre Dame when he grows up—because he saw *Rudy* and already has a Fighting Irish sweatshirt. “No, no, you’ll go to Stanford too!” insisted a gray curled woman with a small crest on her golf shirt, and matching crest on her sun visor. “Maybe Harvard...” and they all agreed, mom and dad and the rest. But Tommy didn’t agree, and he was crying and everyone else laughed. Notre Dame! **Really!** I traced the photographs of black children lining the walls. I was sipping coffee, thinking about Hailie in the past tense.

“Grundle!” I disconnected and looked up.

“Jack!” I was very happy to see him. It was a long time.

“Grundle! How are you doing?” he shook my hand vigorously, “May I?”

“Of course, of course!”

He sat down calmly and well finished. Very much Jack Watco; as if the energy in his body roamed freely without impediment of parts, hands, feet, eyes, knees, they were one.

He sipped black house coffee, “What have you been up to, my friend?”

“Oh not too much, buying books, you know.”

“Uh-huh.”

“How’s the squad? How did the season turn out?”

“Shitty.”

“Really?” I was not unhappy, “Why? What happened?”

“I have to tell you Elric, after you and Jared left, a lot of crap came apart.”

“Like what?”

“Well, Chandler’s drinking became **completely** unmanageable, so I had to take over, for the most part, paying

tournament fees, renting mini-vans, that sort of thing. And then there's the Great Purge."

"What's that?"

"Squads from all over the country are ditching all the cards we ever traded with them, right? Everyone's going through their backfiles and just ditching the ev. They won't even use the backside for new briefs or anything because, like Herman Moloch told me, they're worried that some freshman will get a hold of them and **use** the cards. So they're disposing of them."

"Shit."

"Some squads have even **mailed** us back the briefs—like to say fuck you, or something. That hella blows."

"Wow."

"We're getting briefs back from Hanover and Ann Arbor, you know? N.D.T. is on alert now, and everyone has stopped typing their Affirmatives. Cut cards only. And our rep? It's in the shitter."

I shook my head. I thought something like this would happen.

"No more presumption. We're getting razzed everywhere. Everyone kidds us, but behind the kidding is a real **disdain**. It has already shook up a lot of our younger teams, like Emory asks Keith and Cindy where they got this card or that card from. And of course **they** don't know because they aren't cutting the bulk of the cards so they're freaked out. Nothing's said, you understand, no formal challenges, just 'Oh, where did you get that?'"

"Jesus. Have you spoken to Jared?"

"Yeah, and Elric, let me tell you, that kid is fucked up. He says he's going to transfer to Syracuse in the Fall."

"Really? Why?"

"He says they have a killer rhetoric program."

"What's the matter with the program here?" I asked.

"I don't know."

"Weird."

"Yeah, hella weird," he cooled his coffee and sipped it keeping his eyes on mine, "Elric, you have to come back."

"I'm expelled for the year, Jack, you know that."

"Next Autumn then."

“Noooo. I’m done with debate. You need to know when you’ve had enough.”

“Grundle, what is it? You were a **national** level debater, in the top ten. You were a threat to the Title. You’ve been debating for how long now? Four years in high school, right?”

“Yeah.”

“So nearly seven years. You can’t give that up without going to the final round at Nats. You’ll hate yourself for the rest of your life.”

“There are more important things than debate, Jack.”

“So? That’s non-unique; there are always more important things. So what? Debate is important. It’s the highest high of your life.”

“It’s a selfish high. I’m just not into it anymore. I’ve put everything into it and it has burned me.”

“That’s not exactly true, buddy. Let’s get this straight. Debate is a vehicle. It’s a game, a very high level game, it does not discriminate. It could just as easily be anything else at any time. The *reducto absurdum* would be to never play **anything ever**. Nothing.”

I steeped in my latté. I stuck a finger in. The foam was cold but the brown liquid was still too hot, insulated by the foam, no less. I scooped the foam onto Jack’s saucer, “You mind?” after I had already done it.

“Not at all.”

“I don’t have a partner.”

“You’re looking at him,” Jack was fresh grinning.

“What about Sarah?”

“She graduates this semester.”

“Jack, we’ve never really talked about what happened.”

He nodded seriously.

“Do you believe I forged those cards?”

“No I don’t. I know for a fact you didn’t.”

“How do you know?”

“Jared told me. He bragged about the fact that all the while you didn’t have a clue as to what was going on.”

“He did?”

“Yeah. I really don’t understand him. I mean if you’re going to cheat a card, okay, but forge a whole Case? Forge the biggest case anyone’s ever seen? What’s up with that? Something like that was guaranteed to blow up in his face. And the guy’s not dumb...”

“And then he told you-”

“Right! Then he fucking confessed to the whole thing, but only long after the damage had been done. What that guy thinking?”

He’s thinking frisbee, “I don’t know.”

“What do you say? Will you come back?”

“I’d have to think about it.”

Jack was pleased, “Think all you like! You have Winter, Spring, **and** Summer.”

When you believe someone, like I believed Jared, and they break their promise, a part of you shrivels up and dies forever. And if it happens often enough there is nothing left; anyway, that’s what I thought. Conversely, if you go around trying to protect yourself, trying to insulate yourself from anything getting into your heart, your heart grows cold and empty and eventually **you** shrivel up and die forever.

I didn’t intellectually blame debate, the manila folders, the blocked briefs, the warm smell of freshly xeroxed paper, or the high pitched whine of fast speaking spreaders—it was not their fault of course—but the associations haunted me, none-the-less. Room 203 in the History Corner, the smoky oak walls, the elegant wrought iron filigreed, and Jack, and Keith and Cindy were some of my eponyms.

The Winter quarter rolled across me, at class, reading texts, all very par for the course, all very dull. I meditated on debate, that abrasive game. Jack and I had coffee every now and then, where he would tell me harrowing debate tales, trying to entice me to return. One evening he said Chandler wanted to speak with me. I said I would visit during office hours, as I did the second week of April, the second week of the Spring term. I should probably mention, the 1995 National Debate Tournament was held the previous weekend, the first and the second, and from what I had learned from Jack, it was nothing short of an out and out embarrassment for my soon-to-be alma matter.

Building 120, room 330: Coach Loc Chandler.

“...and since you have expressed to me in the past, in no uncertain terms, that you would be more than enthusiastic to attend law school, I thought maybe you would care to attend the *crem de la crem* of law schools, Harvard, of course.”

“What are you saying Chandler?”

“What I am saying, if I am at all being unclear, is that you might be the proper recipient of the Senator’s Scholarship, that is, if you care to debate.”

“You threw me off the team, Chandler. You said I was a cheat and an embarrassment and you never wanted to see my face again. Those were **your** words.”

“Come now Elric, I think we both said things we didn’t mean. We all make mistakes. I make mistakes,” he pushed his oily glasses up his nose with a chubby and stout finger, “you make mistakes. Let us let bygones be gone. Water under the bridge then. What I’m offering you here, today my boy, is nothing short of your future. I could, say, appoint you President of Forensics—no one is more qualified. I could, say, conduct an investigation of the forgery incident, and find, a lone gunman, Jared say, who acted wholly without your knowledge...You were, say, the patsy! That would satisfy two out of the three criteria for the Scholarship, putting you in striking distance of those crimson gates.”

“You’ve conducted this investigation?”

“Well no, but it could be wrapped up in a week, I have no doubt. I have every confidence that witnesses will testify on your behalf. Jack would be more than willing, and a few coaches in the area owe me a favor...let’s say.”

“You mean they’d say what you want them to?”

“They would be telling the truth, would they not?”

“Well, it’s **factually** true, but they don’t know that.”

“What do they **know**? They should have known, shouldn’t they’ve? We’re your coaches, your mentors, wouldn’t you agree? As long as the right people get what they deserve, what’s to know?”

“I guess,” I shifted in the pea green chair.

“You guess? Did **you** know? Of course not. If you knew, you could have averted this whole disaster. Listen to me and listen to me good Elric, if you care to have a discussion about just desserts we can bat that idea around for a while like a good pair of arm-chair philosophers with more time on our hands than sense, but in the end, it always comes down to who gets what. And if we

already know who gets what, theeeeeen we need not expend our limited resources justifying that knowledge, do we? Did Jared forge those cards? Yes.”

I nodded listlessly.

“Did you know they were forged? No. Should you have had any presumption against your friend and partner? No. That is that. Is it not?”

I nodded again as if swept along with the tide.

“Now back to the subject at hand: you meet the Scholarship’s first two criteria and that leaves only one obstacle to overcome, i.e., a championship title. Let us say you find yourself in outrounds at Nationals and let us further say you go to the semi-final round, or take the Tournament, kit and caboodle, who do you think is on the Senator’s Advisory Board voting for you? Me. And who traditionally has voting sway? I do. Fact: more Stanford debaters have received the Scholarship in the last ten years than any other university. That is a fact, you can look it up.”

“You’re saying if I debate for you and do well at Nationals, I’ll have a good shot at the Scholarship?”

“Let’s just say you’ll have an unfair advantage. No promises mind you, but blue sky—yes, blue blue sky.”

I stared at Chandler blankly.

“Now, what do you say son? Will you come back to debate for the old Card?”

The fantasy grew in my bosom.

Harvard’s name took on mythic dimensions in the months while I ruminated. Powerful people. Leaders. People of immeasurable size. Presidents, Justices, Executives.

I imagined the old brick and the ivy, what was left of it, and the elite group of magi selected to walk the hallowed halls and the legacy that would be conferred upon them when they graduated. Their work, their word, their every capricious inflection would be beyond reproach because they were graduates of The Law School. Any mistake they had ever made would be erased. Any gaff, slip of the tongue, embarrassing pratfall, stutter or poor choice of judgment would be forgotten. Everyone would say, well sure he was a son-of-a-bitch, but ah! there was a method to his madness: look he wears the crimson cords!

I imagined coming home at Christmas, my family fawning over me and hanging on my every word. **Watch Out**, he might say something timeless, he is speaking in the tradition of kings! If only

I could get through those tall gates to Widener Library, study at Langdell, live in a hall named Ames or Holmes, I would be protected, I would have made it by every conceivable standard. I would be among the Nation's Giants. No one would be able to hurt me again. No one would ever be stolen from me again.

All I would have to do was debate to win. I soon took mental ownership of the brass bowl. It was mine for the taking.

Promise me. Promise!

I promise.

I will take care of myself.

Yes.

Unfinished business.

Yes.

The reducto absurdum.

Yes.-

The Fall quarter of '95, was my senior year, and my last scheduled year in college. I returned to Stanford and began again. I shook Chandler's hand. I hugged Jack Watco.

I had returned to take care of business. I had returned to debate.

The quarter quickly passed with a new Res: ...That the United States should significantly advance its human rights foreign policy. Jack and I made a name for ourselves, and for Stanford. Chandler was exceedingly happy, because as I found out later, he stood to gain a newly created directorship within the Communications Program, Director of Debate, as well as tenure, if his team made a strong showing this year.

The debate community was not as enthusiastic of my return. For a long while other squads shunned us, would have nothing to do with us. Twice coaches from other teams refused to judge us. Hira and Bishop, as a matter of fact. They said their personal biases would interfere with their decisions. At least they were up front enough to excuse themselves. Behind the scenes, many coaches thought I shouldn't have been debating and we lost more than a few rounds every tournament for that. As a result Jack and I had to be flawless.

The so called investigation into the forgery incident that vindicated me was denounced as a sham. Well, it was. And that

additional scarring served to further blacken my reputation. In the face of it Jack was a trooper. He kept me together and promised it would get better. Eventually it did, but it never went away entirely.

We traveled everywhere, never failing to clear. We never won a tourney that fall, but we didn't do too horribly. We usually dropped in quarters, and on occasion we would come in third. Jack won many speaker awards including first at <tournament>. We both became very persuasive speakers. We weren't going to win on technical expertise or raw analysis, we had to make ourselves appear sympathetic. Pitiably sometimes. By necessity we became very effective at persuasion and moderate speed debate. Speed made us sound cold so we had to be smarter. Only had time to make one answer to every three. We became masters of issue selection.

We attended two to three tourneys a month, which was an intense ride.

Jack and I settled into each other's style. Jack tended to be impact oriented and principled. He seemed to actually take offense at cross or cursory remarks and would seek retribution against teams stepping too far outside the boundaries of good taste. In doing so he went a long way in shining up our otherwise tarnished reputation, or should I say **my** tarnished reputation. We became the smut police. For example, during prelim rounds at the Sac State Tournament he made a huge issue out of U.C.D.'s use of the word "bitch" within their speech. He spent a whole two minutes out of the eight in Constructives castigating and admonishing this poor guy. I thought Jack was going overboard and told him to cool it. During my speech I spent a total of ten seconds extending Jack's punishment paradigm, and I wouldn't have even done that if I weren't under threat of mutiny. I thought it was some peripheral issue, more to the point of psyching U.C.D. out than anything else, but when the ballot came back it was entirely blank except to say four words, "You can't say 'bitch.'" A zero point loss to the guilty party to boot. Bye bye Davis.

I was more theoretical in nature, but also more games oriented. I played to win through strategy. I did not seek truth or attempt to punish the unprincipled. I did not believe debate was the forum for that. I just wanted to win. I had a job to do. I was thinking of the Scholarship. And when I wasn't thinking about the Scholarship, I was thinking about the Scholarship.

By Winter Term, the National Tournament four anxious months away, Stanford attended U.S.C. under the same Resolution. This was a new move for C.E.D.A., maintaining the same

resolution for the entire year, like N.D.T.—the east coast debate league. There was much talk about the way in which C.E.D.A. was becoming more and more like it's Eastern rival, the Resolution, for example was a policy topic. A merger was in the winds. What that meant for us now, and for the younger debaters later, was uncertain but we could all feel the rumbling, like the emerging giant from a long slumber in the bosom of something even bigger.

At U.S.C. a lightening bolt came down to remind us all what was important and where our priorities were. I wasn't glad it happened, but the event helped me to see who people really were and what they stood for. Since Hailie's unkind departure, I drifted away slowly, unintentionally, from the clear path. I guess I've always been weak in that way, condemned to make the same mistakes more than once. My focus was blurred and depthless as if through a wide aperture, and I has lost much mindfulness. U.S.C. was my wake-up call. It reminded me of Hailie, of the authentic life, of compassion.

It all happened when Cindy got hurt.