

## **Chapter 15 of *The Debate*, Vol. 2 by B. Douglas Robbins**

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I had been missing Hailie so badly it hurt to walk by the cyclone fenced Museum. They began reconstruction like king's horses and king's men, which meant I couldn't get inside even if I wanted to anymore. I was loath to. Well, that's not true. I wanted to be loath to. A sickness.

If Hailie had been nabbed by the authorities and I was unable to neither ascertain her whereabouts nor help to free her from her walnut-shell, I was less than human: subhuman. That's what I thought. It's kind of a funny-pathetic thing to say, "I felt as if I were not even human." That's the thing about being pathetic, it's hard to keep a straight face.

Maybe she was living with her paranoid mother and cuckolded Uncle Barley, going to school like everyone else, saying spooky things to her classmates who eventually brand her a witch. Though not an excuse, they would not be wrong.

And after the U.S.C. weekend I was missing Hailie even more. She would have known what to do.

The following day, a Tuesday, I received a call from Virginia Pierce, waking me at 7:30 in the morning. Virginia was a debate acquaintance from S.F. State, and Jack's ex. I knew her as well as I knew most people. It was an on-campus call, a single ring. She was in Stanford:

"Elric, I need you and Jack to meet me at the Cummings Art Studio," her voice pulled at both ends, airy in the middle.

I didn't bother to ask why, "I don't know if Jack is home, but I'll call."

"Oh, he's home."

Jack snagged coffee and bagels from his co-op and met me at the Claw, like many times before. The fountain dropped a languid bounty. It snapped at the fountain surface, resistant at first, then rippling like acquiescence.

"Do you think we fucked up somehow?" asked my partner.

We both knew something was very very rotten. We suspected we might have done more. More what? It was that feeling you get when you look back at an event and conjecture that had you just done one little thing different, it would have **all** been different, which is the same as saying if you had just been able to survey the future, no evil would ever have befallen.

The on the second floor, the Cummings was empty in the belly. It was hollowed out by the support of inward joining girders. Diffused light from grubby skylights feathered onto the maple slats, even strips of hard cheese. It was warm and cold, alternately invoking your sweater on and off. The tools and pieces of industry were littered like bouldered bread-crumbs, linking one painting and its stretcher bar to another.

Cindy Wahlschbaun worked on her metal marvel. She seemed to be in the process of welding a mass of automobile parts together into an ever increasing tower. Comparatively tiny distributors for legs, then rods with dead cylinders pivoted on the end for haunches, a heater box belly, rocker arms, push-rod tubes flared like a porcupine, swooping up inexplicably to a million little scads, glued to sheets, light switches and turn signals, fuse boxes and spark plugs, and a ton of multicolored wire, swirling throughout. She climbed a paint encrusted ladder, waling on a series of shiny metal shoots that flowered at the end, arranged into a tiara, while the mass precariously tilted with the introduction of more weight. Cindy ignored us. Virginia was equally cheerless.

“Have you been up all night or something?” Jack handed Virginia a cup of coffee. She nodded, flapping sugar packets. She looked bad. Soft pillows hung under her eyes, her lips slung lugubriously like hammocks.

“You know Jack,” coffee steam folded over her oily brow, “I’m pissed as hell. I don’t mind telling you. You boys are so fucking selfish.”

Jack lifted his gaze to the slumped over welder, “Virginia, what the fuck are you ranting about?”

Virginia waggled her head as if it was becoming a burden to keep upright, “What do you **think** happened to Cindy the night before last. Give me a wild guess. Where’s your head, Watco? You’re so fucking irresponsible. Even when we were together you were an irresponsible shit.”

I interrupted, “What happened to Cindy?”

“We have a real problem on our hands.”

“What happened to her?” I repeated.

“She’s been assaulted,” Virginia put a hand to her chin, as if she had a beard.

I assumed the worst.

Jack was still on the defensive, “What are—she doesn’t have any scars—where-”

Virginia hissed like steam, “Do you want me to take off her pants so you can see her fucking scars?”

Banging and clanging echoed in the girded belly. Cindy re-sparked her torch. Loose yellow flame. Ribbon. Then pinned the blue fire to a single point. Steel face mask. Green glass.

“Who?”

“Speed.”

“Shit.”

“Well how were we supposed to know?” Jack was slow, his voice pitched deeply, “We tried to help. She wouldn’t talk.”

“No fucking duh.”

“You know it’s not like we were just sitting on our ass. We were her only advocates. Elric and I, and that’s it. We tried to get her to a hospital in Los Angeles, but Chandler, you know, he said it wasn’t anything.”

“So you got bullied by Chandler again. The circuit’s perennial drunk. Is that **really** your position? Can you give me a break **now**?”

“You know, Cindy asked to go home. Did she tell you that? What were we supposed to do? There was no counterplan. Chandler had the keys and-”

“Okay, alright,” I pleaded. They were both working in well rutted roles to no end, “Has she been to a doctor?”

“No.”

“No?” Jack nearly jumped in place.

“Okay,” I said quickly, “maybe we should go.”

Virginia shook her head over coffee, “It’s her decision and she doesn’t want to go, so we’re not going anywhere.”

“You were chewing **my** ass out for not taking her to the hospital but she doesn’t want to go, and you’re not taking her anyway? What the fuck-”

“Jack, come on,” I hung an hand on his shoulder.

“It’s her decision,” Virginia leaned on the gray work table while Cindy stood eleven feet at the top of her doddering giant. “She doesn’t want to press charges.”

“Why not?”

“Even with good evidence there’s only a 10-20% conviction rate. Date rape is the worst. You get unsympathetic juror assholes, raised in the 40’s and 50’s, who think that if a woman’s let herself be raped, she’s damaged goods, and damaged goods aren’t good witnesses.”

“We have to do something,” I said.

“Cindy wants to go through the University. She’ll be protected that way. I don’t blame her either.”

Jack was as angry as I’d ever seen him and he was whispering, “That’s bullshit! Either it’s rape or it’s not. If it is, it’s a crime and deserves to be treated as a crime. If not, we shouldn’t be proceeding at all.”

“Either/Or dogmatism crap, Jack! You’re always pulling that with me, and it’s not persuasive.”

“Am I wrong? I’m not wrong.”

“No. In an ideal world you would not be wrong, but the law is made by men. We have to work with what we have not with what we wished we had.”

“She’s right,” I said.

“No she’s not right!” Anybody appeals to your sense of cynical self-loathing and you think they’re right,” he swung back to Virginia on a pivot, “Don’t turn this around. Whatever may have happened between you and me is irrelevant. A **man** raped Cindy, not mankind. I didn’t rape anybody. **Elric** didn’t rape anybody.”

“No one said you did!”

“The **law** didn’t rape her either,” insisted Jack.

“No, the law just didn’t protect her,” Virginia was slurring her words.

“Laws aren’t **proactive**.”

“Why not? Because **men** make them that way.”

“Men! Men! I didn’t **rape** anybody!”

“There are different ways to rape.”

Virginia and Jack were mauling each other while Cindy

sparked a bending monster. The hall *shussheed* in the sound of escaping oxygen and acetylene. I couldn't keep a side because it wasn't about sides **really**, it wasn't even about Cindy anymore. You have to remember that Virginia and Jack once loved each other, so they were arguing about that. It wasn't about laws or sociology, they weren't arguing about how things were, they were arguing over who they were.

"Fine, ask Elric then," said Virginia, shaking her head in disgust.

"About what?" I was drawn back in.

"Virginia wants to go though the University. The University probably doesn't even have jurisdiction!" Jack floated his hands like a conductor.

"**Cindy**," corrected Virginia, "doesn't want to go criminal. And it's probably a good move."

"But it's a **crime**. Universities do not punish **crime**."

"Shut-up Jack," said Virginia like a miffed spouse.

How was I supposed to know what to do. Jack was right, if it really was rape it needed to be treated as such, and universities were neither courts nor prisons. But Virginia had a strong argument, about the trauma of a trial and the odds of conviction. Bad odds. What would Hailie have done?

*She would have asked, "What does Cindy want to do?"*

*I would have said, "She wants to go through the University. She doesn't want to have to endure a criminal trial."*

*"And what if she does go to court? What does she get anyway?" Hailie would have held my hand while she asked that.*

*And I would have replied, "Well, if it works, she gets justice."*

*"What's that?"*

*"What's justice?"*

*"No, what does she get **exactly**," she would have drawn out "exactly" like elastic.*

*"A conviction, a prison sentence, her assailant behind bars."*

*"Ooooooh! Revenge!" then she would have smiled with new-found discovery.*

*"Not revenge, entirely."*

“So she doesn’t want revenge and you want to make her have it?”

Cindy climbed down from her crusty ladder slowly, and turned off the torch. Pulled her mask off, “**Shit!**” Her face was glazed in sweat and she was shivering. “Do you see? Do you?” she was ranting to the structure about itself, “Shit. What is this? You have no **mass**, no substance. You just go and gooooo, and when you need to **lean**,” she leaned her head then body, “you can’t, cause you’re going to fall over, so I have to put that stupid, ugly piston over there, so now you’ve got **two** directions not **one**. Look at it. All diffused and nowhere!” She shook her head, “Maybe everything is just too small. Fuck all these tiny c-clips and cotter pins. I need to go for full-on rims and doors and **glass!** Yeah glass! Fuck all these little wires.” Her eyes bounced all over, and tears ran down her face and she wasn’t embarrassed at all. She didn’t bother to wipe them off. She liked them there, right on her face.

I said softly, “Cindy doesn’t want to press charges. That’s fine. We should support her, Jack.”

Jack rolled his eyes as if I had mutinied. Virginia held her lips together, then trotted to Cindy to see if she could help. Cindy wore a tough fire-proof apron as she conferred with Virginia. They spoke under the air, Cindy rarely receiving Virginia’s eyes, and Virginia nodding constantly. The occasional phrase made itself audible after rebounding from the girders: *You—Your choice—Whatever you want.*

Jack and I stood stoically, probably as men have for generations while women spoke of the things that could only be spoken between them. We held our arms crossed. Outsiders. I felt ridiculous. There was an artificial barrier around them. I was unwelcome into the sanctuary. I was untrained and untrusted. I shared flesh with other men.

Jack was shaking, “How were we supposed to know? We **told** Chandler.”

I nodded.

Jack and Virginia discussed the details of our plan while I watched the growing mountain of steel. Virginia volunteered to contact U.C.L.A. to research what needed to be done. Jack was to do Stanford’s end. This was going to be as painless as possible, they said.

“And until you hear from me,” Virginia insisted, “Everything is confidential. Pretend you’re her attorney, Jack.

You can do that.” She hated lawyers, a funny conviction for a debater.

Jack gave Virginia a ride home. They bickered through the door. I stayed with Cindy.

By noon other artists had wandered in. One wore painter’s overalls with little anarchy A’s parading around. Others wore walkmen, emitting tiny music as you strolled past their cocked heads. Like listening to a needle on the record.

Cindy climbed down from her hulking spire, “What do you think of this?”

It was twisted and metallic like the bowels of the Mad Tinman, “I think it’s fine.”

“Does it move you?” she asked hopefully.

“No.”

“Why not?”

“I think because it’s so hard. It’s made entirely of metal. I don’t know where to put that.”

“No shit it’s made of metal!”

“How do you ever expect to move it?”

She was genuinely caught by surprise, “Hmmm,” and ignored it, “Okay, let me tell you what it’s **supposed** to do, then maybe you’ll see it. Okay, it’s supposed to push you so far that it brings you around to the other side. Do you see what I mean?”

“Sure.”

“No you don’t. Goddamn liar.”

“Sure I do,” I didn’t, “It’s just...you haven’t gone far enough.”

“Oh...”

“It’s going to take a hella lot more than this,” I said “hella” because I knew Jack would have, and I needed to be like Jack just then.

“More?” she searched around herself, “I’m kinda out of stuff.”

“That’s no reason to stop,” I needed to keep her occupied and focused.

“I usually get material from the wrecking yard, you know, over in East Palo Alto. They kick in East Palo Alto.”

“Okay, let’s go to the wreaking yard,” I said.

“Yeah, okay, but we need a truck or a van or something. Keith **always** used to go to the yard with me. He has an **awesome** set of tools and he’d get anything I wanted, no matter what.”

“I’ll call Keith.”

“No!” she yelped. Echoes from the sky panes and no one cared to notice. Inside themselves in paint and clay. “No,” she repeated, “He **hates** me, I know it.”

“He doesn’t hate you.”

“He can’t ever know what happened, or I’d just die.”

“He doesn’t have to know if you don’t want him to,” an impractical suggestion. Soon everyone would know.

“That’s not what Virginia said.”

“Virginia doesn’t know everything,” I corrected, like what must have sounded like her father contradicting her mother.

“Really?”

“Sure. Keith doesn’t have to know just now.”

“Not ever!” flush blotches below her eyes like thick brush strokes.

“Don’t you think he would want to know?” something Hailie would have said.

“No. He would think I wanted to sleep with Speed,” she sniffled.

“No one’s going to blame you. People don’t blame victims anymore.”

“Well maybe they should. You know,” Cindy flickered eyes over the floor, “there are things I could have done, Elric, and I didn’t because I thought-”

I was silent.

“It’s kind of sick,” she continued, “ but I thought no one ever gets raped if they really really don’t want to, you know, by someone they know anyway. It’s possible I didn’t try hard enough.”

“That’s crazy,” I said and Cindy’s mouth turned down at the edges and her eyes went glossy.

“I’m not sure I want to press charges at all if it means Keith has to find out. I don’t **have** to press charges,” she was remarkably lucid while her lips spasmed, and I didn’t know if it

was best to try to touch her or not.

I held out my hand.

She held hers out in response, face craned to the tip of her metal boy, like a Catholic girl expecting a rap on the knuckles. Flinched at the moment of contact.

I watched the sculpture as well, “I don’t know, you should probably talk to Virginia before you make a big decision either way. She seems to be pretty knowledgeable about this thing.”

“Yeah, I guess,” she pulled her hand from mine like a sweaty spoon from molasses.

“I’ll call Keith. We’ll go tomorrow morning, okay?”

“Just don’t tell him.”

“He already knows that **something** is wrong,” I tried to prepare her for the eventuality.

“Just be vague, until I figure out what I want to do. You can do that Elric,” she intoned sarcastically, though I did not fathom, the directed object of scorn.