

Chapter 19 of *The Debate*, Vol. 2 by B. Douglas Robbins

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After awards, word spread that Berkeley was having a post-tournament party. I wasn't much into the idea considering the final round blood circus Jack and I had waded through. Caius and Skip and Jack, though, were looking for beer and a place to unwind, "Come on," said Jack, "I'm down with debate, but if we're not making friends, what the fuck are we here for? I mean we can go back to the Farm and argue with each other if that was what it was all about."

Chandler congratulated Jack and me, "Good round boys. I'm really very proud of both of you. Of course it would have been better to win!" he made a big belly laugh, "Still I think we're making good progress on the Scholarship. For Nationals we're really going to put the nose to the grindstone, right?"

"You got it coach!" said Jack. I almost laughed.

The Berkeley party was held in a medium sized condo with a large, hard- wood lower floor, lit by torch lamps, like a stylish museum without the art. The walls were conspicuously white and rising with increasing saucy debaters from kegs and bottles.

The drink relaxed me and warmed my belly and hands. A croon of us stepped outside in a small grassy courtyard where we smoked, related war stories, and listened to the city traffic, just behind University Avenue. Jack and I had earned a lot of respect that weekend. A few others were saying that Jack and I had won the final round on the flow, but the issue of presumption and all that lost blood unjustly separated us from the ballot. I was drinking beer and smoking a Dunhill.

The nice girl who had chatted me up so well after the quarterfinal match was named Elizabeth something. Elizabeth produced some demon weed and offered some to Caius and myself. She hit the tightly rolled splinter and held out her undercupped hand, making a paisley from her thumb to middle finger with the spliff clasped at the top. Nipples peeked from a very taut white t-shirt adorned with a merry Mickey Mouse prancing above. A charcoal sweater wrapped around her waist. Caius greedily thumbed the joint and sucked down the smoke. Then I.

She asked about the final round, “What was the deal with Collin Coboarae? Why was he, like, all bleeding everywhere?”

Caius was all over it, “Oh man you should have seen it! It was unreal! Just unreal!” Caius checked left to right as if he were about to cross the street, “Okay, Speed and Zoë drop to Berkeley, and it’s an ugly drop cause it’s close as shit. U.C.L.A. kicks out of T, and at that point it looks bad for Berkeley because they’re crushing the plan with these casks and the Mobil Chernobyl thing-”

“Casks?” I ask.

“Yeah, anyway it doesn’t matter because Richard disco’s all the way on a Disad turn. And Speed? He’s a big guy, he has a temper, and he thinks he’s a real bad-ass. As we were setting up for Jack and Elric, Speed comes in and asks to see Collin outside. So Collin goes outside and they say something to each other; they’re both hella agitated and then **BAM!**” Caius smacked his fist into his palm, “Speed straight cold cocks Collin in the eye!” he was working himself up. He reached for another hit, and exhaled and weaved his stout body, “Shit! And Speed is honking ‘Give it to me! Give it to me!’ Boy did Collin ever give it to him! Collin acts like he’s stumbling and then CRACK he sneaks one good under Speed’s ribs. You could tell Speed wasn’t expecting it too, cause he got the wind knocked out of him and he took off breathing. Shit! I couldn’t believe it. I thought you said debaters don’t fight, Elric.”

“Usually, they don’t,” I said blithely. I did not think the whole thing was very funny. I had to smile at Caius, though. Seeing it through his eyes somehow made the altercation vaudeville.

“Why did Speed **do that?**” asked Elizabeth, wide eyed.

“Who knows!” Caius was relishing his position of authority; he was the eye-witness, “Speed is a fucking maniac. He’s crazy is all. Did you hear what-” he looked at me and trailed off as I shook my head remonstratively.

“Did I hear what?”

“Oh nothing. I was just going to ask if you’d heard what a sketchy maniac he is or anything.”

“Yeah, I’ve heard some bad things about him. But I know Speed, and he’s not like that,” Elizabeth smoked the joint then flicked the cherry away.

“Hey Elric, congratulations,” a medium build boy with a van-dyke shook my hand. I should have known his name. As soon as that was done, he drifted away. Other boys flocked

around and a few caught my eye and then looked away.

Unexpectedly Tim Eccerby, a heavy and pasty boy from Santa Cruz, snapped a photograph. The blinding flash froze Caius in excited revelry about the fight he was still ventilating. The flash broke the mood, like a surly reminder that all moments were a single one and that to behave in such a way at any time is to behave that way forever. Caius checked around again as if aware of some inner spectacle.

Soon Tim and Caius were arguing about Speed and Collin until they were caught in a loop. Faster and faster until it was a mild gut spread and yelping, “You would assume...” and “Turn! Turn!”

Elizabeth took a swig out of a brandless, green wine bottle, glimmering around and through, “I fucking hate listening to debaters talk about real life as if it were their 2AR. It’s like they’re trying to put something in order that can’t ever get that way because it’s not like that.”

“It’s not like what?”

“Like that!” she exclaimed as if it were self evident. She gulped some wine and offered me the neck. I swung the bottle and it put me in a trance.

How do you answer rage? Elizabeth was saying something, “How do you answer rage with debate lingo? You can’t non-unique it to death.”

“Rage isn’t an argument. It’s a claim without a warrant,” I responded instinctually like a red eyed little animal forced to defend its den.

“It’s real.”

“It’s real, okay, but it doesn’t **mean** anything. It is not a reason to do anything.”

Elizabeth was playfully appalled, “Why not?”

“Cause it’s arbitrary. It’s random. **Anyone** can feel it at any time for all sorts of unjustified reasons, and if you feel rage it doesn’t mean **I** feel rage. Reason is different. If it makes sense, it makes sense to you **and** me. We can agree on it.”

“If that were true there would be no debate,” Elizabeth smiled bewitchingly, tilted the translucent bottle, and the hemlock shot through her squeezed lips.

Collin Coboarae charged in without warning, “Elric, good round! Good round my friend,” he pumped my hand, “You boys

sure are deep on Narrative Theory.”

I smiled. How do you behave when someone is blatantly ingratiating themselves at your expense? Someone was always ingratiating themselves, it seemed, and I was always left feeling used.

“Come on inside! Let me pour you a real drink by way of extending Blue and Gold hospitality, come on now!” Collin wrapped his arm around my shoulder as if we were old chums, and I grabbed Elizabeth’s hand. He was quite drunk. His tongue and lips resounded thickly, and he had an odd nasal quality as if he were trying to cry but could not. He sounded much better than before though. The three of us weaved inside where it was warmer and smokier and louder.

The creakle-scratch of a record prelude popped followed by the smooth bass line. The wavy synthesizer glimmered and shined that everything was in motion, and then the sonorous, “Oh you can tell by the way I use my walk, I’m a woman’s man, no time to talk...” The Bee Gee’s stood proudly in the background, hair parted and feathered, big pointy collars, and tight crotched slacks on the upstanding album, perched on top of the opaque turn table dust-cover.

Drunk kids swayed their hips, pointing alternately to the floor, then the sky. Some wore ratty t’s, some had silky ties on, some had shiny reflective synthetic shirts and pointy collars themselves, and except for a few Asians most everyone else was white—just like the 70’s—but all were Stayin’ Alive, “It’s alright, it’s okay, you can look the other way...”

Collin Coboarae led us to the kitchen bar. He hurriedly made drinks from ice and hard alcohol, a punch, and orange juice. Elizabeth was smiling and smoothing to the music and singing.

In the light of the kitchen, Collin’s swollen eye shined. It was swollen shut and tiny blood vessels were broken all around it like pinpointed by-standards. He carried on as if he were fine. The heady effect was much like laughing at a sick, but sad joke.

Elizabeth raised the issue, “How’s your eye?”

“Oh this?” he pointed to his head with the plastic stirrer, “It looks ugly, but it hurts like hell.”

Elizabeth and I laughed.

“Why were you and Speed fighting?” she was curious and moving to the music, *I’m stayin’ aliiiiiiiiiiiiive! Yeah!*

“I don’t know. Because Richard and I humiliated him in

outrounds. We crushed his counterplan and made him eat his own Disad like a big dog,” Collin handed us an icy jacinth concoction, “Try this.” I thanked him but did not drink. “Isn’t that crazy?” he seemed incredulous while the bulb on his head defied him. His face contorted, half of it raised brows and an arched smile, while the other half scowled like an angry necromancer. *I’m goin’ nowhere, somebody help me there!*

“You’re so chill!” Elizabeth drank her nameless wine, “I’d want blood if someone attacked me like that. Look at your eye!”

“There’s no point in getting worked up over it, now is there?” an uneasy smile; maybe it pained him. Then a change in tone, “God! He really has serious problems, I would say. He’s exhibiting violence as a response to speech, and what have I ever done to him? Why did he have to do that? Look at my eye! Damn! And I’m not the first, I know that,” he nodded solemnly, “What happened to Cindy is a real tragedy. My eye will heal, whereas that poor girl...Are there no stones in heaven?”

His face changed before my eyes. Instead of a lumen bulb festering from black and blue eye socket, I saw a wounded boy.

The turntable arm was scratched off: *voooot!* The *Pulp Fiction* soundtrack replaced the disco. *If any of you fuckin’ pricks move I’ll execute every one of you motherfuckers!* Jack was chatting with Richard Hobbes across the room. *Hey! Hey!*

Collin busied himself with some ice and cranberry vodka, “And Zoë? Can you believe her? How does heaven make such a cheat?” He paused at each of us in turn. I was non-responsive, “God! She weeps and lies and then weeps more and lies more. Like a crocodile! She is like the jezebel that lies with Speed then lies for Speed, who takes from young girls what they aren’t more willing to part with.”

Elizabeth’s words came alive, “Zoë Weatherfield? I know Zoë and she’s not like that! I don’t think you know what you’re talking about, Collin.”

“Tell that to Cindy! Look at my face. Tell that to my face. Cindy looks like me, on the inside. That’s what Zoë is all about. That bitch. That black weed never should have been born,” his eye cocked to one side and his lips were coated like the glossy leach. I was wobbly and unbalanced. Who was Collin? What did he want? My protectiveness toward Cindy banged against my deep affection for Zoë—Zoë, after all saved me at the Emerald City, she was the cinnamon girl at the Pyramids—like opposing ram-rods at Collin’s head, and his face twisted and mutated like exposed wax. His blonde head rolled and his high cheek bones bubbled around while

the third bulge roamed like a lost mouse.

The CD skipped to mad chanting: *The path of the righteous man is beset on all sides by the inequities of the selfish and the tyranny of evil men...*

“Look Collin,” I said, “What leads you to believe that Zoë is doing anything but the right thing? She is probably the most honest, most-”

“I have proof,” he was plain and calm.

“What do you have?” I responded snidely. I couldn’t help it.

“I have a tape.”

The CD blasted five, six gunshots, it skipped and...*when I lay my vengeance upon you. bam! bam! bam!* More gunshots. Something crashed and the sermon stopped.

Collin shot off like a bullet. Jack was on the other side of the living room, having gathered Richard up in his grip. He was snarling like a jackal. I had never seen him like that. I rushed over unthinking. I moved while my surroundings slowed.

Collin is charging before me. He swoops down and breaks Jack’s grip like red-rover and he buffers between them. I am less than an instant behind, though many small things are occurring. I rush past a surprised girl who pulls her jaw in and double chins at the neck. Her expression is comical. Another boy spills his drink when Collin jumps between the brawlers. The light of the ceiling sways. I jump into the center, Collin at my side. Collin faces Richard. I face Jack. He looks sick. His face is splotchy like the newborn child and almost as wet. There is great rage in the indignity of becoming. A round gathering around us—spectators at an imminent street fight.

Richard is out of control. His black hair is tousled, and his limbs flay around. His tone is like someone who has nothing to lose, “Hey, hey! You wanta PIECE OF ME! When I drop your ass in round, comin’ after me with fists doesn’t mean anything! It doesn’t change it! it doesn’t...You are second place. You’re number two!”

I whisper to Jack, “What is the matter with you?” He won’t look at me. Ashamed. Enraged. Quaking. His lips are shiny and trembling. His eyes twitch.

Richard resumes his rant, as if someone asked him a question, “Nothing. Nothing is going on!” which is very peculiar because no one has asked him what was going on and clearly

something is. He is out of synch, like a sprocket with broken teeth, like someone in hell strapped to the wheel.

And he is transparent in his hate, “I was just suggestion that you Stanfords need to protect its women better,” he glances at Collin sickly and makes what he thinks is a grin.

I still can’t believe this is happening. It is too unreal. It is so puce, so ugly. It must be staged. I’m asking Jack, “What is he saying?”

“Cindy...” creaks Jack.

And it all comes together and I feel my heart rappen and my head is full of energy, with no place to go. Much like the night I became sick, my chest tingles cold and white, and it’s starting all over again. I know what’s coming, if I can’t get it out, it will gore me. Again. I’m at Richard’s head, “What’s the matter with you?” I’m coming apart at the seams, yet I’m afraid of my own poor sniveling animal. It wants the ancient savage. And I hold back from cursing or kicking. *Hit him! Hit him!* I equivocate. A deep fear of chaos. The **real** possibility, where the world is ruled by whimsy and mobish furies. The firebombs. I pull back.

Richard stumbles, “Hey, no biggie. I’m just kidding,” one eye stares at Collin, the other wanders, “I guess by **her** age she’s used property,” he tries to focus on me, “She’s from Kansas, right? There’s no place like home,” *Ha*, “Isn’t that how it is in Kansas? First her daddy has her, then her brothers, her brothers. Fuck! With all that the inbreeding, I’m surprised the whole bitch herd isn’t stone cold loony-tooney. Craaaaaaaazy, you know,” he’s swirling his finger by his ear, “Aunt Mae! Aunt Mae! Daddy’s doing me again!”

A wonderful calm washes over me when I realize what is going to happen. I am going to lunge for Richard’s throat and squeeze it until my hands are drained of all blood or I fall asleep. It is certain, and my body slackens, the sinews holding everything together. Muscles relax because it is certain what is going to happen. Nothing short of anything will stop it because it is not me it is the series of events as they are turning. I am watching them and they are turning through me now. I am the events. I can watch them like on TV. Tremendous relief is apparent, so much tension, so much angst, and deliberation, when it is this easy. I will grab his throat and squeeze it. It is just going to happen. I am jovial at the thought. The certainty. I am more free than I have ever been. I don’t consider the past or future, just the certainty of action that I am.

I spring over Collin, much higher than I expected possible.

Arms grab for his face, his throat. I'm a single motion of lunge and grab. I extend for his throat but miss it. I think I hit him somewhere it is soft, but now I am toppled over myself. Richard is fast and rolling away, and I am on my hands and shoulders trying to look up from the heavy weight. I feel slow like in a dream where you try to run as fast as you can only to move like a dinosaur in tar. I'm like that, drugged with the body. Feet and legs all around me. I crawl onto Richard like a lizard taking possession of its rock. Nothing more. And I take his soft throat in my hands. It's much softer in the front than I expected and sort of ribbed like a phallus and I jam my thumbs into that soft place. So easy. Richard's engorged head is pinched at the throat where my hands meet it. It isn't even me. It is something else making me, it's Hailie; it's Cindy; it's Jared. They need me to. Jared wants me to punish him. He needs me to. Cindy needs me to save her. Hailie needs me to save myself and it all amounts to the same thing.

A twisted grin, a pink flesh, my arms jutting out from his throat as if they were his neck bone. A tough job someone has to do. He's begging me to do it.

I am knocked away. Retched from my soft throat. I must get back to him before it is too late, before I turn back to normal and think twice, see both sides of the argument, get bogged down in perspective and relative goo.

Someone is dragging me up, the weight is lifted, and it smells like Jack and his arms are flexible and strong like Jack's. It is very quiet.

Richard is screaming hoarsely but I can't decipher the meaning, "Crazy! SHIT! No wonder your partner backed your back!" and wild laughing like Judas and Brutus, "Fuck your shit! Fuck your stooooopid shit! Hell, I say it! You crazy monkey sucker!" It's making no sense but it's been Richard all along. The whole time. Richard does it to Jared. He does it to me. And we both think it's each other.

Jack and Caius and someone else is pulling me up and rushes me outside. I am dizzy and I puke on the sidewalk. The air is moist and the streetlights provide fleshy illumination. I feel better, but wish I had been faster. I wish I could have grabbed his throat and squeezed it harder. I'm not obsessed with the idea, it just would have been nice to see his eyes fall straight out of his head as he tries to loosen my grip, pull at my iron hands, and tries to kick me but I'm locked at his throat.

Soon he would pass out, but the blood still pumps. Ah! This is the mistake too easy to make! The brain will pass out

minutes before it actually dies. Kill the body and the head will follow. So it is important to continue at the throat long beyond the point at which he loses consciousness.

I feel my own hands. They are white and almost numb. They are clear and bloodless. I damn my cleanliness. I damn my unbloodied hands. It seems like a cowardly condition, like the condition of someone who has never done anything.

Jack is talking to me. I can't hear him. Elizabeth holds my hand. Virginia stammers and steps in the light. A rush of kids exit the party. They swoop past us. Some stop to watch as if they had paid admission. I'm cold and clammy. Elizabeth is warm, Jack is squawking. It seems a pity to have been pulled off the throat like that. My throat. A real shame. And that's all I can think.