

Chapter 4 of *The Debate*, Vol. 2
by B. Douglas Robbins

douglas@medialawgroup.net
bdouglasrobbins@gmail.com

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

Now, if I had known then, what was about to happen that soothingly warm Nevada evening, I probably never would have gone. But I didn't know.

We rode with U.C.L.A. to their twelfth story room at the Stardust where we met up with what Speed called the Inner Circle. The inner what? In their hotel room Speed and two others began tearing up the room. They pushed the tables and chairs into the bathroom and shoved the mattresses from their yellow box springs until the whole room was wall to wall bed, with a small table stationed at the center. We removed our shoes at Zoë's behest, and I wondered what childish party games were in store. There was a certain incongruity that spooked me, however, in that everyone moved with such **solemn purpose**, not like we were about to engage in shitfaced drinking and whip-creamed games, but more dutiful, more respectful, more quietly now. The lights were muted by red cloth, red rugby shirts, red bandannas, red panties. Speed produced two thermoses and placed them on the small central table.

Speed poured black broth from one of the thermoses, "Allright, we have two kinds of Kool-Aid, my friends, **this** stuff," he held up his paper Stardust cup, "is for lions, the other stuff is for lambs. This is to be as children. The other is to close the door on childhood." With that he drank, "Who will drink with me?"

Smiling obsidian eyes trotted forward drinking small Stardust paper cups. Then Jack did likewise, then Keith, then Zoë, then I. It tasted like Kool-Aid, so I slugged back another. As I reached for my third cup (I was thirsty!) Speed grabbed my hand:

"Easy there cowboy. You sure you want to be doing that?"

"What? Why?" I said

"Uh Elric," Speed whispered suddenly, knitting his eyebrows, "do you know what you're drinking?"

"Kool-Aid," I replied knowing I couldn't possibly be right.

"Try 200 micro-gram shooters: pure Jesus Christ Super

Star.”

“What kind of drink is that?”

“It’s Electric Kool-Aid.”

“What makes it eclectic?”

“**Electric**,” Speed whispered intently into my ear, “It’s high octane liquid L-S-Deee. L.A.’s finest. Uh Zoë...” he turned to his partner who was out-stretched on one of the box springs, “didn’t you **tell** Stanford over here what was happening over there?”

“Of course! I told Jack and...” she bolted upright, “Oh shit. Elric, didn’t you **hear** me?”

“Hear you say what?” I was sinking.

“Oh God! Oh Elric, I’m **soooo** sorry. I feel like a fool! I thought-”

“No, no no, it’s okay, it’s **fine**. I’m into it. I’m into this.” There I was, practically drugged by Speed, Zoë, and their band of merry witches, and I was afraid of bruising their feelings. But if you could have just seen how Zoë’s sharp gray eyes pleaded and how her voice spoke a bright line to heaven you would have understood—she was very sorry.

Zoë placed a warm hand on my chest, “Elric, have you ever eaten L?”

“Well, no.”

“Okay, **I**m going to be your personal guru on this trip, so relax, turn off your mind, and if anything gets too hairy, remember to float downstream.”

“Float downstream.”

“Right. And you should have this,” she pranced off to the corner of the room, rummaged through a knapsack and returned with a ski cap.

“It’s a ski cap! We’re in Nevada. It must be 75 degrees tonight!”

“I know. I’m **giving** it to you...to wear,” she was so hopeful, so intense, eyes opened wide and in there galaxies swirled like starfish, “It’s a hunting cap, not a ski cap. I used to wear it when my brothers and I went hunting.”

“You hunt?”

“Sure.”

“But that’s killing.”

“I know that...It’s really all a matter of how it’s done.’

“There is a **good** way to kill defenseless animals?”

“Of course.”

Jack moved up beside me. I asked him, “How long is this supposed to last?”

He grinned and hesitantly said, “Uh, a while,” gypsum white teeth flashed behind silky reddish cheeks.

Zoë came bounding back over the mattresses, “Okay let’s go guys. We’ll meet up with them later.” Keith was cross-legged in a circle ensconced in Speed, two other boys, Virginia Pierce, a top seed from S.F. State, and another girl with long hair. I told Zoë I was still thirsty.

“Don’t drink anything! Hold on!” she rushed away and came back with a chartreuse bottle of Gatorade, “Here.”

Zoë, Jack and I left the Stardust and headed down the Strip. At the magnificently decadent MGM Grand a massive green structure sprawled like a cross, dreamily over the yellow desert. That’s what Zoë said, the desert was yellow. A gargantuan MGM Lion surveyed the comings and goings of gamblers through emerald pyramid eyes, dreaming, I imagined, of money and sleaze. We passed through the air lock, a rush of cool air blasted us clean like immigrants—into the current fantasy: The Wizard of Oz.

Then things started to get weird.

Who would have ever dreamed of a lion so large? A very little man I deduced. A very tiny man, just like the **Wizard** from the **Wizard of Oz**! Yes! Precisely! That thought struck me profoundly, as if everything could be reduced to it, as if the implications of that one premise would be enough to base your goddamn **religion on**, or something. Is humanity nothing but pitiful in presence and but a small part of the lion sized universe? Surely it is. And that seemed so essentially ironic I began to laugh—*Aaaaahh! Haaaa Ahhhh*—and I couldn’t stop. I giggled like a mad man. Surely I did. Zoë and Jack minded me carefully and the older gamblers ignored me all together.

We were drawn toward a huge emerald crystal structure planted at the center of the Casino’s grand domed foyer. It must have been at least an acre in girth, and the longer I stared the further it went until it stretched to forever: The Emerald City! A yellow brick road weaved into us like a jaundiced tongue at the emerald mouth, upon which stood the Straw Man, the Tin Woodsman, the

Lion—the Lion! right!—and Dorothy, floating over ruby slippers.

“Uh, Jack,” I giggled uncontrollably. What was so funny? Why nothing short of **everything**. We were at the goddamn Emerald City face to face with the goddamn Wizard! of all people, and it was all melting like a beatific bomb pop, while Jack’s face mutates into the Lion, and I have to get this out before it’s lost forever. It is imperative: “Jack...uh-”

“I am the Lion King! I can do anything!” he spits from black eye sockets. He knows! He freaking knows! It’s syncro! Mysto!

“Lion...lion..”

“I know...”

“Jack, we’re not in Kansas anymore.”

“No, we’re not Dorothy,” he says, glazed tightly.

Too freaking much!

And we’re off to see the Wizard—but unusually so! Wobbly vibrato in yellow bricks oozing past the wild carpet and easing into the corn field. A **corn field** fantasy in Nevada! That’s what people are into. They **like** corn, even while gambling, people just naturally like **corn**! And I groove with that while the greenstalk stalks weave in and out of syncopation with the top forty pop muzak, it is R.E.M. for godssake, “Shiny happy people laughing, Shiny haaaapee!”

The Wizard flies overhead in his rainbow striped hot air balloon, “Oh nooo!” he bellows, lips still, “It’s out of control! Bye bye!” That crazy Wizard, if he would just stop shimmering tapioca pudding in a glass paned popcorn maker: *splat—pop! sheeengh!* An electric guitar hammers in my brain pan and it is drifting out like the Apollo, it is consuming me...“Too much,” I whisper. Jack can’t hear. “Too much!” whispering so fearful that nothing more than a hearty scream would rock, **permanently rock**, this reality from its foundation—so hard there could be no reconstruction, no escape even for the holy! “Too much,” whispering. It takes me quaking and vibrating and the Emerald Palace registers as a lurid green glowing **smeeear**. No one can live there, because it is too perfect, can’t you see, no one can live in a green crystal perfection—no one! It has been tried, a thousand minute men in a tiny multiplex, perfectly lined, like notes in time. It cannot be done because we have **limits**, one and all. Limits: the word reverberates limits its its its itssss—*But how in apprehension like a God! Shoooooosh-sh-sh-sh-sh!*

Is any of this **real**? What is real and what does thinking

make it so? If that is true, I can **make** anything so, through no more than wanting, hoping, believing. But certain finite elements such as the hard floor, and those green crystals::::I can't **hope** them away, and in that instant I shut my eyes and all the green burns red crimson: the Blood Crystal City! I can believe it not. Not not::::*He who believeth in me shall not die but live in everlasting light.* Believe it, Believe it.....

I open my sticky eyes, wetness seeping down my cheek, "Jack where is my...where is Zoë?"

"She's there!"

Zoë examines Dorothy's smile, her dress, her shimmering slippers on the **other side** of the fence that separates Vegas from Oz. I rush at her, stopping at the barrier. Her eyes are great swirling whirlpools in the sky. Her hair is a waterfall of fire.

"Come see the enchanted forest! Look! The Tin Man," tears stream from her red rimmed sockets, "He has a heart now. Isn't that amazing?" Like cherubs wings: *Isn't that a-maze-maze-mazing-gggggg?*

"Zoë, come back to our side! Come back over," I pronounce in an emphatic whisper, for fear that a louder volume would lift my skull cap right off the odontoid peg. That and the *fear*. The fear of the other. There are most certainly forces working against us in our mission to find Oz. We are on a mission, without a doubt, and if we are on a mission, those who would work against us, the flying monkeys, will swoop down from the sky suspended by invisible cable, any moment now, to **foil** our quest. Yes, fear of the other. Yes.

Zoë glazed me over in a silver shine, "What ever for? I'm in **Oz!** See the Emerald City?"

"No! No! No! Come back. You can't stay there. It is forbidden!" I cannot control my voice, openly weeping, "COME BACK! SURELY THEY WILL CATCH YOU!" We are attracting a dangerous crowd of shutterbug happy tourist types in pressed shorts and pressed smiles and fussing and nudging each other and laughing like **maniacs**, and **I'm** supposed to be the mad one! Then high in the overhead sky dome, "Ehhhhhh! Ehhhhhh! I'll get you my pretties," the Wicked Witch of the West flies on a broomstick. I begin to feel thirsty again.

I am reaching over the two foot fence for Zoë as if it is a ten foot tall steel barred gate, as if it is my last hope. And it is. Her face is a fluid maelstrom, unlimited, first a man now a lion, "Roooar!" she mocks me. I have to giggle in the presence of such a

cosmic joke, I mean, the range, the fantastic **range** and flexibility. *He he he! She turned into a lion!* She might be **anything**, so then what does that make us?

“Come on Zoë,” I cry, “before something baaad happens.”

“Like what?” she responds rather coolly, especially for a girl with her head on fire.

“Before they come for us.”

“Who’s coming for us?” she was toying with me.

“Are you toying with me?” I ask.

“Toying, you mean playing? Of course I’m playing with you Elric. That’s what we’re **doing**. We’re playing.”

Of course! We’re **playing!** “Okay. Let’s go before the, the...”

“Who? You don’t know, do you?”

“They could be watching us right now!” And its the *fear*, it’s just the *fear*, but it can’t be said.

“And suppose they’re not? Suppose no one is after us and we are perfectly safe as houses but you insist on sucking me into your dark little paranoid world? What will we do there? Will we **play** there?”

“I’m just trying to be safe.”

“Be safe? Don’t you want to **do** anything?”

I reach out to grab her arm. She moves away, and the flexible plastic fence between us braces my lean. It is bending and swaying, much like the corn stalks, rubbery, and well, fake!

“Listen to my words, Elric, they come from love. Remember that,” she is glowing strongly, “Be here with me now. All we have is each other...” *The Beautiful People*.

I spin around to follow Zoë’s gaze. A harass of elderly gambler types in strange synthetic clothes, texturized clothes, and texturized faces of the well traveled pain of old age, cower interestedly. Some wear their trousers hiked up too high, and bright pink half jackets, and they all look right through me. To them I am one of yet another attraction for their amusement. *Behold ladies and gentlemen, the Cowardly Lion!* It’s always been that way, has it not? It’s how they made me; I never had a chance, so thirsty, more thirsty than anyone.

Hypnotized by Zoë’s ruddy blush, quivering slowly about her cheek, in anxious search of a hiding place, I step over the fence;

she steps forward and with that we exchange positions. Now she is arm-in-arm with Jack and I am on the inside looking out. In Oz, no less.

What limitless freedom! It is as if I am finally home, back at the starting place to know it for the first time. All the wrangling is so useless, so pointless, a caramel bell in my chest, a shuffling miser and sweating teeth; how much foam can we stand on and on, a tower of white goop—

Then security comes.

Blue Meanies march up to the yellow perimeter—large men, blue and angry at the bulk of their own bodies, bodies they neither asked for, nor had a chance to refuse.

“Okay cowboy, hows abouts gettin’ out of there?” says the first blue wobbly figure. I step from Oz silently, like a reprimanded little boy. “Son, do you have any I.D?”

Before I can gather my shamed whispers, Zoë jumps in with eyes as black as gaping holes in the sky, “I’m sorry officer. He’s my responsibility. I should have been looking after him, but I just got so distracted what with all these lights, you understand. A girl’s never **seen** so many lights.” They nod in unison, because they know the lights in Vegas never go out, they know it because their very **brains** are hard wired together, and who knows if they can even hear her, but that doesn’t even matter because they are mesmerized by her very presence. She is looking straight into them, a beatific expression more worthy of Pan’s apple.

“He’s your responsibility mam?”

“Yes officer, he’s a little slow, developmentally disabled and all. He’s very high functioning but still, he’s a child in a man’s body.”

“I’m thirsty,” I tell her.

“Drink your Gatorade,” she motions to the bottle in my own hand.

And flying on 200 gigawatts of Electric Kool-Aid, she is pulling it off. They believe her because they’re in love, and you always believe the one you love, for love and truth are lovers themselves. Is she lying? Well, in some pedestrian sense of course, but that is quite irrelevant, because together, all three of them are making it true. They’re chatting about the sorts of crazies that come gambling, and you wouldn’t believe it if I told you, miss, but let me put it this way, it’s a dangerous job and things get pretty rough, but we’re professionals...so she believes their petty conceits and exaggerations in giggly smiles and bashful cooing and

they believe her ersatz realities: *And don't you worry little lady if it's not true, you and I and the rest of this Casino and God himself will work like maniacs to make it true; don't you worry your pretty little head.*

“Okay now, you try to keep him out of trouble now, you hear Zoë?”

“Oh, sure thing, Jim. No more trips to Oz for him,” and they laugh like they'd never heard anything so funny.

As the Meanies leave I swing to Zoë, “You saved me!”

“No I didn't!” she stamps her foot, smiling.

“They were going to take me away!”

“Those guys? They're rent-a-cops. They wouldn't have taken anything you wouldn't have sooner parted with.”

“They wanted my I.D! Once they know who you are, it's all over!”

“Do you even **have** your I.D. with you?”

“Uh, no...I left it...”

Zoë is laughing strongly, “Then they couldn't have gotten **anything**, could they?”

Jack stammers, “You...you...you were lost in Oz!”

“I think we should go,” suggests Zoë, “You two are behaving like drug addled idiots.”

We exit the Grand while the Wicked Witch iterates her tired warning, “I'll get you my pretties!” Strolling through bright lights and warm gusts we pass innumerable gamblers and hustlers and raunchy sex fliers, Tiki Gods, Arthur's Merlin, and eventually, the Pharaoh's tomb. A white beam blasts at the heavens from the peak of a jet black pyramidal crystal, and we are drawn to it. An endless light, never waning. The mute Sphinx gazes love at the sable sky, and an obelisk stands guard before an even deeper desert presence. One of the oldest symbols of power and death beacons our arrival. We cross the bridge and descend not into the resting place of pharaohs, but a den of clinking quarters, garishly lit roulette tables, small minded motivations, greed, self importance, fantasy, and willing self deception. A river runs the inner perimeter of the hollow black pyramid. The walls are sheathed in hotel rooms. At the center is another, smaller step pyramid. A pyramid within a pyramid! I ride the Nile by myself in a small skiff. I am moving over the face of the waters in creation. Jack and Zoë leave but promise to return. They have been giving each other soft eyes all

night. I might be jealous of them both.

Upon exiting the Pharaoh's tomb, we wait at the street. Zoë taps a clicky shoe. What are we waiting for? A surreal vision of Speed careening down Las Vegas Boulevard in a golf-cart tram, hauling three other kids, hanging on like standing cable car riders, swells from the neon avenue. The cart reads "U.N.L.V." at front.

Speed pulls up and jump out, "Smiles everyone smiles!" as do his three passengers, one of which is Keith. "Hi guys!" he waves energetically, though we are but three feet from him.

Speed rushes over squawking wildly, "Oh man, this **is** the shit! Right Z? Listen, I think we should bring this Test together, don cha think?" Without waiting for a response he rat-a-tats, "Right, right, right, right! So we need to jet back to Stardust to play C the P."

Brightly Zoë chants, "Go Speed, go!" and wraps herself around him.

Once rolling down the glaring avenue, the warm air feels like a cleansing wash, but the boys are talking trash as we pass the Excalibur and the boy with mutton chops and lovely auburn eyes insists, as heaven is his witness, that the casino's management still rapes and sacrifices teenage virgins to the Horned God Rotor, while wired on high grade Latin cocaine. "It has become an institution," he insists, "They book conventions, and not even the government can stop them, as if they would **want** to!" I try to tune out their demented paranoia. I am having enough troubles as it is without made up ones.

Sirens wail across Tropicana Avenue from proliferating ambulances. We have been hearing them all night, and I did not notice, maybe because their ubiquitous strobes are not so different from all the other sources of flashing light, inextinguishable, unquenchable. What is happening on this strip of pavement that ambulances need to roam like a bevy of roebucks circling for food? Truly evil is afoot. I can feel it.

Up eleven stories to the twelfth and into our bedded harem at the Stardust, shoes off, red light on. A real party is in progress. Virginia Pierce from San Francisco is present, chatting with Keith's partner Cindy Wahlschbaun, as are a number of debaters from Berkeley, Paulander Lee, Christian Vollique, Bobbie Wozniack. Speed announces, "Okay folks, up for a game?" he slides a cigarette into his mouth and passes the pack, "Time for Crush the Puppy, eh? Only the strong survive." He yanks off a lid on one of his banana boxes, reading "Let's break that speed record" beside Speed Racer and the Mark five. He tears small bits from a flow

and instructs us to write “tasks” and to deposit them in the 1994 Raisin Tournament Championship Urn. We would take turns extracting tasks from the urn. Whomever didn’t perform the task would be out. In theory, everyone could win, he explained, but often it doesn’t work out that way. “It is a game of trust. A game of chance. You don’t always get what you want, but you get what you **need**. Who’s first?”

The boy with the cute mop and a U.C.L.A. sweatshirt tied around his waist steps up to the urn at the center table and draws, “Pick five other people and smoke the Bull.” Sweatshirt picks Speed, Keith, the long haired girl, and myself. Paulander complains he wants to smoke dope. The sweatshirt says okay and kicks Speed off the Bullshark team. Sweatshirt extracts a homemade fiberglass bull bong with six blue rubber utters, a shark fin on its back, and a shrunken \$100.00 bill for a tail. Mooing ensues as Sweatshirt stuffs greenbud into the Bullshark’s crown. I feel thirsty again, but before I tell Zoë, I find my bottle and suck on it.

“Now everyone draw hard at the same time,” Sweatshirt is excited, “We all have to be synchronized for it to work. Okay, all together now!” He lights the crown and we suck the smoking Bullshark-*gurgle gurgle gurgle gurgle—Pow!* Again, again. The bud turns to ash and our brains turn to mush.

After that, everything melts around me. A siege is filing into the bathroom, the shower goes on and lurid screaming, and wet people, some naked running around, “The shower has no solvency!” *Har har haaaaaaa!* The ossified strangeness speeeds up from people to red foxes, the people trotting around the beds, “One flew east one flew west one flew over the coo coo’s nest...” chanting. I am unable to move under so much pudding **everywhere**, thick molasses inveighing my heavy body, and the Las Vegas lights burn through the open window, never dimming.