

## **Chapter 9 of *The Debate*, Vol. 2 by B. Douglas Robbins**

**douglas@medialawgroup.net  
bdouglasrobbins@gmail.com**

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### *How did I get here?*

I was well liked at Seramonte, the middle class high school I attended in Inglewood. I had plenty of friends. Well, maybe more like people I knew and spent a lot of time with, but by no means was I ever alone. I mean, there was always so much stuff happening. Somewhere in between graduating Most Likely to Succeed and my third year at Stanford, I had come to detest all the things that had worked to my advantage for so long.

Two weeks had passed since my encounter with the girl with the green lamp. I had scant memory of what was said up in her attic at the top of the Museum, as few memories came easily to me in the period after my illness. Each day, though, my mind became stronger, but I had to work at it like a crash victim in physical therapy. I practiced my powers of recall constantly.

I did remember Hailie's deep set eyes, her dark, green, wooden attic, her teas and other assorted images and haunting expressions. I should have been frightened by them. Anyone else would have been. To me, though, they were nubilous enchantments. I remembered the stinging sensation of her applying spearmint moisturizer to my flaking lips. I remembered warm blankets appearing out of thin air. I remembered her holding my head like a friend of many years. Most of all, I remembered the deepest sense of gratitude. I felt I owed her my life.

I walked around campus to my classes: Berlinski, Mintent, Roncek. Discussions about art, philosophy, modernity all fell flatly. I ate dinner alone. I studied and regurgitated as required, without excitement and I was lonely and bored and something else I couldn't quite get a grip on. My grandmother used to say that only stupid people get bored so I tried not to think about it.

Mid November: finals approached and rain crashed down mercilessly. Surprisingly, the rain was of little consolation. My homework load lightened in anticipation of finals. The professors had learned, a long time ago, that students uniformly shrugged off mid-November assignments. Review sessions though, became fadishly popular.

I, though, could no longer distract myself so nimbly with school-work. I was flush with fantasies of revenge. I imagined elaborate hand to hand melees with Jared. I would bash his head mercilessly. Then I would fix his head because it was too easy, and then threaten to enact terrible tortures. But not even in my fantasies could I find satisfaction. I kept imagining him asking if I wanted to play frisbee yet. *Bash! Bash!* And blood would run all over the arcade and seep into the tiny etchings and grooves of the walk of fame, 98, 99, 00, and the back of his head would be soft and sopping like melon, and through the whole thing he would entreat hopefully, “Frisbee golf? Ultimate? I double-dare you!”

So it never helped; I never felt better and often worse. I was blocked. My chakras or something.

Thanksgiving evening. Most of the campus went home for the holiday. I could have gone home, I suppose, but that would have entailed spending the week-end with my family. I biked to the market on the El Camino to buy a lame Hungry Man turkey dinner or something normal like that, but half way there I turned back in recognition that it was only melodramatic misery to buy a fucking frozen dinner. The distinction had long eluded me.

For no reason I could articulate I biked back up Palm Drive to the neoclassical respectability of the Leland Stanford Jr. Museum, and her painterly images. I was searching for a green light.

It glowed green, so I climbed the wet fire escape, where I found the unlocked lever. I pushed open, through the short corridor, dangling tentacles and found the cross-legged girl and her Coleman camping lamp.

“Would you like some tea?” she was undisturbed by my arrival, as if I were keeping an appointment.

“Please.” She made me a tart tea, reminiscent of rose hips.

“How are you this evening, Elreik Grundle? You’re not ill tonight are you?”

“I’m fine, thank you,” not entirely untrue.

“Can I ask you something? Can I call you Ellie? Elreik ith harbd omn my tomngue,” she stuck out her small tongue, and grabbed ahold of it between thumb and forefinger by way of explanation.

“Ellie? No one has ever called me Ellie before.”

“Oh good! Is it okay then?”

She was so excited, I couldn’t deny her anything, “Okay.”

“Please sit by me. You’re not afraid tonight, are you?”

What a strange girl, “Afraid of you?”

“Uh-huh.”

I went toward her and sat on her bedding, where a few weeks earlier she had nursed me back to health. I looked for the pentagram. It was still there, surrounding us both, now. I remembered suddenly how spooked I was, how I ran off like water. I wasn’t spooked anymore. I guess if it’s Thanksgiving and you come within fifty feet of buying a hungry man dinner because you’re so lonely, you’re not going to be afraid of a stupid symbol, especially when that symbol holds your last friend.

Hailie was sitting peacefully playing with a black insect. She was considerably smaller than I remembered her. Her matted hair was just as crazy.

“What are you doing?” I asked gently.

“I’m thinking about all the things-”

“What things?”

“All the things and how—well, you promise you won’t laugh?”

“I promise.”

“How I want to be a bug.”

“A bug?”

“Yeah. Not really, but if I were a bug it would be just fine by me, because bugs can just crawl in the dirt and do whatever they’re doing and no one bothers them and they don’t worry about anything, see?” she inspected the crossbeamed ceiling, “We...oh yeah! Bugs! Bugs! I want to be a bug.” Then she wryly asked, “What do you want to be?”

“To be? Like an animal?”

“Whatever. What do you want to **be**?”

“I don’t really know.”

“You don’t?”

“Not really.”

“Awww, that’s terrible, Ellie Grundle! Come on, **think!**” she gripped her small fingers in a shaky fist.

“I suppose I wish I were somebody like Don Quixote.”

“Who’s Don Keotee?”

“He’s a guy who goes around fighting dragons and tries to do good things.”

“Yeah! Things that are good! But wait, isn’t he the one that tilts at windmills or something, like he’s really confused?”

“Well, yeah, he is sort of confused, but at least he **thinks** he knows what he’s doing.”

“And thinking makes it so?”

“Well, I guess not. Maybe Don Quixote isn’t such a good thing to be.”

“Truly, Grundle, you are a very funny boy,” she smiled.

“I want to thank you for caring for me.”

“You’re welcome.”

“I mean it. I don’t think anyone else would have.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, I just need you to know how much I appreciate your, uh...care, and if I can ever do anything for you...”

“Really, Grundle, it was just tea and scalp manipulation,” *manipulation* emerged from her fine spun mouth like a queen bee laying eggs, “No biggie.”

“It was more than that. Most people aren’t as, well, **good**, as you were to me.”

She pondered that, “Yeah, I know what you mean. Some people just aren’t **in-tune** to themselves. I think that people are, deep down, good people, and the people who aren’t so nice, are the people who are lying to themselves the most.”

I waved my hands by the green lamp, “What are you doing here?”

“I live here.”

“You **can’t** live here.”

“I doooo,” she sung.

“Don’t you have a family?”

“They ran away.”

“They did?”

“Well, they left me, and then I ran away.”

“Where did they leave you?” I asked.

“At the hospital.”

“Were you sick?”

“They thought so. Do I seem sick to you?”

“Not now.”

“Good. I don’t think I’m sick.”

“What sort of illness did they think you had.”

“They thought I had a sick head. They said that I was all messed up because normal kids don’t think all the messed up things I do,” she flopped her wrists to indicate messed up things.

“You mean, you were mentally ill?”

“That’s what they said, but do you wanna know what I think? I think they were just afraid of hearing things they didn’t want to hear. Some people are like that you know.”

“Such as?”

“Uhhh,” she cringed her brow and poked at her beetle, “Okay, people don’t want to hear that they’re gonna die and they should be doing something about it.”

“That’s not true.”

“See!”

“No, I mean no one’s going to diagnose you as schizoid or whatever just because you say something about how you should prepare to die. No one’s going to lock you up just for voicing unpopular or minority ideas.”

“They tried to lock me up.”

“I used to argue weird and improbable ideas all the time. No one ever said **I** was crazy.”

“What did you say?”

“I used to say things like the apocalypse was nigh, an ice age was impending, a nuclear holocaust was inevitable. At one point I even argued Witches were going to save the world.”

“Really? You said that?”

“Yeah. I didn’t mean it, of course. I mean, it was a **game**. I used to debate for the university competitively. Like baseball, but whomever makes the best arguments wins, not the most homeruns.”

“Ohhh! So you didn’t **believe** what you said.”

“Sometimes. Usually not. It was a game.”

“And everyone **knew** you didn’t believe what you said?”

“Pretty much. Maybe you do believe what you’re arguing, but certainly, you don’t **need** to.”

“But that makes **all** the difference. If they don’t think you believe what you’re saying, gosh, you can say whatever you want can’t you? They don’t care cause you don’t mean anything by it. But it’s a whole different thing when they think you believe in what you’re saying. Especially when you believe with all your heart.”

“What do you mean,” I didn’t see how that mattered.

“Okay it’s like this: the more you believe the goofier everyone gets,” she put her beetle on her forearm like a small commuter on a bridge, “Like, I had a vision once, when I was seven. I saw my mother old and sad. I could **see** it. So I told her with all the sincerity in the world, ‘Mom you’re going to be old and sad and no-one will love you,’ and she flipped out.” Hailie flew her arms out, “Stuff like that happened a lot.”

We sat in silence. Then it dawned on me, “You escaped from a mental hospital?”

“Kinda...I mean, I was never admitted. I ran away before. I read all about what happens to kids in there. I’m illiterate but a very good reader for my age. Everyone says so.”

“How old are you?”

“A hundred and two.”

“No really.”

“Does it matter?”

“I’m just curious.”

“Fourteen.”

“Fourteen! Christ I thought you were at least eighteen, or nineteen!” She appeared, in fact on first sight, to be in her early twenties.

“I know! You’ll still be my friend, won’t you?”

I glared at her reflective beetle, her tea, the pentagram, her green lamp shining on her smooth cheek, “Of course I’ll be your friend.”