

Chapter 14 of *The Debate* **by B. Douglas Robbins**

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Through the elegant plaza, a lovely marble space really, a dignified mausoleum, and out the door. We stood in front of stolid fluted columns, a regal balustrade, and evenly placed urns, into which the ashes of the dead were deposited. The night was scented of trees. A black sky behind the Campanile, an alabaster spinning face—hiding Le Conte and her glory.

“That was sort of gross, huh?” I asked.

“Aw! did it disturb your sensitive sensibilities?” Denise scrunched up her nose.

“C’mon,” I took her hand and lead her up the hill. I stopped at the Western steps at the base of the Campanile and sat down. The campus was very still, except for the ubiquitous hum of city traffic, and machines in LBL, and the wind, and the moving water, which were all the same thing, really.

“How’s your eye doing?” she asked.

I touched it self consciously, “Fine.”

“Did something happen to your leg?”

“Why?”

“You’re limping.”

“Oh, am I?”

Denise nodded seriously.

“It’s stupid,” I insisted.

“What happened?”

So I explained how after the octa-final round, Pennington from Vermont attacked Christian like an animal, and how I stepped in to fight him off, and how

Pennington kicked in my knee while tripping over it, and how I berated him for his cowardice.

“You’re such a good friend to Christian,” she bent brows earnestly, “I really admire that.”

“If I’m such a good friend why am I sleeping with you?”

“Gawd, Richard. Don’t even go there. You’re a good person. I’m the one to blame for this mess.”

“No,” I said weakly, “I’m always to blame.”

“No, don’t say that.”

“I’m not as strong-” I pressed my eyes with the heels of my hands to hide.

“You’re the strongest person I know,” Denise insisted, “And you’re so sweet, always sticking up for people even after what happened to your eye. Even then!”

“I took you away from Christian,” I whispered.

“No. I’m a person. I **left** him,” and then, “Some things are out of our hands,” she offered me mercy, “You can’t stop it,” her lips curled and I wondered if she’d look this pretty at sixty.

“I know you think that, but do you ever wish things could go back the way they were? I wouldn’t be upset,” I stared lifelessly toward the West, where the sun goes away, “We could just pretend this never happened and go back and everything would be safe again.” She stared at me blankly. “You could go back to Christian. I wouldn’t be mad. I’d be happy for you even.”

“Don’t talk like that! Are you fucking crazy?”

“I’d call everything off if you’d go back.”

“I think you’re afraid of me, that’s all, because I’m just as strong as you are.”

I choked on tears coming up. And a moment passed as I tried to swallow, “You couldn’t be more wrong. You’re utterly . . . helpless.”

She turned to me, looking blankly again, and I’d never seen a girl as beautiful as her, “I love you way more than I ever felt anything for Christian.”

I wiped away a sob with the heel of my palm, “Was he a good lover?”

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“Not like you.”

“What do I do that he didn’t?”

She ducked her head bashfully, “You make me come.”

“He never made you come?”

“No.”

“Never?”

“Never. It’s not his fault, he just couldn’t do it,” she was certain, “Christian didn’t love me. He didn’t know me. I think he loved what he wanted me to be. He made me feel so”

“What.”

“I just—I wasn’t,” she groomed herself and straightened her spine, “I always had the feeling that he was judging me, or something, and I couldn’t ever do anything right. It’s like, no matter what he was doing, it had to be done a certain way, and **god**, he was so obsessed with that Scholarship, whatever it was. It scared me.”

“It did? What did?”

“He wanted me to go to law school with him. But I don’t want to go to law school. And he’s like ‘You have to have ambitions.’ And I’m like, ‘I want to be happy.’ And he goes, ‘That isn’t good enough.’ I mean not in so many words . . . So I go ‘You just want me to apply to Harvard so you don’t feel so bad when neither of us get in.’”

“But he **never** made you come?” I repeated.

“No, he didn’t.” She moved her hands through my hair and kissed me passionately—I could smell Eucalyptus—and she looked down as if remembering something unpleasant, “You’re so distant, Richard.”

“Now?” I squealed.

“Not now. I feel closer to you than I have in a long time, and I guess that’s why I can even say anything, you know?” She hung around my neck, her chest, so soft, filled in the difference between us. Her breath constant, at the side of my hollow head: “It’s like you don’t need me.”

“I need you!” I heard myself say, “I need you so much that if I let myself need you as much as I do, I would just fall apart, I wouldn’t be able to do anything, and you’d hate me because you’d see how fucking needy I was, and how pathetic-”

“Not true!” she rested her forehead against the side of my jaw socket, “You’re the strongest person **I know**. Why don’t you cry?”

“I didn’t know I was supposed to,” welling up.

“Isn’t it normal to cry, like, to let others know you need them?”

I shook my head gently, “It would be a trap. It would trap you.”

“Trap me? How could you trap me?”

I wrapped my shaking hands around my knees, “Saying you need someone becomes a trap, because . . . because then they can’t leave you. Right? You can’t just leave someone who needs you.”

“You want me to leave you?”

“I don’t **want** you to,” shaking, “but I don’t want you to be with me unless you want to . . . not because you feel sorry . . .”

She pulled back as if I had just spoken tongues.

“Doesn’t that make sense?”

“Too much.”

“What does that mean?”

“It’s like you **expect** me to leave you.”

“It happens, Denise. Okay? You left Christian.”

“Christian needed me. I left him despite that fact. But you’re looking so far ahead, like, in anticipation of getting broken up, you see everything like that, and you make everything like that.”

“You’re not hearing me! I just want to be sure you’re with me because you want to be, not because I need you to be. I want you to want me **selfishly**.”

“What if I didn’t?”

“What does that mean?”

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“What if I wanted to be with you because you wanted to be with me? That’s alright, isn’t it?”

“Well,” I felt confused and suddenly sleepy, “No, not really. That would be a lie. Everyone does what they want and justifies it later.”

“Haven’t you ever felt that way?” she rolled my knuckles like Rosary.

“No,”

“No wonder you expect me to leave you,” she spoke to the steps glumly, “You only love in one direction, and you can’t imagine anything else.”

I didn’t know what she meant but I sensed that admitting such would be tantamount to concession.

She whispered to the stone steps, “Why won’t he need me?”

Tears welled up and rolled down my face, one after the other. Nothing could be concealed any longer. And after a few minutes they showed no sign of abating, and I became panicked that if I lost her, then everyone would know why, and that I had to tell Denise the truth. The Beekeeper put a finger to his lips and exposed a shelf of angry bees. The toll for telling secrets was high, but I was nearly choking on the flood, “I’ll tell you something that’s very secret.”

“What? Tell me.”

“And when I tell you,” I coughed and rocked forward and back, “then it will be out.”

“God! What is it, Richard?” she gripped my arm with nails.

“I think it’s time to take a good look at the world I’ve created, we’ve created . . . I- . . . at the beginning,” I breathed heavily, “I’m not like other people. I was born . . . a black pile of waste. A fish. And they locked me in a cage, and now the fish is inside me, and I’m the cage. I never had a chance,” I looked to the West.

Denise shook.

I had only a discrete window to get it out, then the Blueman would come with a door. For my own protection. “Mother wouldn’t let me pee standing up,” I wiped my face with the back of my hand, shivering,

“She said only bad boys peed standing up, and she made me sit on the toilet for many things, and that the toilet was an intimate friend.”

Denise nodded but she had no idea. I could have been speaking Japanese and she would have nodded as vigorously. I would make her understand, “Punishment for potty mouth was to sit on the toilet with my pants down and the door open, and punishment for a messy room, a ‘shit hole,’ was Toilet Time, and punishment for undone homework, that was, ‘shit for brains,’ so then Toilet Time. Punishment for lying, speaking secrets, thinking about certain things too much, starting fires, or cutting the cat was Toilet Time, and punishment for suffering too much Toilet Time was Toilet Time. Mother always said ‘Don’t be a sufferer.’ When Jesse’s friends came over I begged and cried for Mother to at least let me close the door, but she refused and they saw me. I heard the upstairs toilet in my parents room flushing and I knew Jesse’s friends had to go all the way up there to use it because I was on the other one. I was always there.” My nose full of snot, “I was a fixture, like the sink. My legs hurt and fell asleep, and a deep ring pressed into my ass, and wherever I went, my legs always tingled and never stopped.”

“Oh god, Richard,” Denise cried for the weak little boy.

“But it’s okay!” I hacked and cringed, “A beautiful man came to the window one day and fed me honey and showed me a beautiful and warm world. He kept bees! And with bees everything is in its place.”

“The neighbor was a beekeeper?”

“No the neighbor was an orthodontist . . .” *To ever divulge the secret world is to die and never stop dying*, the Blueman pronounced carefully through blood ribbon lips. He had pulled his mouth apart to deliver a reminder of established rules. If Denise wouldn’t forgive me, there would be a toll to pay for his pain. Blood gushed like a spring from his mouth. Ragged strips of lavender, and violet flesh draped over his teeth and chin.

“I want to tell you,” I shook violently, “But there are specters that rule the meta-levels, and if I tell you they

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could kill me.” *To oh divulge oh secret oh is oh die oh never oh dying.*

Denise watched with massive twitching eyes. She dug her fingers deeply into my arm and pulled my head into her chest. I pressed my face into her breasts, “If I tell you, will you promise to always need me?” A murmur, and heart beating, “There is a man who wears blue and cannot be reached. He rides the high wall held together by flesh. The wall stops the sound running around and around.”

Denise stood up, and I fell over on my side. I looked up at the sky, the Campanile above. “There’s a keeper of bees with a mouth full of honey. A finger to his lips helps me to keep quiet. The bees work diligently, putting everything in its place, and buzzing drowns out the sounds, overlapping around. The life underground lives under the bridges. Nine of them burns when the debate has consumed me. When I get hot, I burn the fish clean. I get clean with the heat, and even with the toll. I pay in sentience and-”

“Are you talking about debate stuff? I really don’t know what you’re saying. Let’s talk about this later,” Denise waited and then said flatly, “C’mon, let’s get back.” She head back down the hill.

“There is a door, that goes nowhere,” I hissed, “It makes a madrigal creek at the hinge and halos heat at the frame.”

“What?” she stopped by South and turned back to me, “Allison is going to wonder where we went.”

“You have no fucking idea what lives under those bridges,” I clenched my teeth and squinted.

“What bridges?”

“There are nine bridges,” and I pointed to one over by Moses.

She watched me blankly, “So what if there’s nine bridges? No, wait, there’s more than nine bridges-”

“There will be a heavy toll now,” I whispered in earnest, “I won’t be able to pay it all myself.”

She walked back, all the way up the steps, “C’mon, you’re really drunk,” she extended a hand, “We can talk about this crazy stuff in the morning. Let’s have

fun tonight.” Her hand shook. Her other arm wrapped around her body, and then brushed off imaginary dust, and wrapped itself back.

Everything can be accounted for and put right in time, said the Blueman, *We can forgive an indiscretion.* He loved me that much.

Collin and Allison swayed at the top of Wheeler’s steps. Collin lit up his smoke, and Allison ran off. She leaned over a thick stone wall, at the far side, where evergreens grew.

“What’s going on with Allison?” Denise and I approached Collin.

He muttered something about blowing.

“What’s she blowing?” I asked. Collin dragged the beedie.

“She’s blowing chunks!” exclaimed Denise, “Aawwww!” and ran over to Allison.

“I thought you said she was blowing her nose!” I staggered, and showed my palms.

“Blowing your nose,” yelled Denise as she dashed away, “and blowing chunks are two entirely disparate experiences.”

“She’s right about that, you know,” Collin nodded and rocked on his heels, mulling it over.

“Shouldn’t you be helping her?” I suggested.

“She’s doing fine,” he slurred, “Besides. Not done yet.”

“Yes, I know,” I took him by the shoulder, “but soon she **will** be, and then what will you do?”

He dragged the beedie eagerly, but did not respond. I took the beedie from his mouth, “Heeey! I was smoking that!” I took a big drag and squashed it out.

“Go,” I pushed him, “Don’t you fuck up tonight for me.” Collin took Allison on one side while Denise took her on the other. Allison hyperventilating.

Denise asked, “Are you allright? Are you okay? Do you want to sit down?”

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Allison turned to Collin and hugged him, grappling for support, while he feebly looked down, “Wooo! Your breath!” he exclaimed.

“Sorry,” she bleated and buried her face in his chest.

Collin burst, “I’ve got it!” he rose a single finger, “Yesss! I know now . . . We must get her some tea!” He was certain. “Yesss! You would like some tea wouldn’t you?” he asked. A plangent moan in response.

Collin, undeterred, “Yes, we must get you tea, or all is lost!” He marched off.

We sneaked across Strawberry Creek, emerged around Anthony Hall, past a large, brass pelican, and squeezed out to Bancroft through the corridor.

Past the Urban Outfitters, and down Durant, a garish scene with salmon fluorescent lighting. Blue and red swirling police sirens.

At Wall Berlin, Collin asked Allison, “What kind of tea do you want?”

“Doomeannn?”

“Tea—Teeeee!” he insisted, as a matter of principle.

“Whattta—wanna.”

He ordered, “One tea, whatever you recommend, my man.” The girl behind the counter bristled. “And one of these!” he held up a purple/black bottle that read “Love Potion #69” with a cartoon skeleton hand squeezing a sponge bloody heart. “You like this, eh Rich-Richard. You like this, huh?” He winked wildly.

I ordered Thai Ice Tea and Denise had a Lama Special, a complicated coffee beverage with Italian flavored syrups.

The third round.

Collin passed the Goldschlager bottle. I took a hit, then Denise, then Collin. Then he offered some to Allison.

“Stop it!” cried Denise.

“Okay! Okay, I was just kidding!” Allison melted off the chair. Denise moved around to help Allison up, and put her head on her shoulder. She pet Allison’s

forehead. I drank an orange-cream fluid. Sweet. Green, like reeds.

“That looks like Allison’s puke!” Collin pointed a finger, and realized he was screaming, “I mean that’s fine. Okay? Just, that’s what it is.” I muttered to Collin we were on a schedule. Collin looked at his empty wrist, baffled. He rose his other wrist, and for a time examined the face of his watch, “It all hinges upon that slender difference between clockwise and counter-clockwise, of course. We must go, wouldn’t you say?”

“Woa, cowboy,” Denise’s eyelids swung up slowly, “Maybe your date would appreciate a break? Wouldn’t **you** say?”

Collin was baffled, “Oh her? She’s fine. How are you, babe?” he stroked Allison’s back.

“Weebelll?”

“See?” Collin brightened, “Come on, let’s go to my house. We can take better care of her there.” He stood as if the issue was settled and gathered Allison up like soup. They staggered out the door.

Denise stared, frozen.

Reaching around People’s Park, cautiously, watching, we turned up Regent, and into Collin’s house, a full fledged party in progress. The wide front steps held stoop sitters, and chit-chatters, Cal caps, bear paws, Big Game t-shirts, blue and gold all. A band of blonde girls coagulated separate from a group of Asian kids, set off from a clan of dope smokers. Denise was offered a hit on a ceramic bong, as we ascended. Boy in an American flag for cape, and blue underwear, talked about particle physics to a girl nodding furiously. At the top of the wooden steps, the porch lamp glared jaundice on tall boys who said “Nicomachean Ethics,” over and over again. One wore the theory of relativity on his t-shirt. I called him a bitch, and walked off, as if I hadn’t.

Gamalataki played an improvisational jazz set, spinning and spitting from cello, bull fiddle, and electrified guitar. High sizzling. I pointed to the guitarist, sucked my thumb, and licked my lips. “He’s my bitch,” I told Allison.

“Beaaaach?”

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The drummer fluttered, in rising dissonance; he climbed through fits and bleats. The sitting room was full of moving, and dancing, and smeared bodies, squirming through each other like worms in the guts.

Denise held one of her ears as I pulled her along. In the kitchen a line formed at the keg. A brunette hung by her ankles by a pair of large boys, with good sized necks; her shirt falling off, sucking beer through a crazy straw.

I told Collin I needed to fuck Denise now. He nodded. "You're just my bitch, aren't you?" He nodded coolly again.

He asked Denise, "Maybe you two would care to use my room?" the excuse, "I don't think Allison and I will be needing privacy anytime soon." As if to prove his point, Allison mis-stepped around the kitchen, appearing perpetually bewildered by all the solid objects that would not give way.

Denise nodded enthusiastically. Collin produced a key and told her where to go. I gave Collin a coin, "Flip it for me." And soon she was tugging me through the mass. Bouncing heads, smell like a sound, faces in a carnival ride, and there was Miranda, rose window glasses and the whole thing. I yelled, and waved, "Christian and I share everything, and when it's time I'm going fuck your ass."

She waved back cordially and smiled.

Denise dragged my hand up the stairs, into the darkened hallways, up to a familiar door, bumperstickers, and newspaper clippings:

Man Burned In Fight Over Candy Bunny

Associated Press

Santa Ana

An elderly woman tossed rubbing alcohol on her cancer stricken husband and set him on fire after he angered her by eating a chocolate Easter bunny she wanted, police said yesterday.

Denise fumbled the small key, opened the door and entered the blackened room. She closed the door firmly, turned the tiny lock, and instantly pressed herself to

me, kissing my mouth. I slid my tongue into her mouth, and she suckled it while tugging at my shirt. I pulled her sweater off, and unbuttoned a white blouse. Lace wrapped breasts scraped my chest.

Denise pushed me back while roughly yanking on my belt. Then button, and zipper, and the khakis fell of their own weight. My erect penis pushed through the boxer flap.

She knocked me back onto Collin's bed, where I kicked off the readers, and books, and clumped laundry. She crawled up the length of my body until level with my waist. I placed firm palms on her head and shoulder and nudged her down, while I crept up a little, and my prick slid along her neck and jaw and mouth.

Denise produced a small tongue to lap up a bulb of semen. An intense heat. Her expression was peaceful and content as she suckled. Denise sucked on the tip, with cheeks drawn, and then slid the shaft into her mouth, and made little moans. I held her head at that deep position while she swirled her tongue. Pom poms.

I rocked my pelvis in and out, and watched her lips glide along the ridge. My cock filled up her face. I loved doing her mouth. I fucked her head harder. She flicked her tongue rapidly.

Pounding music shook the walls. Denise rode her skirt up, pulled my boxers down and straddled my hips. Between tremulous knees she slipped on a condom, and then herself. She galloped over me, back arched. I met her thrusts, fucking her deeper and deeper. I pinched her nipples with thumb and forefinger quickly while she yelped, "Oh god, oh god, oh god."

Sweat ran down her chest while a streetlight gathered over her in time. Through the window, yellow, and fuchsia dabs pinpointed her lovely nose and teeth, longer lines at a pale space between her breasts, where ribs made subtle undulations.

I turned her around, to watch her ass. She squatted, and rode like a jockey, with feet high in the saddle. I pushed her forward onto all fours, facing the door. I pulled out, and from behind I stuck a finger in her gooey snatch, fondled her button. She sighed and moaned like a little girl when I found a cadence that pleased her. I yanked off that polyurethane piece of shit, and

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burnished my cock around her wet labia. And slipped it in easily, flesh through flesh, and she knew that I was fucking her with sheer skin, and I could hear a sob, and she was terribly beautiful as she rocked her little ass toward me and murmured, “. . . no, no, no . . .” Small words.

A bright flash of rectangular light opened before us. Denise’s head jerked up, and a silhouetted figure, like lightening, a silhouetted male—crass light in my eyes, the crazy deep thumping contra bass. The figure turned his head away, his profile, and then twisting body followed, and the *slam*. Blackness and holographic rectangles blinked around the room, all with the empty silhouetted profile, and I knew that nose, and those shoulders, that turn of step, and he was a friend, my partner in debate.