

Chapter 4 of *The Debate* **by B. Douglas Robbins**

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After class Coboarae smiled at me and jerked his head back. I mimicked. Outside LeConte the Campanile bonged and the traffic swelled. Coboarae glided alongside on a skateboard, awkwardly taller than others; his good grooming and country club countenance clashed with the rumbling board.

“Wheeler Beach,” he yelled. Coboarae and I would meet at the grassy bank that lined the west side of Wheeler Hall and critique class and comment on the inane questions of classmates. Today he would ridicule Pyre, and I would encourage him.

Coboarae pushed off down the bank, gained speed, and slalomed through the thick, wiggling ostentation of backpacks that lumbered and earnest grins that clenched against the sun.

I approached Dwinelle Plaza as Dave, the Y’eshua guy, bellowed at the top of his throat, “Where are the Roman Catholics?”

“I’m here, Dave!” shouted a smiling Freshman.

Dave’s pure white hair glimmered, “Where are the Jews?”

“Here Dave! I’m Jewish!” the Freshman belted.

Dave wore a blue t-shirt reading “Y’eshua” in bold, white letters stretched over a pilling, long sleeved, middle manager dress shirt, “Where are the Baptists?” asked Dave again.

“Where are the Girl Scouts, Dave?” asked an athletic boy, donning a shaved scalp, and wearing a hooded sweatshirt reading, “Not the Unabomer,” in cut and paste type.

(More useless players; who can keep track? Bad cadence and so many of them. Please protect me.) An

undergraduate with bad skin marched ahead of himself across the plaza, vowing not to be impressed by weird shit. A pocket of girls in blue jeans slung around Dave in passing interest, and then vectored off.

On another side of the plaza, directly in front of Dwinelle's granite steps, a reinforced cluster of students, like a spinning cyclone gawked at an unusual exchange between another preacher—a new-comer—and a tall blonde. Approaching the din I found Coboarae in the eye, pacing within the body barricade, his skateboard trucks in one hand, his other hand motioning in preach.

“What good news do you bring?” asked the young Christian, “What can you offer beyond the empty experience of the MTV videogame?” He scanned the curious crowd, blinking wildly. In gray suit and red tie the Christian pointed out a wide arc like a disco dancer. “You're—all—sinners!” he articulated slowly, “Each and every one of you. Through the Lord our Christ, you may find salvation! All you must do . . . **all**—you hear me?—you need is the Lord, and you shall live eternal life. Give up your drugs. Turn to the Lord! He died for **your** sins. You are the sinner. Acknowledge your evil!”

“Judge not, lest ye be judged!” shouted Coboarae.

“No, no, my brother! You can know the words but you do not have the spirit. You read the Good Book like the antiseptic treatise in your Schools of Learning, but the word of God is not the WORDS OF A BOOK!” The Christian had wild eyes and thick fingers pointing around, and then up, “Spread THE Word and remove sickness from your heart. The demons of lust and Sodom and Gomorra will eat you alive! REMOVE 'EM!”

“Before you try to remove the speck from my eye, remove the log from your own!” explained Coboarae.

“I spread the word of God, my young, glib friend. I preach the Truth. I spread the light! I do not come to judge you, I come to reveal the Word, and the Word shall set you free! For without Jeeezus, you are a slave to sin and a slave to vice and a slave to CORRRUPTION. For the unpenitent is reserved the wheel of sulfurous hellfire! All sinners, who have casual relations out of the sanctity of wedlock must repent. And for the betrayers, the Brutuses and the Judases, is reserved the high unholy Jaws of Lucifer himself,

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gnawing and grinding for all and ever.” The Christian pointed to the sky and then the ground with absolute certainty.

“He without sin may cast the first stone,” Coboarae screamed, bent over.

A flock of coeds, looked on in consternated attraction. Slender legs became open mouthed stares; the Beekeeper put a finger to his lips.

“You like to talk! You like the attention? But how much attention do you pay the Lord? How much attention will He pay you on the day of **Reckoning?**” He yelped at Coboarae, then looked around the twister for approval. His suit folded stiffly when hands were raised to sky, “Hear me! Listen to me! And be saved! Listen to me, listen 'ere!”

“Beware of false prophets for they shall be many!” proclaimed Coboarae. “Who knows the face of God? Who-”

“You’re the false one! To the wretched I bring the sound of goodly harps. Hear and repent, give your cursed soul to the Father! I would wage war against your evil. I’m not afraid of your kind and your dark lord. On the day of Reckoning when good wages war against evil, as it is written, I will strike you down, and SEND YOUR BLACK SOUL TO ETERNAL DAMNATION.”

“To him who strikes you on the cheek offer the other also,” at that Coboarae turned his head to the side and the cyclone cried cheerful laughter. A few rose their churning fists and elbows, hooting. A black boy pushed against an imaginary ceiling.

The preacher stepped forward awkwardly, hands above his head, “No god, no peace.” Shivering words. His lips moved, nothing came out. He tapped a finger to his temple like a telegraph, “**Know** God, **know** peace!”

“Do not think that I have come to bring peace on earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword!” Coboarae parried, left arm extended, bolting the final blow right to the heart. He held his sharpened finger at the preacher’s red tie and grinned. The shocked Christian recoiled, aghast at the flustered turn of events. Coboarae pushed himself, skateboard in hand,

from the cyclone gawkers, while applause crashed over the plaza.

At the grassy incline on the north side of Wheeler Hall, Coboarae and I reclined. I propped back on my elbows. Coboarae's hair shined neatly, and his face radiated dry heat. As it warmed, wavy wrinkles distorted light and smeared the background all around a self-satisfied grin. A halo.

"You're possessed," I said as seriously as possible.

"I am but a humble messenger," he kidded. Collin had the gift of total recall, and was evidently beginning to understand its utility.

"You hammered Pyre pretty good," I laughed, "I liked that." I had to give him credit.

"Really? That was cool, huh?" he asked as if unsure. Collin's mind was a child with matches, still dazzled, still surprised. I believed he was attracted to heat and the consumption, a pyromaniac in the making.

"You know what I like most about hosing that preacher with his own book?" Coboarae asked.

"What?"

"That it was so **easy**. It was such a cinch!"

"Easy," I watched the languid pace of the thinning student river.

"Yeah. It was like so many things you're not supposed to be able to do, and seem so intimidating until you do then and find out what a bull-shit bluff it is, right Rich?"

"Richard. Don't fucking call me Rich."

"Right. Richard. You know, at USC last week, I did the old deaf-mute thing," and Collin laughed, "Freakin' their shit out!"

"Who was it?" I asked, squinting.

"Aaron and Jackie!"

"Ha!" Collin loved the bullshit stuff. He thought it was the greatest thing. The deaf-mute ploy was where you got up from your desk, went over to your opponent's podium, or desk, wherever they were speaking, and began flowing right there, right under

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their nose, as if you couldn't have heard them where you were before. And while you were there, breathing down their neck, you made all kinds of faces as if whatever they were arguing was the stupidest thing you'd ever heard. You would be surprised how easy it was to shake someone's confidence and break their concentration with idiotic expressions.

Collin loved that stuff, "During the second prelim round, Wes and I tried to make as many *non-sequiturs* as possible. We were talking through our ass!"

"Wes **is** a *non-sequitur* Did you pick up?"

"Yep. Debate's a bluff."

"Not true," I corrected him, "You can only get away with that shit in certain situations. If you tried it with me, I'd face-crush you in under sixty seconds, and then grandstand on your ass for sheer pleasure."

His round glasses blinked blue, blinked white, reflecting the stone and sky, "Still, it does work."

"It only works because no one's yet figured out how much shit you're full of."

"Aww, that's not true. Everyone knows," Collin smiled.

I shook my head, disappointed, "I thought you were the real deal, man. I thought you were a debater. Sounds like you're a fucking lawyer."

"Whatever it takes," Collin batted short, sharp lashes, "But really, what's some other good bullshit stuff?"

"I don't go there anymore. Just grow-up."

"Just for the sake of the argument."

Collin knew how to draw me in, "For the sake of argument," I repeated gravely.

"**Just** for the sake of argument."

Among debaters, the well being and happiness of the argument had a life of its own. There was a kind of revelry and release in argumentation, as vital and solemn as any war fought for love, or hate. The argument, many of us felt, was the source of our personal power. It was a terrible truncheon that could create and destroy the universe of meaning by sheer

force of will. (You will assume I am speaking metaphorically, but I am not. Understanding is the Standard on the B sub. To misunderstand is to violate it.) The argument and the meaning inspired by it, when accepted, when submitted to, manifested everything. There was no thing-in-itself, just the argument.

“Well, let’s see How about the Evidence Decoy?” Collin nodded intently. I sat up straight and continued pedantically, “The Evidence Decoy consists of requesting specific evidence from one’s opponents to furnish the illusion of soon assaulting that particular argument. In response, the opposition begins to prep out pre-emptive answers to the position. During your speech you concede it.”

“Ahhhh, so they-”

I cut in sharply, “Hence, they have prepared themselves for arguments you do not make, and caught unaware on the positions you do go for. The Evidence Decoy is very effective in inducing your opponents into burning their prep time. Always remember, Time is the superset of debate.”

“Time is the superset of debate,” Collin chanted along, “Kick ass! Did you and Christian do that stuff at USC?”

“No.”

“Christian’s a pussy. I bet if you’d done the Ev Decoy, or the Deaf-Mute, or any of that, you would have beat Speed and Zoë.” I stiffened up inside.

At the final round of the USC Tourney I wanted to kill Speed and Zoë. Christian debated like my grandmother. When we lost, I wanted to express violence against him.

Heat collected along my spine. Collin rambled on, “I don’t get it Rich. Richard. I don’t get it. You guys are mismatched. Christian doesn’t want to win. You do.”

“What do you know?” I answered non-committally. He hadn’t the understanding of Christian as a fire under heavy wind. He didn’t know that Christian could consume us all with one word; he didn’t suspect that no one could ever kill Christian because Christian was

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neither man nor animal, and I could not say any of these things aloud. There were rules.

“I know Christian thinks you’re killing his *ethos*. I know he thinks you’re unable to control your lust for blood.”

“He said ‘blood’?”

“Yeah.”

“I’ve never heard him use the word ‘blood.’”

“Well-”

“Why would he say that?”

“I don’t know. It’s just what he said.”

“No he didn’t.”

“Yes he did. In this instance he said ‘blood.’”

“You’re a fucking liar. And I should make you bleed for it.”

Collin Coboarae cringed his brow and licked his lips in the sun, as if ruminating casually, but I could see something else there.

The Beekeeper smiled honey-drippings from his lips. Sticky yellow sunshine. Round eyes of sweet kindness. He extracted a honeycomb panel and displayed the tidy compartments proudly. One hexagon snug up against another, and another, and all of them perfectly ordered, and all the bees working in perfect unison. A tender finger to his lips as a reminder, and honey gelled at the meeting point:

“Okay. Whatever,” I stood down, “I’d never heard him use that phrase before.” The rules would have to be revised.

“There’s some things you don’t know about him then,” Collin stared into the West, the ocean beyond.

“Christian’s my partner,” it was terribly bright, and the sun bent the white buildings yellow, but not the Campanile.

“And there are things he doesn’t know about you,” Collin Coboarae continued in the same insouciant tone, “I mean, how can you guys be partners when you’re fucking his girlfriend?”

A panic chill took the back of my skull. My legs tingled and Coboarae's face softened out of focus as if filtered through Vaseline. The wafting foot traffic iced into stony silence. I felt dry and disoriented, and my stomach gurgled loose and unpredictable. I continued to stare into Coboarae's indigo eye sockets, just behind wire frames, relaxing my mouth, and de-squinting my eyes.

"How do you know that?" I laughed as if it were humorous.

"I had my suspicions. Sort of an economy of explanation. You know, Occam's Razor."

"Occam's Razor," I repeated quietly, "You had suspicions?"

"Yeah."

"That's how you **knew**?"

"Oh, I didn't **know**...Not until now, that is," Coboarae's grin matched the orangey yellow sun brimming over Wheeler's white stones. He looked calm and pleased with himself. My legs tingled and slept.

One-thousand over-voices cackled and rankled.

Push the heart down into the bowls. Jenny Jenkins from ninth grade biology laughed. Steve Perkeigio screamed at the Round Table Pizza that I had sop in my mouth, and the black rotting fish in my cage. Little Tara O'Reily refused to hold my hand for P.E. square dancing, and cried, and yoweled, and they knew she smelled how I smelled. Clamoring in unison, in condemnation, over and around, winding sounds, and the bees couldn't work fast enough to put everything place, to keep it all separate, to keep them isolated and muffled; the bees could not buzz loud enough; the voices of every boy and girl who knew I was cowardly and soft, and all those cries about my inner rot, stepping over each other, in unison, and overtones, clamoring over and under, in condemnation, and cold-tile bile. And then: silenced by the Blueman, and he brought me relief because it was all around. The Blueman was my friend, and though he knew the things that cannot be said, and though he had heard the over-voices personally he rode high on the Wall in a glowing pale cape, in arrant beauty. For me. And the bees could pull

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it apart again, into place again because the Blueman straddled the Wall like a horse-man, legs draped on each side, with a hand up to stop the sound, like a policeman, and a quiet smile of lips sown together for me. He endured terrible pain in having his lips sown together, and there would be a toll imposed, but in that space, I could hate Coboarae, with burning clarity, and without shame. The burn washed me clean, clean, cleaner. Without the fire to stop it, I would have rotted from the fishside-out. The cleansing heat saved me.

I balled up a fist for Coboarae, bidding my time. I was on the slick side, but not for long. If I hit him in the head, shut one of his stupid grinny eyes, and made blood dribble from his smirky mouth, he never would have made it to the Supreme Court because you can never recover from being a guy who has been hit in the head. (I will ruin him. Got his spine. It's a cold Orange Crush.) But the Beekeeper leaked sweet honey from his lips, *there is more love here than in heaven*. Which was true, but there would be a toll to pay, and so much sentience. Bashing in Collin's face would have made it even and then some. But the Beekeeper slid his sticky-pasted fingers across a wax-comb panel and played the cells like strings, and the bees worked together, each hexagon a little universe, *you would be as happy in a nutshell*. And the Beekeeper had his way, because he loved me so much, and Collin didn't receive his penance. Instead, it was paid by others.

That afternoon I returned home to my small apartment, where I was greeted by a message on my machine. The red light winked coyly.

The life underground scurried toward the open door, and I shut the door with a slam that sent it back under the furniture. A few of those things roamed freely around the apartment, making clicking noises, and scratchy sounds on the linoleum. Any food left out, however small, would attract them. Droppings lined the corner where the wall met the floor in the safety behind the couch, the bookcase, and desk.

I pressed the red winking button: "Hi Rich, I haven't heard from you in a while so I thought I'd give you a call!" a bright ringing voice, "So anyway, if you're free

I thought we'd go to LaVal's or something Give me a call!" *Beeeeep.*

I liked Denise. And what Christian had been saying about the blood made me feel like fucking her all the more. He was exposing secrets, for which a penalty had to be imposed.

I grabbed the life underground out of the cage in the closet. Such a small and helpless thing. As I squeezed it in my hand it predictably began to scratch, and bite, and squirm, and yelp, and my thumb, and first finger, and all the flesh between began to bleed, and I squeezed tighter. It yelped with fanatical panic as the ribcage began to collapse. It was such a sorry sight, because nothing in the universe could have helped it, and it was so over-rehearsed, really, like they all do, like they all will do, with all the yelping and squirming, as if there was any hope anywhere, ever. As if it mattered. And I almost screamed along with it, and wished that something larger and meaner would have scooped me up and crushed my head between its fingers, just for the satisfaction of consistency, if nothing else. Of completion.

I popped its head off with my other hand, like the cap on a small bottle of soda, and there in one palm was the head and in the other, a blood matted fur body, and it didn't move anymore. Also highly predictable. Playing by the rules. The whole thing was so idiotic that I had to cry, and I wiped my face with the tacky stuff, and I was crying not for the stupid life underground, because it was playing by all the rules, but for myself, for all I owed on a debt I didn't make.

Denise was so very-pretty she gave you irrational hope. It never lasted long, and you always came down, but for a moment it was there. She knew nothing about the life underground. And whereas Christian knew something, he also knew enough to keep the secret. But Denise's hope came at a price. For example once I made a crack about kikes, I said, "Wow that kike sure is smart. I wonder if a brain that size takes longer to bake," and Denise went out of her mind, betraying the vouchsafed trust. I was joking. She ought to have known that I was not racist, and if anything racist people were afraid to make those sorts of cracks. My remarks ought to have been interpreted as an

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indication of my lack of racial bias. I had a lot of Jewish friends. I'd even slept with a Jewish girl once. Fucked like an animal—and I mean that in the best way.

I threw the carcass into the Danish cookie tin, and replaced the lid before the smell got too bad. There was red tacky all over my hands, from me, and from it. And it struck me, that the color was identical, as was the consistency, and really it could not be differentiated. And it struck me further that what was inside the life underground was inside me. And it explained so much. There were different sorts of bloods, I had learned in freshman bio, A, B, AB, O, positives and negatives, and I had life underground, and that's why they never could help me at the hospitals, no matter where we moved to, because the blood wasn't right.

I erased the message. I wandered into my kitchen and ate six Oreos. Then I ate three more and drank a glass of milk. Turned pink. I remembered a billboard advertising milk that read, "got chronic congestion?" as if it were some sort of anti-milk happening. The militant vegans were at it again. In Berkeley, the vegans were so extreme, they went up against the Anti-AIDS factions because AIDS was a disease that stopped the body's immune system from murdering millions of other innocent viruses and bacterias. Made some sense to them, I guess.

I sauntered into my bedroom, containing a frameless king size bed, lit a cigarette, and sat down at the edge to watch the *McLaughlin Group*. Those guys were **smart**. John could bitchslap that femmy, love you tender Michael Kinsley on *Crossfire*, and NPR's Nina Totenberg, all day long, every day of the week. Eleanor Clift was in the process of face-crushing the right on welfare reform. She gave me an erection. "On a scale from zero to ten," McLaughlin ranted, "ten being utter utopia, zero, utter catastrophe, how successful will Clinton's work-fare policy be? I ask you Pat Buchanan." Buchanan rated it a two, Eleanor, a seven. McLaughlin rebutted, "The answer is two!"

After the show I stared at my Theories Reader for an hour but could not stop thinking about what had occurred that morning. Pyre, the Preacher, and then me. But I was weak, and he was strong, and that was the score. Then *The Newshour* was on.

You were allowed to pay the toll in sentence of any sort, but in this case so much was owed it would have taken dozens of life underground to quench it. It was just easier to take it yourself, and be done. And finally be even.