

Waking Sevan
by Leslie Heiden

I once had a dream that gigantic stone letters, spelling the word irony, were chasing me. The setting resembled the twisted world of Dali and the granite letters were something from a comic book. Irony had arms and legs; Irony was a woman--I knew this by looking over my shoulder as she thundered behind me. I couldn't out run her; I couldn't hide behind the abstractions of boulders, foliage, ducks and the other farm animals that line the edges of my dream world. They quacked at my misfortune, as wobbling legs carried me across the plain of their world. Irony was too large, could see everything; in my dream Irony was God. There is no way to escape God, even if She is nothing more than a figment created by men who wanted to control the world. In this world, the God of Christianity did not exist; Irony seemed only to be the driving force subtly embedded within my own reality.

In my dream, Irony finally caught me as the fear was becoming too much to bear. My body began to shut down with the fatigue from the chase and the fear was quickly breeding apathy--even death by giant letters would be better than this terror overwhelming me. "Mickey Mouse" hands, swollen, white digits popping out of large round palms, jutting out from Her massive sides wrapped around me and I began to suffocate. Irony ground me into the flat expanse and in the moment when I should have felt my bones turning into chalk under the pressure--that was the moment when I woke.

I was never sure if I awoke to relief or sorrow.

I wasn't sure of anything, really.

Today was no different. I woke, coughing, grasping at my chest to release the pressure that followed me into consciousness. Pulling at the pieces of consciousness, slowly reconstructing my room--the bed clothes tousled around me, my scratched and battered desk in one corner, an old lamp, a gift from my mother, next to me, still on from last night's delving into the world of Woolf, and my clothes, hanging in the closet. All items in my room that anchored me into my reality, leaving the Divine for another night.

Rising from bed, feeling the cold perspiration sticking to my skin, I looked around my room again, taking in even more

details: the poster of Dali's famous painting, *The Persistence of Memory*, hung proudly over my desk. I bought it shortly after Irony began appearing in my dreams. It was almost as if the poster allowed me to anchor the discomfort of waking into the calm of consciousness. Even now, looking at the drooping clocks, watching them meld into the ground, I could almost see Irony doing the same and the pain in my chest, the rapid palpitations of my heart beginning to slow. It was just a dream, repeated in the few cubic inches that made up my mind. Irony, Her overwhelming hands, Her smothering presence, began to recede. It was only a few more moments and Irony had reclaimed her appropriate place in my subconscious.

My desk was neat and clean, appearing as if it came directly off the pages of an Office Depot catalog. The closet was next to the desk, my T-Shirts and jeans hanging in disarray as they always were--I never took the time to put my clothes away properly. Across the room, my bed, reflecting the night of tossing and turning, two small shelves hung at either side. My father had loosely constructed them years ago, a small clock and lamp resting on one, a plaque, a gold plate fastened to an oak board stood proud on the other, reflecting the light of the lamp. It simply read, "Student of the Month, Marathon Elementary. Sevan Stuebner, January 1995." It was a simple reminder of who I really was and it kept me more anchored into my reality than anything else.

Looking away from the small plaque and turning back to my closet, examining the items of clothing there, I began preparing for my day. The muddled ball of thoughts that often rolled through my head began to roll again.

My parents named me Evan, but there was a typo on my birth certificate. As my parents found the typo humorously fated, I grew up with Sevan as my name.

Often, as I graduated through the various levels of education, I became the subject of laughter and humiliation as the more popular groupings of my peers discovered and utilized the humor that the typo embodied. My freshman year of high school, in order to deter such humiliation, I wised up and went by V--the middle ground of my name. Often I wished that my name was something more powerful, like Vincent or Victor--not a number seven, or zero, as some took it upon themselves to call me.

Teachers thought it was funny too--always making sure that I was seventh in line, or that I had the seventh cubby hole or that my

jacket went on the seventh hook. After so many years of dreading that first day of class, that first roll call and the laughter that would ensue as the teachers confirmed my name with me, I finally realized that I didn't have to respect the humor that my parents, peers and teachers saw in the careless typo. There wasn't a lot of available criticism when your name consists of a simple letter.

I reached into my closet--feeling the need to be subtle in my protest of my of the past taunting--pulling out a orange and blue jersey with a large, white number seven on the front. Pulling it on over my bare shoulders, resisting the impulse to pull it off and run through the house to the shower, needing to feel the musky texture of my own skin under my shirt on this particular day. I enjoyed, for a brief moment, the gentle mesh of the shirt glide against my muscles. I ran a hand over the number on my chest, feeling the embroidery around the digit.

Even escaping my numerical designation did not quell my social. There was a short-lived taunting of "V-Spot," but it didn't last long. Instead, now when people ask what my one letter designation represents, I can give a different one each time someone asks.

I don't think that anyone actually knows my real name. Well, other than Lilly and my parents--that's how I like it. It started with the first date that I ever had. When he asked me what V stood for, I told him that it stood for Vivienne (it was a test to see if he would chuckle at such a feminine name--he didn't). His name was Jake.

"He's a perfect match for you, Sevan," Lilly had said--she was one of the few people who used my real name. There was something about Lilly that reeked of honesty. Had she called me V, it would have sounded false. Stepping back from my closet, I opened one of the drawers of my desk, pulling out a snapshot of Lilly and I outside of Marathon high school--the sign could be seen in the background--and a small smile crept across my face. From her strong lips, Sevan sounded like a normal name.

Jake never knew my name. I remember that evening, nearly three years ago, when he looked at me blankly--the person that I had fallen in love with had receded behind cold blue eyes. "I can't see you anymore," he had said. We had been sitting in his car, silently holding hands--waiting for the illuminated green digits to make their final click to the ten o'clock hour. We only had a few more shared moments before Jake's curfew came to pass. His

parents felt that keeping him inside for the nighttime hours would somehow keep him away from people like me--people like him.

It was 9:55pm as he began to speak. It was deathly silent outside of his car but I felt as if the whole world were looking at me--watching the humiliation as it happened. "I like you and everything..." he paused, longer than I had expected, and then said "Its just that...I'm not really...I dunno...like you."

Dumbfounded, I had responded, "then why have we been going out?"

Jake began to fidget, squeezed my hand and then let it go. He fumbled around with the cuffs of his blue button up shirt for a moment then took my hand again before he continued to speak. "I guess...I guess you made me feel good about myself. I mean that was what this was really about right? I mean we're not a couple of fags, are we?" I dropped his hand. He continued, as if he hadn't already said enough, "I was just wanted to feel good about myself. You're a good friend, but... I guess I hope you understand why I don't really want to see you anymore...well not like this anyway, I'd like to just be friends."

I left a few pieces of my heart in his car that night.

Burying the lump in my throat, consciously loosening the tightness in my chest that always accompanied this particular memory and reached down for a pair of socks and sneakers from the floor. There was a shoebox next to my shoes and the same smile met my lips, spawned by thoughts of those I loved. The box held all of the tokens I couldn't display in my room: letters and pictures from John.

A few more boys fell into step with Jake, taking my heart and discarding it, before I found John. I had almost told John my real name when we met. Something about his sparkling eyes, not quite brown, but not green either--simply the essence of green. His hair had fallen around his ears and I had noticed how powerful his shoulders looked as they sloped upwards into a strong neck. John, after I had taken a long pause to think about it, knew me as Vale.

I glanced at the clock next to my bed, quickly realizing that my reviere had taken far to long. I was late for class. Tying my shoes, I grabbed my bag and ran out the door. Shouting over my shoulder, a half hearted farewell to Mom.

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My day at school passed realitively uneventful. No one took it upon themselves to taunt or humiliate me between classes or during lunch. The football team, who made it daily tradition to harass me in some form, ignored me with a hostile silence--but nothing that I couldn't handle. I suppose I jinxed myself, thinking I would make it home without any sort of conflict.

After the morning, I thought that my reflection on my name and all of the implications that it had carried would be done for the day, but, after classes had let out for the day, I found myself thinking about it again.

"Fucking queer."

He must have thought that was my name.

I wasn't sure if this guy knew my name, any name I had ever given, or not as he shouted expletives into the side of the gym wall, not able to look down at me as his steel toe boot made contact with my ribs. I certainly didn't know his, nor could I see his face. It was only the vein that I noticed, running up his neck from his collarbone to just under his ear. His skin was white and moist from the effort of beating me. A Marathon High School Letterman Jacket was hanging loosely around his waist--not an uncommon article of clothing on campus as anyone who played a sport had one. Three small stars signified his class rank. They sparkled from the block letter, M. He, like I, was a senior.

After what seemed like an eternity of pain, I finally couldn't feel it any more. I figured that meant he was beginning to get tired, kicking me with less and less force, or my ribcage had long ago collapsed under the pressure of the rhythmic blows. I imagine the latter was more likely the truth. His boot landed against my chest--I had been trying to roll onto my other side, he kicked my chest to halt that move.

"You fucking faggot, you make me fucking sick!"

I wanted to say, *My name is Sevan, does that mean anything to you?* But it didn't sound outside of my mind. I only heard the onslaught of disgusting names in my ears again. From a great distance, I heard the thick smacking sound his foot was making as he kicked me. I tried to think about other things, anything else, but I couldn't concentrate. I tasted copper in my mouth,

just before white light exploded across my face. White, then dark creeping up the back of my neck.

And then, Grans was looking down at me, offering a hand up, and looking at me expectantly, "Come on Val, sweetheart, get up." My grandmother called me Val just before she died. The genesis of the nickname lay within the realm of casual family taunting. My little brother learned about vowels in grammar school and he came home telling me all about them. Like an epiphany of thought, he realized that my name had two vowels: a letter A and a letter E. "You have two Vals!" he shouted, unable to pronounce his words properly as his pillow had been visited by the tooth fairy rather often over the last few months. Running around the house he shouted "dubba val, dubba val!" I suppose I was lucky that Val stuck and not Dubba.

I opened my eyes to find myself in the guestroom of my grandmother's house. I was still bruised and beaten, but my body no longer ached. I realized the true depth of the pain that had racked my body only moments prior. "Grans, what are you doing here?"

"Well, its time for you to get up and go to work, Val. Why else would I be getting you up at this hour?" she said simply.

She was an old woman, but you wouldn't guess it to look at her. She looked, I imagine, what a fallen super model would look like--as if she married a plastic surgeon and was desperately trying to hang on to her youth to no avail. The only difference was that Grans took no pride in the way that she lookedÑshe simply woke every morning and made sure that she was neat and clean, and went along with her day.

"But I haven't done my old paper route in years, Grans," I said, looking at her oddly, wondering why the back of my mind kept up the implicative that I shouldn't be lying here, speaking with my grandmother, nearly two years after her death.

"What are you talking about, you silly boy?" She replied as I caught the scent of cookies being baked in the kitchen below. "You delivered them papers yesterday."

"Grans? What's that?" I asked. The bed felt like it was moving, but the movements were irregular, as if I wasn't really lying on my back, in my bed at my grandmother's house, but rolling. I felt restricted and fear was scraping the walls of my stomach.

Sevan, don't worry, everything's going to be fine.

There was some sort of loud noise too--a wailing accompanied by the low murmur of concerned voices. I couldn't really hear much for sure.

I wondered what Grans was baking cookies for.

Sevan, just hang in there a'right?

A female voice, yet not my grandmother's, was weeping in my ear but I couldn't tell who was talking. I heard the voice again, but much closer this time, "Sevan, if you can hear me, you gotta wake up."

"Val, hun, get you're ass movin, breakfast isn't getting any hotter!" Grans chimed from the kitchen below--I hadn't even noticed her move out of the room, let alone back downstairs. The bed was stable again and I rose, feeling slightly disoriented. I looked at the clock, it was seven...in the morning, I assumed. My clothes appeared wrinkled from sleep. I straightened my clothes, and hopped down the stairs to the kitchen--something I had done every morning for years before my grandmother died. I had lived with her, I remembered. I had taken care of her when she was ill.

Grans didn't have a kitchen like you'd think a grandmother would have. It was only a single room, divided by a long counter. On one side, there was the cooking area and a garage sale dinner table was on the other. The oven was turned on and I wiped the sudden sweat that formed on my brow, up into my long, shaggy blond hair.

"Lord, child, you really need a hair cut." Grans was puttering around on the cooking side of the bar. I was standing next to the kitchen table--it was that hideous orange color that you only saw in the 1970s. There were eggs and bacon with sourdough toast set out for me, with orange juice. I hated orange juice, but never challenged Grans on it. I just never drank that much and bought a Pepsi on the way to school.

"Get, your ass in this chair," Grans said, a smile in her voice.

I looked back at my breakfast and it wasn't on the table. Finding this less odd than I probably should have, I sat in the large kitchen table chair that Grans had waiting for me. She draped a towel with large orchid images on it over my chest and

gently placed a bowl on top of my head. Her hands shook softly, smelling of Ben-Gay cream as she trimmed my hair with ancient silver scissors.

Sevan, come back to us, darlin'.

I heard the voice, but wasn't sure what to make of it.

"You are a very special little boy..." Grans was saying as she trimmed my blonde locks. "Soft, but strong...a sort of walking contradiction."

Snip. Snip. Snip.

"What do you mean?" I was suspicious, knowing how to read her tone of voice--knowing that she knew something that she wouldn't tell me. I knew she wouldn't tell, but I asked anyway, hoping I would be wrong.

She didn't say anything, just started humming. After a moment of trimming, a small pile of blonde hairs were collecting around my feet, she said, "There are going to be a lot of people who don't like you," and then, after a moment of reflection, "but I suppose that's everyone really. It's just going to be a bit different with you, little head." She tousled my hair playfully.

The haircut was finished then and I briefly closed my eyes. I must have sat there in that oak chair, pondering for a lot longer than I thought. I must have fallen asleep, because suddenly, I woke.

My body was frozen in the warmth of the bed, I wasn't sure that I could move. The exhaustion could be felt in every inch of my body, stretching over every inch of my skin. Slowly, my senses were following my consciousness, waking as slowly as my brain. The room smelled of antiseptic. My eyes burned; my mouth was dry. I wondered if waking from death was a similar feeling. I rose and walked to the mirror across from the bed. I didn't remember the walls of my room being so white, but I paid no attention.

I looked at the individual features of my face without acknowledging that they pulled together to form a face— a face that was dark with exhaustion, a face that was still bruised and beaten. Dark rings held strong under my eyes, slightly purple, slightly green. My nose was swollen and deformed.

Where am I?

My subconscious evaluated my surroundings before I became aware that I was standing in a completely foreign room. I realized that every inch of my torso was crying for me to stop moving--the pain suddenly knocked me down. It felt like a flock of sharp razors slicing across my chest--it was a feeling that I hadn't been expecting at all.

"Nurse, goddamnit, get in here."

Warm, gentle and familiar hands helped me find my way back into the comfort of the bed. "Thank you, grandma," I said without thinking.

"Well, you're welcome, ya jackass, but I'm a little insulted that you think I'm old enough to be a grandma," Lilly said.

For the first time, in what I would come to understand was nearly three days, I opened my eyes--really opened them and looked around me--and was assaulted by the bright white light of the hospital room. "Welcome back to the living," another voice said. This one was also familiar, but much more soothing. I looked up and saw John.

"Hi," I said weakly.

"We leave you alone for one minute and you're trying to high tail it out of here. I should have known you'd wait until we weren't expecting it," Lilly said. I could feel her sour breath, stale from cigarette smoke, yet oddly comforting, on my cheek. The images of being beaten were coming back to me. "What happened?" I asked.

"You were hate crimed, buddy," Lilly said. Her abrasive slaughtering of the English language made me smile for a moment, but all I could see was John. He was slumped in a chair across from my bed, a look of sadness and nausea rested upon his face. He was beginning to cry.

Ignoring Lilly's presence, I said to John, "I'm all right, darling." Though I wasn't sure if it was true. As far as I knew, they would be amputating my leg later in the day--but, as far as I could tell, I felt fine...well other than the searing pain in my chest.

He nodded his large head, towering on his broad shoulders. The corner of his eye shined softly with fresh tears. I knew that if it were he that had been beaten, I would be crying as well. I also knew that, at this moment, I couldn't stand to see him cry. I couldn't stand to see such an act of violent stupidity affect him in such a way. He didn't respond when I spoke to him and Lilly jumped in, "course you're all right, ya dumshit." Always lacking some sense of sensitivity, but always allowing the fact that she really did care to creep into her voice. Lilly continued, "What the hell were you doing, hanging out by the gym, after school, all alone...what? The daily taunts aren't good enough for ya. Ya need to get yer ass kicked too?"

Sarcastically, feeling a small measure of mental strength return, I barked, "Sorry Lil."

I forced my eyes away from John and looked up at the solid woman who faced me. She was smiling softly, despite her surly demeanor. Looking at her--soft shaved head, robust figure, and her work jacket clinging to wide shoulders--she was beautiful. She was so strong and reassuring. That's what people didn't see when they saw her. They saw the stereotype, not the person. The very soul of what a woman was supposed to be--strong and a caring.

Lilly had looked after me since the first day that we met. She had hunkered down by me on the school bus as it barreled towards our junior high. She slung a large arm--even at that age, she was massive enough to look less like a teenaged girl and more like a bouncer--around my shoulders and looked me directly in the face.

"Are you a dude or a chick?" She had asked. For several minutes she continued to look at me but I made no effort to respond. "Cuz that bunch of assholes back there was trying to say that between the two of us, I'm the dude and you're the chick. What do you think?" She had been talking about the "popular crowd," whose names escape me at the moment. I don't remember what I said, but no one beat me up after that because Lilly was always with me. Well, no one beat me up until now that is.

As I became aware of the different parts of my body again, I felt her hand softly folded around mine. The skin was rough from washing dishes--she worked at a local Denny's. Her eyes expressed how much pain she was feeling, but her mouth just kept on smiling. I would always remember and love her for that smile.

John was silent.

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"Sevan, honey, how are you feeling?"

I opened my eyes, wondering who I would see, no longer trusting in my ability to recognize voices. Hell, in the past few weeks, I had opened my eyes to the blinding white light of the hospital rooms, more often than not, seeing Grans face. Her face following the voice of my father, who had visited from Oaks Grove, two counties over--where he lived now--or my little brother who had come down with him. Grans face would come after hearing my mother's voice or Lilly's or even Jake who ventured to the hospital to see me. Once, I woke, after being chased by Irony, only to see the white-gloved hands still surrounding me.

On that particular occasion, after the searing pain of broken ribs had replaced panic, I wondered if this was what it would feel like to awaken after Irony had Her way with me. I had ended up laughing to myself, realizing that on the day I was beaten, I had started the day with pain in my upper body, carrying over from the dream world--it was...ironic.

This day, however, I woke and saw my mother looking down at me. The first time, this week, that she had visited.

I struggled against my body to speak, "Hey, ma."

"Hi, honey, how are you feeling?" she asked and then caught herself, laughing softly, "Wait, I know, dumb question, right? You probably feel like shit." Her hand traced the line of my cheek and jaw and I marveled in how smooth it felt.

My only response was to nod softly.

"They caught the guy who did this," she said softly, conveying how much she felt that it was an irrelevant victory in the slight tremble in her voice. "Chad Procter. Do you know him?"

I closed my eyes against the image of Marathon High School's star quarterback and nodded in response. I surprised myself by saying, "It doesn't surprise me, that guy has always hated me."

I didn't have to open my eyes to know Mom was looking at me with horror, "always hated you, son...why?"

This was certainly not the time that I wanted to come out to my mother. I simply didn't have the strength and I groaned with the

thought of it, audibly. There was no way to fight it, so I just said it, "I'm gay, Mom. Or, a 'fucking queer' to use Procter's name for me."

The silence that followed was excruciating. I heard the clicks and hums of all the medical machinery that was attached to my body--monitoring this, regulating that. Seconds turned into minutes and I became aware that I still had my eyes closed and I heard the steady intake of and expulsion of breath from Mom. "Are you going to say anything?" I asked, my eyes still closed.

"Honey, do you think that I didn't know?"

My eyes flew open and I tried to sit up--instinct that was quickly rejected by my torso.

"Don't move like that, Sevan!" Mom said, and I felt her firm hands on my chest to keep me secure in the bed.

The silence set in again, broken a few minutes later, when the pain had subsided into the constant dull ache and I was able to open my eyes, focusing on my mother. She looked tired, the lines around her eyes and mouth more taught and defined than usual. Her blonde hair, usually swept up into an austere bun, hung loosely around her face--completely in shambles. She looked like a mother whose son had been pulverized by a hate crime.

"Sevan, I've always known," she said simply. Then thought about it for a moment, her eyes clouding for a moment, then clearing as the thought passed. "Mother and I talked about it a lot, we just weren't sure how to talk about it with you. And then she passed away and your father left," she stumbled over the words, her voice clouding with shame, "I just never found a way to approach you about it. And all seemed well..." Tears began to well up in her eyes, but her face remained calm and loving, "I didn't think it was a problem for you."

It took more than a moment to absorb. It took several days in fact. Lilly, who had been waiting outside in the hall, giving Mom and I some time alone that day, had told her about the taunting at school. Mom had asked Lilly point blank what the attack was about, knowing that Lilly knew me even better than she knew her own child, but Lilly had refused to speak on it. It was something that Mom and I had to work out. But they had apparently shared several conversations while they had sat in my room with me as I silently recovered--Mom carefully pulling information out of Lilly until she finally broke and told her

all sorts of things. Lilly, however, refused to say that Procter had kicked the crap out of me because I was gay. I suppose that Lilly felt it was something that I had to tell Mom myself.

Even know, being fully aware of the history that I shared with Procter--his harassment being the genesis of Lilly and my friendship--she still asked me why. Why being the question that came off her lips most often. She simply couldn't see someone hating me so much for being myself that they felt the need to brutally attack and nearly kill me. All I could tell her was that I didn't know the 'why', I had only grown used to the reality of it.

The best thing that came out of the attack was the renewed friendship with my mom, regretting that I hadn't confided in her sooner. The worst thing was the silence I felt from John.

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John remained silent for the three months that I was in that hospital bed. When they sent me home, it was my email inbox and my answering machine where I felt the silence the most. John and I had only been dating for a couple of weeks before Chad Procter decided that it would be a good idea to express his distaste for me, but I had felt hopeful. I was hopeful, more than anything that John wasn't going to break my heart like all of the men that had come before him.

My hopes were rapidly fading as I realized that John probably just didn't know how to break up with someone after they had fallen to a hate crime.

After that first day when I woke, Lilly and Mom spent as many days as they could with me, taking turns holding my hands when I wasn't well enough to do anything else and making me laugh when I felt up to laughing. At first, John lurked in my room, hardly speaking to me. Then he wasn't there. That day was followed by another and then another. It didn't take me long to realize that John was going to rip my heart out and dance on it, just like everyone else. I also knew why, though--John hadn't told his parents about us yet. Feeling the freedom that came with the knowledge that my mother knew, accepted and love everything that I was, gave me a new form of strength and it also made me realize the constrictions on one's life when that life is kept from your parents.

I imagine that John's parents started to inquire as to where he was disappearing to so often. Since his response was probably

something less impressive than "my boyfriend nearly got killed by some homophobic asshole," they probably asked him to stay home. Without even thinking, he probably complied--swearing that he wouldn't go out for a while. "I don't have anywhere important to go anyway," he probably said.

Six months after the assault--three in the hospital, three in my bed at home--with no word from John, I was in my car, driving over to his house. Lilly was in the back seat but I was going to drop her off at the Scratch, a local pool hall where we played a couple of times a week--well, before the attack.

I pulled into the parking lot of the Scratch and felt Lilly's arms enfold me from behind. "Don't let that little whore hurt your feelings, all right?" Before I could answer, she had kissed my cheek and slipped out of the car. I watched her walk in and get our usual table near the window. A few other people, I noticed in my rearview mirror, moved to greet her as I exited the parking lot.

John lived in one of those housing developments where there were only three or four model homes that you could choose from. It was one of those neighborhoods where you never saw anyone out doors. No one went on walks because they owned high powered computers that kept them tied to the internet and no one worked in the yard because they could watch gardening shows on satellite television.

I parked in front of his house, recognizing his parent's gold minivan. I swallowed the lump in my throat and rang the doorbell. John answered the door. "What are you doing here?" he asked. He remained invisible behind the security door.

"I wanted to see you." I smiled, hoping that he would open the door, fling his arms around me and explain away all my fears--proclaiming his love for me.

"I don't want my parents to know that you're here."

Well, there goes that thought. I sighed, "Can't we talk?"

He looked around, as if we were being watched. "Well, they're out at a friends, I guess we could chat for a minute. But not long, they'll be home in like an hour."

"Okay," I wanted to smack him across the face, but shoved my hands deeper in my pockets instead. "Then, I'll make this

quick," I tried to pack all of the anger that I felt into such casual words, but I'm not sure that it worked. He looked at me and I realized that I probably sounded like I wanted to cry. "Why haven't I seen you?" I asked.

"I thought you'd figure that out," he said.

I said, "What does that mean?"

"I can't see you anymore," he said and I looked down at the welcome mat. It said, in bright white letters, *Welcome To Our Home*.

I felt that lump in my throat swell. "Why not?"

"I mean, you're really great. I really like you...I mean, I really like you--I think I love you...I just can't...be with you. I have a lot of things that I need to deal with right now." When I didn't say anything, he continued, "I'm sorry Vale, it's just that--you're one of the best people I've ever been with but, well..." He shrugged then said the words that cut through me like a quarterback's boot, "I still want to be friends." I thought of Jake and I realized that John probably didn't know my real name either. He never asked me what my real name was. Maybe he had caught it, from my parents or from Lilly, when I was in the hospital--if he did, he probably didn't make the connection the number that was being uttered on concerned lips and the mangled form that lay in the hospital bed, bruised and broken.

I thought of Lilly and started walking towards my car. I hoped that he would run after me; I heard his front door close quietly.

It was starting to get dark and I looked up at the gray sky. Crimson splashed across the clouds and I felt my ears chill in the frost of the pending night air. The sun was hidden behind the billows of musky cotton, just out of sight on the horizon. Looking down at my feet, I felt an odd sort of apathetic emptiness come over me. It felt something like hunger. It felt like waiting all day to eat and then not being able to because of the nausea and a biting headache.

I looked around me, taking a deep breath of the cool night air. I had reached a nexus and I wondered how many times I was destined to come back to this point of rejection and heartache. With Jake, I had been someone that he had used; with John, he

had loved me, but the relationship reached the same conclusion. I suddenly wondered if Irony would visit my dreams again, tonight.

In all reality, I should have been thinking about how horrible it was that Chad Procter felt justified to kick the crap out of me simply because something about me, as bad-after-school-special as it sounds, was different than him. Or maybe I should have been thinking about how awful the dull aching in my chest was. The truth was, there were about a million and a half things that I could have worried about on that short drive from John's neighborhood, back to the familiar territory of the Scratch, but really, all I could think about was how much I was looking forward to playing pool. My ribs were feeling pretty good, though I'd have to take it easy. It was nice to think that I wouldn't go home and be disappointed when my answering machine intoned, "You have no new messages." Pausing for a moment after "no," just long enough for me to really acknowledge the fact that John hadn't called. I wouldn't have to frantically get online and check my email. I wouldn't have the ridiculous urge to check the windowsill to see if messenger pigeon had brought word.

God, I had been such an idiot.

I walked into the Scratch, absorbing the gentle mingling of mozzarella sticks and cue chalk. Terrible eighties heavy metal blared over the sound system, I heard the ensemble of billiard balls clacking as they made contact with each other and I suddenly felt comfortable within the confines of my own skin. I felt that same warm hand on my shoulder again and then "hey, buddy, how did it go?"

Turing to Lilly, I simply said, "you knew he was a bastard right?"

She appreciated the full meaning of such a simple sentence, "yeah, I tried to tell you dumshit." One corner of her mouth began to tilt up into a small smile. She clapped me on the shoulder, "c'mon, lemme kick yer ass, eh?"

"Well, everyone else has, why not you too?" I said, and then regretting it as Lilly looked back at me horrified by what she had said.

"Ah, Sevan, god I'm sorry, I didn't mean it like that," she fumbled with her words, and knowing her as well as I did, I knew that she wanted more than anything to reach out and hug me.

I just smiled, finding it sort of comical that I had finally made a joke that was lost on Lilly. More often than not, I was trying to back peddle after sticking my foot in my mouth. "Its all right, Lilly. I was just joking," I said, very seriously.

She smiled then, as did I, and we shared a chuckle for all the pain that we had felt in our lives, knowing that at this moment, all was truly well. We both moved towards the table she had been playing at before I had walked in.

The Scratch was a small pool hall; the walls portrayed giant billiard balls, giant circles of color with numbers painted carefully on them--numbers as large, if not larger than my head. Our table was in the left corner of the room. I noticed that there were a couple of new people milling around it.

"Who are the newbies?" I asked Lilly as we approached them.

Instead of answering, she approached the tallest of the pair--a solid, athletic looking blonde girl, short hair cropped closely to her head, yet distinctly feminine. She had large green eyes that seemed sort of sad and pale white skin. Pretty, but sort of geeky on the same token. The other was tall, similar height and look, only she had almond colored hair, a large nose, and gold rimmed glasses.

"V, this is Sam," Lilly said, indicating the blonde, "and Jules," she pointed at the brunet then softly laced her fingers with Sam's. I was immediately reminded that Lilly said she would be bringing a date and a friend of hers that she met at work. I smiled softly despite myself, realizing that Sam and Lilly were ascetically pleasing as a couple, but Sam would have to jump through a lot of hoops to meet my approval. I smiled again, remembering Lilly's warnings about John.

"Its great to finally meet you, V. Lilly talks about you a lot," Jules said, smiling at me.

"What does V stand for?" Sam asked.

I reached under the large, green-topped table and grabbed the wooden triangle to rack the billiard balls for the game. I took a moment to consider how to respond. I thought of Mom, and then

Jake, and John. I looked up at Lilly and then at the face of her expectant companion. I chose the road that had yielded the most success thus far, "My name is Sevan," I stated simply and then, allowing the soft wood of the cue to slip powerfully between my index and middle fingers, I sent the white cue ball down the table to make contact with the rainbow that awaited at the other end. The orange five-ball fell easily into the left corner pocket, where Lilly was standing.

I looked from the pocket, up to Lilly's face. She had an amazed smile dancing upon her lips. Sam only looked at him quizzically.

"Seven, like the number?"

"Nah, Sevan, like Evan with an S in front," I said, mocking Lilly's smile and then sticking my tongue out at her.

Jules looked rather confused as well, both at my name and at the playful faces that Lilly and I exchanged. Sam just smiled--I imagine, with Lilly's prompting, Sam had intentionally asked me to define my one letter nickname. Jules obviously had not been privy to any inside information. Jules asked, "well, if your name is Sevan, why go by V?"

I looked at her, "you know what, Jules?" I paused for a moment, leaned down to set up and take my next shot--sinking the two--and surprised myself a second time because I had no qualms to overcome, "you're right, it doesn't work. I don't think I'm going to use it anymore. Sevan, I'm just Sevan from now on."

Lilly let go of Sams hand and came around the table to hug me before I lined up my next shot. "Three ball, side pocket," I said, feeling satisfied, not only because I sunk the three ball, but because I knew I had found my name.

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That night I dreamt about running. I ran and ran until I felt as if my heart and lungs were pumping so quickly that they couldn't keep up with my body. It was that sort of running that you do when you are a small child and you just want to run until you cant feel the ground any longer. In my dream I ran until I could fly. I looked down upon a cold and dark city, watching the lights flicker to life as I flew over. With the lights came warmth and comfort, the illumination provided for a view I had not yet seen. I found myself looking down at a city I had lived in all of my life, but was seeing for the first time. Gradually, the city melted into Irony's world. The amber plain stretching

out as far as I could see, the strange animals, nothing more than specks against twisted forms and splats of green and blue.

I felt as if my heart were soaring even higher than myself as I flew over Irony, knowing that Her existence would never leave me, but that Her existence no longer haunted me. I actually waved down at Her, pleased that those large white gloves waved back. My heart warmed and, at a great distance, I felt myself begin to stir. For the first time in many years, I woke up--really woke up--excited to see what the day would bring.