

Six Inch Valley

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Six Inch Valley

by [SLWalker](#)

Summary

A vague and disinterested sneer kept floating in the front of his mind, a twisted version of the Cheshire cat's smile, over a white coat and stethoscope.

Notes

This is a pretty grim little tale, but it pulls out of the nosedive at the end. There are two songs specifically referenced, both by Bruce Springsteen and the E-Street Band: [I'm On Fire](#) and [Ghosts](#).

Happy birthday, Dara. You have given me so much joy these past several months. Hopefully you'll forgive me for giving you angst back on your birthday. LOL!

- Inspired by [A Higher Power When You Look](#) by [daraoakwise](#)

His hands were shaking too hard to light his cigarette. All around him, the sleet pounded the leaves on the trees and lashed Central Park into dusk; beyond it, the sounds of city traffic occasionally penetrated the sounds of the rapidly encroaching autumn. He sheltered under a sugar maple that was dropping leaves in brown and orange, but still didn't stop all of the sleet from hitting him.

He had no fuckin' idea how he got there. The hot tears on his cold face felt like poison. His not-hand screamed fire and pain up that was left of his arm and into his skull.

A vague and disinterested sneer kept floating in the front of his mind, a twisted version of the Cheshire cat's smile, over a white coat and stethoscope.

He tried lighting the zippo eight, nine times before he realized he probably needed to refill it and didn't have any lighter fluid on him; the silver case with the California bear on it was a gift from a different kind of bear, one who had rode him hard and put him down wet several months back. He remembered the man lighting his cigarette with it while he was laying in Owen's lap, naked and sloppy, feeling well-fucked and temporarily something almost like *okay*, then pressing the zippo into his hand and pressing a sweet kiss to his mouth at the same time.

Scotty hadn't seen the bear since. But Owen--

Scotty tried for a tenth time to light the zippo, but between the lack of lighter fluid and his trembling and the lack of another hand to shield against the breeze with, he couldn't get it. He tried fishing for a Bic, which he usually carried with him as spare -- when he could remember -- and found nothing.

Half a pack of Marlboro reds were useless without fire, and with only one hand, he broke one more when he tried to put it back to save for later.

A year ago, he'd watched a rat get slowly killed by one of the many street cats that roamed Queens. Maybe a year ago. Maybe less, maybe

more, didn't matter. But it had been early morning, a gray dawn over a gray city, rain pouring down. Across the road, one of the rubbish bins was laying on its side, abandoned there post-collection. Until whoever owned it took it back around the side of the multifamily home, it served as an attractant for all of New York's misery and a scant shelter for the ending of a life.

The participants in this one-act play: The gray rat, probably not too old given its size, seeking food. The cat-- maybe doing the same. The roaches, oblivious to the drama playing out.

Scotty, sitting on the porch watching. Did the act of observation change the event?

Did it matter if it did?

His hand burned and screamed, which was a neat trick, what with it not existing anymore. His shoulder and upper back also howled, tension he could medicate away, but only by going to more and more extremes. He sat with smoke curling around his face, a half decent coffee in a styrofoam cup from the corner bodega on a side table. Lads who worked in there couldn't really speak much English, but they took one look at his stump a few months ago when he walked in and he hadn't had to pay for coffee since.

He'd tried to stop them. They thought he was a war vet. Thought he'd gotten his hand blown off in Vietnam. He tried to go anywhere else for his cigarettes, but it was convenient, it was literally on the corner, so he accepted the coffee with as much grace as he could.

I'm a starship engineer, he thought.

I'm a theoretical physicist with four doctorates, he thought.

The little rat had made a horrible sound when the cat ambushed it. A cut-off squeal. It tried twisting and flipping, tried to fight back, but the ragged moggy that had it was patient and kept it pinned, and then choked and punctured the life out of it, thankfully *before* taking it apart. But-- not too swiftly. The killing. Or the taking apart.

There was no cruelty there, though. It was all very matter-of-fact.

I'm the rat, Scotty thought.

Dear Cait, he wrote and then crossed out.

Ma, he wrote, and stared at the wide-ruled notebook paper he was writing on, pinned under a very neat paperweight that one of his grad students had given him. A letter to a dead woman who wouldn't even be alive for centuries, except she might not be even then because they had changed the timeline so drastically.

And what would he say? If this letter to a dead woman survived the centuries and somehow found its way into her hands. Would he try to warn her? *Listen to the doctors, even though you don't want to*. Would he have listened to a line like that if he hadn't been committed?

Aye, maybe. Seventeen was young to look for an escape in death, and he'd been terrified.

Would he have wanted help? Not the help of hypercaine or alcohol or sex or slimy professors, but professional help? He hadn't taken it easily, but by then, it had been so long since he'd felt right. He'd spent six months institutionalized. He didn't really feel so great after he was released, either; he couldn't go back to Glasgow, he couldn't go back to the University of Edinburgh. He started taking classes at MIT, instead, but life at that point had just been one constant decision whether he wanted to continue it; meds that were too strong for him, but the only thing keeping him something like stable, and the same sorts of cut-throat competition. Sometimes he was surprised he lived through it.

Would she have wanted help, his Ma? To not make her living on her back? Or would she have felt like he'd felt when he held that phaser: that there was no such thing as help, or hope, and that the only way to peace was through an ending.

I'm sorry, he wrote, then folded the paper and later burned it.

Owen Hanson was a poet; a lovely lad, a handful of years younger than Scotty, another professor at NYU and another unrepentant queer. He liked to lecture and recite on his very tiptoes, leaning on his podium for balance, gray eyes bright; liked to throw his words out to his students on wings, some of whom loved him and some of whom couldn't recognize poetry if it was tattooed to their eyeballs.

He was thin and tall and spoke with a Boston accent, something more Cambridge than Dorchester, an interesting quirk of nostalgia for Scotty at first; he dressed in tweed and wore bracers and seemed to intentionally cultivate his reputation and appearance as a specific *kind* of poet.

(He also liked to get passed around in gang-bangs, or participate in the passing around; liked it when someone would get a hank of his chestnut hair and yank it until he was sobbing as he got fucked. At a podium, he spoke of the beauty of the world and of words; in whatever dark club, he sometimes looked to be turned into something that couldn't speak or wouldn't.)

Scotty had wondered whether he would reach that point. A different kind of ceasing to exist. He hadn't been there yet the last time he and Owen had gone clubbing; hadn't been at that level of needing to be obliterated. And he'd never be there now, no matter how much his bipolar twisted his mind into evermore complicated knots.

Nor would Owen, who no longer stood and recited on his tiptoes, giving the words he loved wings; sometime, in the dark where he didn't want to speak, he'd been given HIV. And in the space between where he'd contracted it and when he got tested for it, he'd probably given it to others. And even though the scene always had that undercurrent of danger and the sense that life was terribly short, so you might as well fuck, Owen had still been leveled by the results landing on him.

He'd sat in Scotty's fairly okay apartment two months ago and sobbed into his shoulder; Scotty, somewhere -8 or -9, held Owen and pet his hair and murmured the best reassurances he could manage for what was probably a death sentence. Instead of the bright shard of pain it should have been, his lover essentially marking the hour of his death, depression had Scotty staring at it all with a kind of mind-numbing desolation.

Owen was likely going to die; a final obliteration.

He went to get tested himself the next day.

Dear Jim, he wrote once, then scratched out.

Dear Kirk, he wrote after, closer to a truth.

Dear Captain, he wrote finally, then burned.

It wasn't all a nightmare, even on primitive medications, even living in chronic pain: He had a bowtie with rubber ducks on it that he wore over a band t-shirt to his lectures sometimes, delighting the hell out of his students and scandalizing his colleagues-- at least, all but Owen, who had bought him the t-shirt that first concert they went to together. Their first date, though neither were anything like exclusive.

(His poet liked rock'n'roll; classical, by Scotty's time, but he still had a grand time at the concerts, letting the roar of the crowds and the intimacy of sharing music and space distract him from his wrecked inner world and the constant companion of his pain. *Blue-collar poetry*, Owen had said in his ear, at Brendan Byrne Arena; Springsteen, without his E-Street Band, but still singing both joy and rawness.)

And there were times when he would be surrounded by his students and regaling them with tales half-true and re-contextualized for a past where First Contact hadn't yet happened (and never would the way it was meant to). The dissertations and the defenses of. The three invitations to discuss theoretical physics on air on CNN.

There were joys that didn't belong to mania; sorrows that didn't come only from despair or depression. Sometimes in there, Scotty found moments where beauty existed seemingly wholly independent of his fucked-up brain chemistry: Nyota, watering the plants growing in the window box outside of the kitchen window, in hers and Spock's apartment. The way the sunlight slanted in, made her skin glow golden-brown, caught on her eyelashes.

Owen swaying as he washed dishes, vinyl records playing; Owen walking unapologetically with Scotty on campus, hand-in-hand. The balance of acceptance versus prejudice, and how all those young people were fiercely more the former.

The view over New York, very early in the morning; already bustling, but the mist burning off with a fall sunrise, red and gold. From high up, as high as he could get, the city looked both clean and peaceful, and it touched something in him to know that to some people who loved it, they saw it that way all of the time, even on street level. Above the colors of sunrise; below, the cool gray and blue and violet shadows cast by buildings, the red glow of taillights, the reflections on a wet road.

The buskers in Central Park. The children going to school. The old men who played chess or poker, smoking and drinking too-strong coffee, laughing with rusty voices. The *accents*; the voices of so many people. The tones of skin, brown and black and white and olive, not necessarily all at peace or ease with one another, but still for now co-existing.

The instinct to keep living, to survive, was an evolutionary necessity. To continue to exist, even in pain. In whatever tangled up combination of biochemistry and electrical impulses and meat that made him was the same instinct, and sometimes when he was feeling cynical, he wondered if the moments of beauty he observed were another trick of the mind to encourage him to keep going. And he would spiral around that -- not every time -- until Nyota and Spock would put all his shattered pieces back in something like order.

Those are real, she would say, in their minds. He couldn't give them much of anything except worry or grief most of the time, but when he had something beautiful stored in the malfunctioning gray matter where his thoughts lived, he shared it openly and wholeheartedly. It wasn't enough to lift the burden of him, not even from himself, but the gift of their pleasure in the beauty he could share with them kept him going just that much longer.

The instinct to survive meant that death was a wide-ranging variable; it could come in a day. It could come in many decades yet. Scotty knew he wouldn't last forever, and in fact had tried a few times to cease altogether, but even though he knew everyone died and even though he sometimes wanted nothing more than to do so himself, he felt at least a little bit in control of the *hows* and the *whens*. He felt at least somewhat that his survival was his own to decide on.

He could choose. There was a comfort in that knowledge. Randomness could happen, could wipe him right off the mortal coil, but for the most part he could choose, and if he didn't choose, then it would remain a nebulous thing that could be near or far.

And he could, until he couldn't. Until the white paper with letters and numbers and the word *positive* marked his death sentence, and the sneering doctor in the white coat pronounced it for him aloud.

Scotty stared into the ever darkening night in Central Park, soaking and shaking head to toe, which only made his not-hand hurt even worse; stared into the shadows, and yet he couldn't see anything there. Inside of his veins, a virus chased itself around and around, replicating, building itself up for the time when it would convert from HIV to full-blown AIDS and where, if he lived long enough, it would then hollow what strength was left out of him. Inside of his mind, he ran the the familiar route between despair and fatalistic indifference, except now with the variables between life and death narrowed drastically.

Some people lasted a shockingly long time. Some were gone terrifyingly fast. But the average was supposedly eighteen months, untreated, from when HIV was contracted to when it became AIDS and killed you. Scotty had no idea *when* he had contracted HIV, but he could take a fairly educated guess, accounting for how long it took for it to become detectable in the blood and how long it took to get test results back: After a concert he and Owen had gone to, they had gone clubbing and hadn't surfaced for three whole days. He'd been out of his head pretty much the whole damn time, too. He could only remember it in pieces; strung out on every illicit drug that was being shared around, including heroin, and he'd been able to lose the constant, screaming agony of his hypersensitized nerves and missing hand. And if he was exhausted and desperate for rest, at least sometimes he could occasionally find a momentary equilibrium between drugs, sex and bipolar and pretend that he wasn't broken.

Best guess was that he left that drug-fueled orgy with both the zippo and the HIV, and that the bear who had given him the former might already be dead thanks to having had the latter.

He laid his head back against the sugar maple and swallowed, yet more tears hot on his face, mingling with the sleet to drip off of his beard.

Later, he was going to have to somehow find the words to tell his friends -- the only family he had left, whatever that meant -- about this. He was going to have to make himself look at them, and tell them that even though he knew all the rules for safe sex, he had been too manic to *care* at the time. He was going to steel himself and take responsibility for his reckless behavior in various clubs, with his lovely poet, and explain to them that he now had a better idea of when he'd die.

All of that would be later, though.

For now, he just let the terror and truth roll over him; felt the pinning and the puncturing, the deconstruction that had already taken place, the dark water closing over his head, and cried.

(Three years later, the day before he shot himself, he went to Owen's grave and said the goodbye he never got to before.)

In a quirk of the multiverse, Bruce Springsteen had both outlived him and not.

Scotty didn't know what had prompted him to look up the works the Boss wrote after 1998. But one night, heart aching with a deep loneliness that he had no escape from aboard the *Enterprise*, he'd looked them up. He'd known about the E-Street reunion, however brief, in '95; a moment of pleasure, telling Owen about it, watching his poet's thin and gray face split into a grin. But then the band had gotten together in a much more permanent manner after they were both gone.

Scotty had never gotten to see a Springsteen and E-Street concert, but he found himself searching for and then listening to those old (new) albums while he existed in the purgatory after being resurrected, off-duty and likely permanently and with nothing to do but cut himself loose on physics and invention. To sort through whether he wanted to live, to try to stand up again; in some ways, weirdly-- *stable*. But in some ways, devastatingly lost.

In all ways, looking for a light above the dark water to reach for.

And then, one night, staring at a vial of red matter and all the things it meant-- he found it.

Not a torch, but a candle; not a guarantee, but-- a glimmer through the darkness.

*I hear the sound of your guitar
Comin' from the mystic far;
Stone and the gravel in your voice
Come in my dreams and I rejoice:
It's your ghost, moving through the night,
Spirit filled with light.
I need, need you by my side,
Your love and I'm alive,
I can feel the blood shiver in my bones,
I'm alive and I'm out here on my own,
I'm alive and I'm coming home.*

Owen would have loved that; he would have been an old man, by the time that song came out, looking up at the stage with tears rolling down his face. He would have felt every bit of the ache and *joy* of it; the loss and the celebration. And he would have cried every bit of that out, watching Bruce send those words out with wings.

Since Owen couldn't, though, Scotty did the weeping for him.

And then he went to go find Nyota and Spock, taking his latest doomsday weapon with him, chasing the light.

Works inspired by [this one](#), [Measure Every Grief I Meet](#) by [daraoakwise](#), [No Different Our Years](#) by [daraoakwise](#)

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