

Chapter One of My S.E.D. Label,
By Joanne Troppello

When I was in high school, the guidance counselors and social service caseworkers gave me the label of S.E.D. I never understood what they meant. No one even bothered to explain their words to me. All they gave was psycho-babble and stern looks. *Who cares, right? He's just another messed up teenager with no future, except a life of drugs and crime.* Didn't anyone think to dig deeper beneath the crusty layers and help me. Finally, several years later, someone came into my life and made a difference. He was my therapist and he told me that label meant: I was *Severely Emotionally Disturbed*. I immediately disagreed. Yes, I was messed up—but *severely*, not really. There was more to me than the label. I just wanted everyone to understand.

In the midst of my rambling thoughts, Dr. Logan's monotone voice intruded into my mind. "Lie down on the sofa and close your eyes. Tell me what you see and feel."

Seriously, man! Was he on a Freudian trip or something? Whatever, why not? I had nothing to lose. "Iron bars, locking a window tight. Light streams through the window but when I try to get close, the bars stop me. I'm a prisoner and the weight of that imprisonment is suffocating me."

"That's good." Excuse me? Near suffocation is *good*? "Can you tell me what else you see?" His droning voice continued, driving me crazy.

Should I share more? Would he actually believe me? That was the most important question. "I'm trapped in this dark room and the bars are getting bigger. They are wrapping around me. Someone's calling me an *insane idiot*."

"Tell me about your mother."

Ok, watch out Freud, here we come! I kept my eyes tightly shut and tried to remember a time when I heard my mother call my name. I drew a blank—not a good feeling. "Doc, I see only iron bars and hear my name, *insane idiot*. Maybe I am an idiot."

“No you’re not.” Dr. Logan spoke calmly again. I must admit, he certainly had a soothing quality to his voice—definitely a bonus for a psychologist.

“I’ve beaten people and destroyed everything that meant anything to my family.” My chest tightened and I opened my eyes, clutching my throat, trying to breathe. What was happening? This was no stroll down memory lane—more like a horror show in the making.

“Go on.”

Two simple words, not normally terrifying, but in that moment, they had me frozen in terror. I remembered something about *Pandora’s Box* from my high school literature class and considered this situation mimicking that myth. What if, like the mortal, Pandora, I opened the box of my memories and unleashed horrible things into my world—like the evil that was unleashed when she opened the box? “You want to hear this?” Even I heard the edge to my voice as I spoke.

“Yes.” He said that one word with such finality. That action urged me forward.

“Did you know I was arrested three times for assault and battery?”

“I think I have that down in your file.”

My file—I was certain it was as thick as a dozen reams of paper. I wished I could burn every page. The file chronicled each law I’d broken and awful behavior I’d exhibited in my short lifetime, but it failed to tell the real story of my heart. I’d never let anyone get close enough to learn that story. The walls I’d erected were as thick as the Great Wall of China. “I’ve broken my mom. She doesn’t love me anymore. She can’t. Not after all I’ve done.”

Red. Yellow. Green. I sprayed the colors on. The concrete erupted in vibrant color—my design. It felt good to control the nozzle of the aerosol can. I was the master. No one could dictate my actions in that moment. I ran around the Jack & Jill Campground spraying the wooden park benches, the swing set, and the jungle gym.

Whatever I chose to deface, I did. I was the selfish destroyer. It felt right. I was free. After everything that happened to me, this small token of freedom was owed to me.

“Why did you feel free?” Dr. Logan questioned.

“I was trapped before. I had no one to talk to. Nobody ever took the time to figure me out.” I stared at him as he pushed his round, wire-rimmed glasses up the bridge of his nose. Each fiber of my being even doubted his understanding of this situation, which was my pathetic existence.

“You can talk to me now. I want to dig deeper.”

Dig deeper... could he possibly be telling the truth? Such a possibility seemed like an anomaly to me. “Isn’t that great?” The sarcasm dripped off my tongue like a foaming-at-the-mouth rabid dog and I stood up, facing the glass doors in his office. “I’ve only been coming to see you for six months. What about the other 19 ½ years of my life? You weren’t there. No one was.”

Beads of sweat dripped down my forehead and I nearly passed out from the heat. The windows were closed and locked and my leaden feet held me captive in place, watching the closet door. Not sure how long I stood there, suddenly a loud bang rang in my ears, dulling my senses. Worried my worst fear had come true—I had to check on him. *Oh God, I whispered, please let him still be alive.*

I pushed away cardboard boxes and trampled on a pile of soiled white underwear and socks, trying to get to the other end of the room. Claustrophobia started to suffocate me. I had to open the closet. He was in there. I just knew it. I tripped over a muddy, worn out sneaker and banged my head on the brown dresser. The impact rattled empty beer cans on top—several clinked to the stained carpeted floor. For a moment, I hesitated touching the doorknob, afraid to find him. Slowly I turned the

knob and he crumpled in a bloody heap at my feet, next to an ashtray swelling with ashes. His cumbersome body weighed heavily on my small feet, and I shoved him off.

Crimson splotches stained my white socks. I knelt down next to his lifeless form and saw the darkened hole in his temple. He'd done it. Just like he told me he would someday. Uncle Vinny took his life. I pounded his bulging beer belly with tiny fists and screamed until my lungs hurt. "Why did you leave me all alone? You know what mom's gonna do now. How could you leave? You understood..."

I turned away in silent disgust, while tears streamed down my cheeks. "I hate you, Uncle Vinny!"

"You don't really hate your Uncle Vinny." Dr. Logan's steady, unwavering green-eyed gaze penetrated straight into my vacant soul.

"Maybe I don't. All I know is that I really hated him at that moment." I stopped and looked away so the doctor wouldn't see the tears filling my eyes. Finally, the words came again. "Do you know that my mother gave me up for adoption soon after her brother killed himself? She kept my sister Rebekah, but gave me up."

"Did that make you mad?"

"What do you think, Doctor? It made me mad as hell." Clamping my lips shut, I moved away from the glass doors—the need to keep moving fueled my fire. What good would come from sitting down discussing my past? In that instant, the future was the only thing on my mind.

"Stop pacing. Come relax on the sofa." My whole body tensed as I defiantly stared him down like an opponent in an old time duel. He never batted an eyelash and only offered me his calming gaze. "Sit." I sat. Apparently, the doctor had power to diffuse my temper. Only time would tell, though, if he could get to the bottom of my story. "Tell me what happened next."

"You already know this story."

“Yes, but today your medicine doesn’t seem to be settling you.”

“Why don’t you increase my dosage?”

“Because you know as well as I do that you can control your anger if you want to. You have power over your actions.” *Power over my actions*—unbelievable...after all I went through and the frustration boiling inside me.

“Whatever, Doctor. Can we get on with this session?”

“That’s up to you. I want you to tell me about life with your adoptive family.”

On that note, tension crawled up my neck and took residence. I did not want to go there, at least not yet. The memories were bittersweet—love mingled with depression. Of course, Dr. Logan noticed. Nothing ever bypassed his radar.

“What’s wrong? Can’t we talk about that part of your life?”

The shaking started then as I voiced my belligerent objection. “No. No. I don’t want to. I won’t!”

“Just try.”

“Why don’t you slap me? Aren’t you gonna punish me? What’s wrong with you people?” I yelled. At that point, I didn’t care if the neighbors heard my shouting or not. They’d experienced enough second-hand altercations originating from my house—what was some more noise?

“Nothing’s wrong with us, Greg. We just want to talk this out. You’re fifteen. I’m not going to take you over my knees and slap you. I think you’re mature enough to discuss what you did.” My adoptive mother’s husband—my step-father—motioned for me to sit down. Needless to say, we rarely got along, many times butting heads like two bulls with horns. He was her second husband and very protective of her, not exactly the ingredient to bind he and I together.

“No, I’m not gonna listen to you. You’re not my real dad.” I knew that dig would hurt and did not care.

“You’re right. I’m only your step-dad. I haven’t even legally adopted you.”

“Well, then leave me alone. You have no right to tell me what to do.”

“Greg, that’s where you’re wrong, I married your mother. She has legally adopted you. She’s been your mother for six years. Think about what you’re doing to her.”

“Go to hell!” I screamed as I ran downstairs to my bedroom. I blasted the radio and left the door open so they could hear the loud music and squirm. They hated my music—anything alternative or heavy metal I craved listening to. The fact it bothered them, made listening that much sweeter. Actually, they hated everything I had and what I did. But they were fools. They thought they were smart—doing their *reverse psychology* on me. What did they think I was? Stupid. No. I knew he really wanted to beat me. Just like my real dad and all of my real mom’s boyfriends did. Mr. Cool, calm and collected upstairs, he really wanted to punish me. He just thought if he played Mr. Nice Guy, I’d be a good little angel and leave him and his wife alone. He was so wrong.

Dr. Logan put down his pen and white notepad. Leaning forward in his chair, he gave me the piercing stare again. I was in for it this time. “I’d like to know something.”

“What could that be, Doctor? I thought you knew everything.”

He ignored my sarcasm. “We are talking about your life here and whether or not you want to get better.”

“You already know the answer to that.”

“Yes, I do. You tell me all the time that you don’t want to get better, but I think you really do. Deep inside, I can see a young man who truly cares and wants to help himself.”

“You’re so wrong,” I retorted. His assumptions made me boil over inside. “I don’t care about anyone, not even me.”

Dr. Logan took a deep, steadying breath and picked up his notepad and pen. Settling himself back into his comfy chair, I knew he was not going to let me off the hook so easily. "Please tell me about your relationships with the children in your adoptive family."

Quietly, I walked out of my bedroom, like an inch worm, climbing the carpeted stairs. I crouched low on the top step and peeked through the white wooden bars of the railing. There she was, lounging on the brown sofa with a thick book in her hands. She was always reading. I couldn't see the name of the book, but that didn't matter. The only thing that mattered was that I was invisible to her—time to take my chance.

Slowly and carefully, I moved from the stairs toward the kitchen, desperate not to make any noise. As I crept passed the cabinets in the center of the room, my mind focused only on what I needed to do. Reaching the other end of the kitchen, I rose slowly to a standing position, as my hands clung to the countertop for support. I cautiously glanced behind me. She was so engrossed in her book; she still failed to notice me. My heart raced as my hands grew clammy. No time to chicken out now. I reached for the silver pocketknife and wrapped my fingers around its handle, how I'd practiced. Purposefully, I lunged towards her like a lion spying its prey.

My legs felt a rising momentum, as I made a sudden move to run at her. For the first time, she became aware of my presence. The blade reached out to touch dangerously close to her pale cheek. I could see the panic in her eyes—exactly what I wanted to see. "Greg! Get away from me. Mom...!" I laughed and ran back to the kitchen. Shoving the knife into my pocket, I high-tailed it back to my room.

Dr. Logan tapped methodically on his ever-present notepad. "Why didn't you stab her?"

"Why do you ask so many questions?"

“That’s my job. Now please take time to think about my question. I would like an answer.” I looked at his face. His features started to blur. A small mole stood out on his chin, holding my attention. Purposefully, I ignored his question.

“I know you have an answer. I need to hear it if I’m going to help you.”

“Look Doctor, I don’t know why I didn’t stab her. Maybe I should have. What difference does it make?” This conversation was going nowhere fast. Why did I have to come to therapy anyway?

“It makes all the difference. Even though you may have wanted to hurt her, you controlled that desire. Your control is a good sign.”

“So, who cares?”

“I do. All right, we’ll go on to another question.” Dr. Logan leaned his elbows on bent knees and questioned. “Who was she?”

My leg started twitching—I had problems with nervous twitches. “She was my sister. Well not my real sister. I was her adopted brother.”

“Why do you talk in the past tense about having been her adopted brother? She’s still alive, correct?”

“She’s alive. My family doesn’t care about me.”

“I want you to tell me more.”

Where was the clock in here? This session had to end soon. Finally, I saw the small cherry wood clock on his desk. “Doctor, isn’t our time running out?”

“You’ve only used up half an hour. Tell me about another time in your family.”

“Any time or is there something specific that you’d like to hear about?”

“Yes, any time.”

I heard some woman’s voice trying to convince us why her bath bar was better than the other leading brand. Swiveling around in my chair, I glanced at the TV. Oh, only another stupid commercial. My adoptive mom and her husband sat snugly

together on the sofa next to her two daughters. Her other two sons were already in bed. One of her sons sat next to me on the floor, on his pillow. The commercial droned on and then another one took up space on the screen. Another boring family night in front of the TV—I started getting antsy to stir up trouble.

Mary turned to her mom, “Let’s have ice cream. I think we have some chocolate chip cookie dough left. We can get it now before the show comes back on.”

The perfect opportunity—“I’ll get it.” In unison, everyone stared at me as if I had three heads. I felt like a foreigner in another country. If they were too suspicious, it would never work. My mission must not fail! “What, did I say something wrong?”

“No, Greg, Dylan will get the ice cream. Just relax kids and watch TV.” Her husband, Dylan, went upstairs to the kitchen to get the ice cream, and I wondered why they looked at me with such strange expressions. Maybe she was mad at me again. She just didn’t love me as much as she loved her own kids. That much I knew for certain.

I watched a commercial for Hallmark greeting cards and thought grimly *how stupid can they get*. No family is as mushy and loving like that. Not even this bunch of religious freaks I live with. “I’m going to the bathroom.”

Walking out of the family room, a plan began brewing in my mind. It was brilliant, but I only needed to get my dumb step-dad out of the kitchen to make it work. Fate must have been on my side, because just as I knelt by the foyer floor, he walked out of the kitchen and into the bathroom. *He’s probably going to be in there a long time.*

Once in the kitchen, I got to work. In only a matter of minutes, he’d come out or one of them from downstairs would catch me. I opened the cabinet door under the sink and grabbed the first bottle I saw—*Forest Fresh Scent* air freshener. It wasn’t the one I originally planned to use, but it would work.

Taking the air freshener, I sprayed it into each of the bowls. Since it wasn’t a liquid, I didn’t have to mix it into the ice cream. It would look as if nothing was wrong. Opening the cabinet door, I put the can back where it belonged. Suddenly I felt another

presence in the room. Glancing about, I saw no one and finally my heart slowed back to a steady beat. I heard the flushing of the toilet and I knew I'd better get back downstairs.

I moved down the stairs one at a time, careful not to make a sound. Looking up at the bathroom door, everything in me willed him to stay in there for one minute more. That was all the time I needed to get back to the room. The doorknob twisted and the hinges creaked. He walked out to the hallway and I made it back to my seat. No one noticed when I entered the room, except for my adoptive mom. The rest of them sat engrossed in finding the killer on the *Perry Mason* Sunday night movie. That made me smirk—*I'll bet you never will find out what's wrong with your ice cream.*

Dylan called down from the kitchen to his step-daughter. "Anita, can you help me carry the ice cream?" She grumbled and stomped her feet as she trudged upstairs.

"You won't miss much, honey," her mother called out.

I got comfortable in an empty chair and watched them carry the ice cream into the room. They handed out the bowls. Just as Anita offered me a bowl, I waved her away. "I don't want any."

"Geez, nice time to tell us," she replied.

Her mom motioned towards the table. "Put it down. Don, do you want it?" He nodded and his eyes grew big with delight at the extra serving. He ate so much and never gained weight. Sometimes I wondered if he had a tapeworm. "Greg, why don't you want any...are you not feeling well?"

"Look, I'm not hungry, okay."

"No problem, fine with me." They turned back to the murder mystery and opened their mouths. I tried not to stare at them while they ate—anything to avoid suspicion hanging over my head, like a dark storm cloud. After the first spoonful, I was disappointed. No reaction. I swiveled my chair and sulked quietly, tapping my foot against the floor.

Mary threw down her spoon. It lay vibrating on the wooden table in front of her. She frantically grabbed her neck, rasping. "I need water. Oh God, something's wrong...my throat." As fast as I've ever seen her run, she rushed to the bathroom on that level of the house. I heard water from the faucet rush into the sink. Several minutes later, she raced back into the room, water dripping from her chin. "Mom, I was so scared. My throat closed up!"

"Come here, sweetheart." She motioned for Mary to sit next to her. Anita sunk down into the sofa next to them, not even looking at the ice cream on the table. *Why, was no one else affected?* Wringing my hands, I waited. Her mom tilted her head curiously. "You know, this ice cream did taste a bit funny to me. I thought maybe it was the spoon. Do you think the ice cream had freezer burn?" That last question she directed towards her husband.

"No, that's impossible. We just bought it yesterday and it looked fine when I dished it out."

Not good—she wouldn't let the issue go. "What was the expiration date?"

"Hon, this ice cream has an expiration date for next week. I don't understand. There was no reason for this."

Oddly enough, I couldn't resist the temptation. "Maybe someone put something in the ice cream."

"That's ridiculous, Greg. No one touched the ice cream." She fell for it—just like that—this was way too easy. I eagerly anticipated the next attempt.

Dylan glared at me and I knew he pegged me for the culprit.

"Why do you think he knew?" Dr. Logan asked patiently.

"Really, Doctor. What do you think? I saw it in his eyes—the way he stared at me, as if daggers shot out and pinned me to the wall. He wanted me out of his house."

The pen tapping on the notepad started again. "Can you be certain of that fact?"

“He never liked me. None of them did.”

Scribbling again— why did he always jot down everything I said? “What did you write down?”

“I’m only taking notes.”

“Notes, on what?”

“Notes on you.”

“Why?”

Dr. Logan chuckled. “Did anyone ever tell you that you ask too many questions?”

“No, no one ever did. You ask too many questions, Doctor. Why is it okay for you and not for me?”

He shifted in his big leather chair. “Yes, I admit, I do ask many questions. Although, as I’ve repeatedly told you, that’s part of my job description. If I didn’t ask any questions, I’d never be able to help my patients.”

“I don’t like that word, *patient*. When you call me that, it sounds like I’m sick.”

Finally I stumped the good doctor. His quick responses failed to come. The silence was deafening. Glancing around the office, I waited for some reaction from the doctor. His wife and two daughters sat laughing with the family dog, Max, in a silver picture frame on the large mahogany desk. I remembered the conversation when he’d told me about his family. That’s when I had basically refused to open up and share about my own life. Dr. Logan broke into the stillness and stepped towards the glass doors. He motioned for me to stand next to him. “Isn’t this a beautiful view?” There he went on again with the *quiet voice* like I was a little child. “I picked this office specifically because of the view. I had a choice of a bigger office on the tenth floor of the hospital, but I chose this one. Do you know why?”

I decided to play his guessing game. “No, why did you?”

“It caught my eye the moment I stared outside. I knew that it would be a calm distraction from the problems of all my patients.” Then he stared me down.

I kept quiet, not venturing to glance his way. My eyes were drawn towards the panoramic scene outside. The green pine trees began blending into one solid reassuring mass. The sun, suspended just above the horizon, blazed fiery light into my vision. For as long as I could take the brightness, I stared—until I had to turn away. There was nothing left to say right then.