

The Hallowed

By: Evan Bair

I'd love to tell you I could feel the cells themselves slowing down. By my sixth time, I could probably convince a few bystanders in the waiting room that I could feel the cells, bonded and mutating, slow down to a halt, returning my body back to its original and organic state. This time it was in my right lung, the first time I ever had it there. This one was no picnic, but it wasn't the most painful. The payday was still large as ever and I certainly had earned my keep on this one. My final day in chemotherapy, I was already well on my way to beating this thing. Another notch on the bedpost, another feather in my hat. There were very few people on the face of the planet that could do what I do, and I'm one of the best.

"How are you feeling, Mr. Chefsky?" asked an approaching nurse with a gigantic smile on her face. It was as though she was administering the treatment to a local celebrity. "Your last round today, no? Well, will we see you again next time?" Eli gave an abbreviated smile to his nurse and looked beyond her shoulder at a gathering of nurses looking his way and gossiping from their station.

"Well, honey, I'd like to tell you no, but you never know when someone else needs saved," replied Eli in a cavalier manner. He adjusted his belt with his right hand as his nurse detached the IV from his left forearm. His belt was on the second to last hole, this time around he had lost considerable weight. But he never lost a single hair, and that was a point of pride for the 38-year-old member of *The Hallowed*.

"Well, we'll be here to take care of you if you do, so make sure to choose us again. Thank you, Mr. Chefsky, and feel well soon!" Eli smirked, nodded, and made his way towards the exit of the building using his own two legs and no help from anyone else. On his way in and out of the waiting room everyone stood. Cancer patients 85-years-old would grab their aids and insist they raise them into a standing position. The check-in nurse at the front, and the doctor checking his messages at the computer all rose when Eli walked through. This was the same for any member of *The Hallowed*. It kept combat veterans up at night, tossing and turning, for the way *The Hallowed* were regarded in modern society. Ever since a solution to cancer was found, there became the opportunity for the alienated, the downtrodden, and the poor to realize instant recognition in the hearts of their peers. This is because the solution, however, was *not* a cure. It was rather a one-way solution for the one who concocted the cancer in the first place.

For a small fortune, it was now possible for those who developed a cancer to now pass it on to another human host. The process, called *caroling*, requires the cancer to be transferred while both hosts are incubated, taking a full 48 hours while the hosts lie in an induced coma. The cancer cannot be killed during this process, as many failed human trials have proven to the medical community. Both subjects would come out of *caroling* alive, however, if the cancer was properly transferred from the infected host to the healthy one. With this medical development, the most dangerous profession in the world was created.

II

It all started for Eli in just the same way any poor, young kid in Chicago begins a career. Combing want ads for any sort of opportunity to help pay the rent. He was single, always had been, and quintessential loner. This meant he insisted on living alone, and those rent rates were certainly higher than if he jumped in on a multiroom opportunity on Craigslist. Eli wanted to live the way he wanted to live and was determined to make that happen any way he could. For a while he worked as a teller, also as a nude model, a sperm donor, he'd do anything. There was no job too low or degrading. That was when, one day at the sperm bank, he heard about *caroling*.

At this point, Eli had been doing at least three odd jobs a week just to get by. He was eating ramen and slept on a bare mattress on the south side of Chicago. He'd gotten used to hearing sirens at night, as well as gunshots, breaking glass, a symphony of crime and punishment. Then he heard of the going rate to be a host in the *caroling* process, and from that day forward his life was never the same. Sure, he knew he'd have to qualify to be a host, or, as they were being referred to as, *The Hallowed*, but he was in supremely good health and had been his whole life. He'd never gotten sick once in the cesspool of an apartment he lived in and considered his immune system to be top notch. However, the grim realization he also would come to cut deeper than any existing physical liabilities. The fact was, he was very much alone in this world. His parents disowned him when he moved to Chicago from Wisconsin his senior year of high school without getting his degree. He had no brothers or sisters or any close family members for that matter. He hadn't had a girlfriend since he was 14, and he wasn't sure that even counted. He was alone, and if he became a member of *The Hallowed*, and didn't come through to the other side, no one would come looking for him.

Physicals, stress tests, bloodwork, paperwork. That is basically what becoming a member of *The Hallowed* required. Sure, many people were rejected from *The Hallowed* and never could get the chance of risking their lives for thousands and thousands of dollars. But these tests you could not cheat on. One was simply genetically crafted to be with *The Hallowed*, or they weren't. Eli Chefsky was their poster boy. Perfect physical exams. Stress tests passed with a cool head. Bloodwork properly in order. Of course, the cherry on top, he was also completely alone. He was *The Hallowed's* dream come true.

III

Eli's iPhone alarm went off promptly at 6:30am. He rolled over in his California king-sized bed and grabbed his phone, silencing it after a firm tap. When he drew back the curtains of his bedroom window, he revealed the high-rise landscape of a city that never slept. He couldn't hear the hustle and bustle from the 30th floor, but he sure could still see it. People getting in and out of cabs, riding bicycles on the sidewalk and dangerously weaving through the traffic. This was a far cry from where he lived just over a decade ago. Through six diagnosis, six battles, and six fearless victories.

He began his day like he always did, on his rowing machine. His weight had significantly dropped during this round of chemo, so his goal wasn't to exhaust himself, but rather kickstart his body. He had discovered the importance of not treating your body like it's made of glass when you have cancer. It was important to do what you did when you were healthy; don't let your body fall into the same paralyzing empathetic cycle that can happen to the mind. The "oh woah is me" syndrome can kill the body and mind faster than the cancer itself. He had learned this early and put an iron shield around his mind, attitude, and body to repeatedly achieve the unlikely. Next, he did 3 sets of 10 pull-ups, a 15-minute ab exercise, and wiped the sweat off of his neck and chest before heading downstairs for half a grapefruit, toast, and espresso.

Eli's apartment was work of modern beauty. When he bought the place, it had been one of mid-century charm that would be quite suitable for most homeowners. But this was his point of pride, his spoil from all the hours spent on the floor vomiting through the night, the payoff of being pricked and prodded by a slew of doctors. This apartment was going to be exactly what he saw in his dreams. Dark, chestnut hardwood floors lined every inch of the two-story masterpiece. The entryway was marked with a modern chandelier made of right-angled, reflective pieces. Not everyone "got" the chandelier, but then again Eli could count the number of visitors he'd ever had on one hand.

His kitchen was modern with granite countertops, stainless-steel appliances, an espresso maker, a gas stove (he had his own gas lines put in), and large islands for entertaining. He sipped his espresso, cup in one hand and plate in the other, while he made his way to the bathroom. His walk-in waterfall shower applied the perfect amount of water pressure as he washed the sweat out of his close-cropped brown hair. Back in the bedroom, his belt hung from one of his bed posts and he stared at as he pulled on his clothes. The belt was responsible for the overwhelming majority of human acknowledgement and interaction that Eli experienced daily. The buckle, in the shape of an "H," represented his career and the sacrifice he made for others. At least that was the stigma. What it didn't say was without this belt, he would probably be homeless, or at least on the brink.

Leaving his apartment, he wore a ballcap and a jean jacket over an old gray sweatshirt and his Hallowed belt over size 28 jeans. He wasn't much for dressing flashy, the belt was really all he needed to do the talking for him. Walking down the busy Chicago street, he was met with nods, smiles, and words of gratitude.

“Thank you, sir,” one little boy said to him while holding his dad’s hand.

“Appreciate ya mister,” a rough construction worker said to him with a smile.

“God bless you,” a homeless woman chimed in as he walked by her. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a twenty-dollar bill and placed it in her coffee can full of change. A tear came to her eye as he continued his pace and turned left down another block. More accolades, more signs of appreciation, more attention. Eli soaked it up as he turned down another block and made his way back towards his apartment. Everyone knew *The Hallowed*, and it was almost seen as a sign of disrespect if you saw the buckle and didn’t say something. But there was always something inauthentic, something lacking true human emotion that kept Eli from truly feeling loved. His admirers would woo over him from afar, but they also knew he was infected. It’s like he was rolling down the streets of Chicago in a bubble, gaining the attention of everyone around him but unable to touch, feel, experience the humanity of another.

He reached his building, his doorman excitedly greeting him even though he had just done the same fifteen minutes ago and boarded the elevator back to the thirtieth floor. He held up his electronic key to his door and stood in his foyer in silence. Looking up at the chandelier, he saw multiple images of himself refracted in the glass. He figured that was the truest image of himself he’d ever seen. Then he told himself sometimes feeling sad is just as important as feeling happy.

IV

The mandatory waiting period between *caroling* for *The Hallowed* was 8 months after receiving a cancer-free prognosis from one's oncologist. Eli's last round of lung cancer had crowned him the leading member of *The Hallowed* in terms of successfully beaten cases. His 8 months was up, and he was going to waste no more time getting back in the caroling queue. His body had filled back out, he put his chemotherapy clothes back in the chemo closet and wore his healthy clothes out of the healthy closet again. It was not a matter of money, he had enough to keep up with his current lifestyle for the rest of his life and have a shockingly large donation for *The Hallowed* when he eventually passed. It was just what he was put on this Earth to do.

After his typical morning routine, he sat in his modern living room and stared at the clock. 10 am. It was time for him to call a car and head to the *caroling* center uptown. He made the appointment as soon as he was legally allowed to. Eli did not fear the cancer. It gave him purpose, it was his roommate, his best friend, his significant other. Without the cancer he was alone, and he was tired of being alone.

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The doctors said that still, after all these years, all these *carols*, no other member of *The Hallowed* accepted the abnormal and invasive process quite like Eli did. It was another successful *caroling*, but this time it was lung cancer. It wasn't skin cancer, the likes of which Eli barely counted in his tally, or even testicular cancer, one that Eli didn't hesitate to take on due to his relationship status. It was pancreatic cancer. The doctors carefully explained to him that only 42% of people survived this type of cancer, and Eli responded to them carefully explaining no mortality rate would slow his body from defeating it. Several other members of *The Hallowed*, the desperate, destitute members, had *caroled* pancreatic cancer before and all of them were now eternally commemorated at *The Hallowed's Hero Memorial* in Washington D.C. None of that bothered Eli, as he was given his chemotherapy schedule. It was going to be a grueling bout of chemo to take on this dangerous cancer, and the quietly confident Eli was ready to do what he was put on this Earth to do; beat it.

He sat quietly in his chair as he received his first round of chemotherapy for his newly acquired pancreatic cancer. A lot of the other patients around him had a family member or friend pull up a chair and keep them company. Some knitted, a few read books. A teenager sporting a do-rag leaned back in her chair, eyes closed, ear buds in. In another world. Eli sat up straight with perfect posture with no means of distraction. It wasn't just that he was a member of *The Hallowed* and wanted to appear impervious to the tribulations of chemo, he also saw it as a time to reflect. It was a form of meditation for him. He had learned to handle the treatment over the years, and the poison that had rescued him so many times now brought him solace. This treatment center was in Lincoln Park and it was the first time he had ever attended it. Even he needed some change of scenery to do his reflecting.

"Good morning, Mr. Chfsky," said a doe-eyed nurse to him. He had been staring blankly ahead of him, at nothing in particular, for so long he wasn't sure how long she'd been standing there. Her face was plain but beautiful. A short brunette pixie cut outlined her simple features in an inviting way that caused Eli to stare for several awkward moments before responding to her.

"Good morning miss..." replied Eli from his seat. His belt buckle was illuminated by the florescent light overhead.

"Manner. You can call me Nyla," she responded with a smile that quickly had his heart racing, his blood pressure on the monitor next to him increasing. She acted like she didn't notice and placed her hand on his. "We're honored to have you here today, Mr. Chfsky-

"Eli," he blurted out. "It's Eli."

"Eli it is," she said with another charming smile. "Your time is almost up today, Eli, I'll be back in about five minutes to wrap things up and you'll be on your way." She removed her hand off his and turned around, making her way towards the nurse's station. It's not that Eli hadn't seen an attractive woman before, let alone an attractive nurse in a clinic he attended, but there was something about the plain innocence of Nyla, her big brown eyes and perfect smile, that made him feel something perk up in his hollow chest. After several minutes, Nyla returned to his station.

"Okay Eli, it looks like we'll see you next week then?" Eli nodded and smiled. "Okay, well I know I don't have to tell you, but you might feel a small pinch..." she removed his IV from his other hand and placed a bandage over the spot of insertion. Eli could feel his face getting red as he attempted to gain the courage to prolong the conversation past his chemo schedule.

"Uhm, Nyla, do you always work at this time on Wednesdays?" asked Eli, his head tilted up whimsically at the mid-thirties beauty standing before him.

"Me? Oh, I'm here practically all the time," she chuckled. "But yes, I'll be here next week too, if that's what you're asking." Bashfully, Eli looked down at the ground and said, "Good, good, good nurses are tough to come by these days. Didn't feel a thing when you detached the IV."

Detached the IV??? He thought. *Could I sound any less...*

Nyla displayed her perfect white teeth with a grin that made Eli weaker in the knees than his round of treatment. “You know what, Eli? That’s the best compliment I’ve gotten all day.” Eli let out a relieved laugh that sounded more like a gasp. “I’ve got to be going now but take care of yourself okay? And of course, call us if you have any complications.” Eli nodded, grinned, and hoisted himself out of his seat, making his way towards the exit. He didn’t even see the flurry of cancer patients stand at attention for him as he strolled through the waiting room and out into the blustering Chicago winds.

VI

Eli never had a busier week in his life between his first and second treatments. In addition to a little more vomiting and nausea than he experienced in the past, he also spent more money on a haircut than he ever had in his life, his normal close cropped look now stylized into a fade on the sides with a part shaved in on top. At first, he thought it looked ridiculous, but when he looked through blogs and articles on the subject, he convinced himself this was the modern look people were wearing these days. He also spent quite a bit on some new clothes, visiting some of the men's boutiques downtown and asking the sales associates what would look good on him. He took every recommendation and swiped his card when prompted. He wondered why he never took any steps to elevate his look in the past, he certainly had the means to shape his appearance into whatever he liked. He just had an extra splurge of motivation after that last round of chemo.

Today was Wednesday, and Eli had never looked forward to a round of treatment more in his time with *The Hallowed*. He called for his car and in what seemed like just an instant he was back in Lincoln Park at the treatment center. The typical salutations and accolades from the waiting room crowd greeted him, but he was only looking for one face. He hadn't stopped thinking about Nyla all week. Of course, he knew she was the motivation behind his recent transformation, but these feelings were so new he wasn't sure what was safe to admit to himself yet. All he knew was there was no place he'd rather be right now than sitting under the florescent lights with that fluid pumping through his veins.

"Mr. Chefsky?" he looked up. No Nyla. A pleasant looking black woman stared at him with a grin. "We're ready for you now." Trying not to look disappointed, Eli followed her back into the treatment area. From behind, he saw the same brunette pixie haircut that was burned into his memory as he walked past the nurse station to his chair. He wanted to reach out and touch her shoulder, waiting for the compliments on his new style, how handsome he looked today. But he just kept walking. His nurse hooked him up to the necessary monitors and machines before telling him that he might feel a slight pinch. He'd heard that so many times before that he had learned to tune it out. He felt nothing and the nurse told him she'd be back to check on him in a while.

About halfway through his visit, he still hadn't seen Nyla. *What a fool*, he thought. *What a fool I am to go through all this trouble when I'll probably never see her-*

"Hi stranger," said Nyla as she approached his chair. "Oh, hi, Nyla how are you?" "About as good as I can be," she said smiling. "I've got to tell you, I'm not sure how you do it."

Not sure how I do it? You mean beat cancer for a living?

"Do, do what?" said a confused Eli, already far too wrapped up in his thoughts.

"Sit here the whole time with nothing, not even a magazine!" She chuckled quietly and shook her head while pulling up a chair to sit next to Eli. His heart rate on the monitor increased. She went on to compliment his hair and said he looked like a movie star, which made him blush even more.

“Don’t you need to help your patients? I don’t want to keep you...” he offered. “Oh, I’m on my break,” she said with a shrug.

She’s giving up her break to sit with me while I sit here staring at the wall...

The conversation continued without a break for the rest of Eli’s visit. Her loose nature and charm eventually calmed Eli as he settled into his own version of self-confidence and was fascinated by the little things he learned about her life. She had two cats, Pepper and Bingo. She was from Milwaukee, Wisconsin and moved here after becoming a RN. Every Tuesday she went out with her girlfriends to a local cantina and got chicken tacos. He didn’t understand how someone like her could come to a place that was so close to death every single day. She replied to him saying that she met the most inspiring people in the world at these clinics. It made her problems seem so small after interacting with her patients and gave her a tremendous appreciation for her life. He admired her. He was smitten. She was like no one he’d ever met before and he felt more alive than any extra digits in his bank account could make him feel.

Time was up. The pretty black nurse came back around to wrap up today’s treatment and Nyla’s break was over. “It was a pleasure, Eli,” she placed her hand on top of his. Fueled with the adrenaline of infatuation and pulling from the deepest depths of his being, Eli said, “Nyla, it was a pleasure. I’d love to talk to you more outside of here, is it possible we could connect this weekend?” The black nurse grinned. Nyla revealed her famous smile. “I’d love to.” She got up and walked over to the nurse’s station as Eli’s heart pumped like he just completed a triple back handspring. “Good for you... she’s a keeper,” the black nurse whispered while removing his IV. He smiled at her and let out a gasping laugh as Nyla returned with a piece of paper. “Call me later, I’ve got to go.” She touched his hand again and went to attend to her patients. Eli tried to stand up in his chair and fell back on his rear end. “Take your time sweetheart, it’s not a race,” said his nurse. She helped him up and he made his way towards the exit. He didn’t even notice how weak his body felt because his heart felt so good. So goddamn good, never like this before. The waiting room stood at attention as his belt buckle always demanded, and he high-fived a patient as he made his way to the car waiting for him outside.

VII

Nyla was even more beautiful out in the real world. She was a snappy dresser when she wasn't wearing scrubs, and Eli was shocked at her slight figure and curves that had been ambiguous under the baggy clothing. That weekend they went to a high-end steakhouse downtown, Eli's idea. Nyla admitted she felt a little out of place at such a classy restaurant, but Eli insisted she fit in just fine. Far better than him, even. She ordered club soda when he did too, even though he told her he was fine with her drinking alcohol. Even though alcohol wasn't strictly forbidden when undergoing chemo, Eli made it a rule to avoid it. It was his business to beat the cancer as efficiently as he could, so he drank numerous supplements and took vitamins, kept up his exercise routine, and drank no alcohol while he was working.

She had countless questions for Eli, and they weren't all just about how he got involved with *The Hallowed*. Although, she was shocked to learn this was Eli's seventh time having cancer. After he beat this pancreatic nightmare, he would be the member of *The Hallowed* with the most successful *carols* of all time. Nyla wasn't necessarily impressed by this accomplishment, more surprised and a little scared. Eli's background was dark and depressing which made him apprehensive to fully open up, but there was something about Nyla that cracked through his bolted exterior and he shared about his family, his old apartment, the odd jobs, the loneliness. At one point, a tear formed in Nyla's eye and she reached over and put her hand on top of Eli's like they had done at the clinic. Before it felt like a mother comforting her child, convincing them everything would be alright. This time it felt like love. Eli was moving fast in his head, but these feelings were so powerful they blinded him from anything that wasn't Nyla.

"Can you excuse me for one moment?" Eli said when their conversation, first rambunctious and playful, now serious and passionate, reached a natural lull. Nyla said of course and Eli excused himself to the bathroom where he pushed open a stately wall-to-ceiling door and collapsed on his knees, vomiting violently into the toilet, his head inches from the water. His first feeling was pure embarrassment, he was at one of the best steakhouses in Chicago, probably even the country, and there he was puking his guts out. The next thought was laced in concern. He never saw symptoms like this so early in his treatment. He vomited again, kicking the oak door closed behind him. After waiting a few minutes to make sure he was done, he washed his hands, threw some water on his face, and looked at himself in the mirror. His color was terrible, he resembled a ghost. How long had he been gone? He looked at his watch. It had been at least ten minutes... how embarrassing. Making sure no vomit had splashed on his wardrobe, he left the bathroom to return to Nyla.

"Is everything alright?" she asked instantly as he sat down. A look of grave concern was on her face. He couldn't fake it, there's no way he could fool her, she worked at a chemotherapy clinic for God's sake. "Yep, all is well here," he responded faking a smile. He took a sip of his drink and looked down at the half-eaten ribeye on his plate. His stomach turned at the thought of fitting another piece of the meat into his body. His hand shook as he lowered his fork and knife back down to the table.

"Eli, if you're not feeling well we can absolutely--"

“No, no, it’s nothing, a little indigestion. There was no way I was going to finish this steak, anyway, look at this thing!”

Nyla smiled, but it wasn’t enough to cover up the look of genuine concern on her face. “Why don’t we go back to your place, maybe you’ll feel better if we can relax a little bit.” Eli stopped for a moment, not sure if Nyla was looking for sex or putting on her nurse hat.

Looking for sex? It’s our first date! She’s just trying to make sure you don’t pass out at the table...

“That’d be great. The car’s outside, ready?” Nyla nodded and smiled, they packed up their leftovers and got into the black unmarked car sitting outside the steakhouse. Once dropped off, Eli handed his leftover porterhouse to a homeless man stumbling down the street. They got into the elevator and went up to the thirtieth floor.

“This is such a beautiful foyer! Wow Eli, you have great taste, I’m sure you love having people over here.” Eli gave a half-smile and looked at the floor. She looked at him, lovingly for a moment, and grabbed his hand. They walked over and laid on the couch, a fantastic electric fireplace keeping them warm.

“I know what happened at the restaurant... you don’t need to hide things from me, Eli,” Nyla said softly, her head propped up on the chaise lounge. “It’s safe with me, Eli, you’re safe.”

Without warning, tears began streaming down Eli’s face. He can’t even remember the last time he cried. They lay there, embraced, shielded from the cold Chicago winds. They stayed there, just like that, until the sun came up.

VIII

After the night at the steakhouse, Eli and Nyla became inseparable. She was enamored with how strong and stoic he was, yet how vulnerable he could be. He was an untouched gem, not tarnished by the vanity a man of his standing could easily wrap himself in. He was enchanted by her, her loving and caring embrace, her beautiful eyes, teeth, and smile. She was the only woman, the only *person*, he had ever loved. Every week at the clinic she would take her break when he came in and sit with him. His belt notched tighter and tighter as the weeks went by, losing mass to his treatment. They'd laugh and swap stories and before he knew it, it'd be time to leave. They'd see each other every weekend, and then during the week, and then almost every day. She'd sleep over, exercise with him, split a grapefruit with him, watch the sunrise from his breathtaking apartment.

After five weeks, Eli discovered some hair in his drain after his morning shower. He was dumbfounded. Not only was his weight down far more than normal at this stage, he was losing hair from chemotherapy for the first time in his career. What he saw when he looked in the mirror wasn't Eli, King of *The Hallowed*, Cancer's Worst Nightmare. He saw a cancer patient.

Once the sixth week came around, his chemotherapy treatments were put on hold and he was to go back to see his oncologist again to get an update on his progress. He pulled on a blue ball cap to cover his completely bald head. Nyla wanted to go to his appointment with him desperately but couldn't get off work. He told her not to worry, he'd never even had someone accommodate him to an appointment and knew all the proper questions to ask as if they were written on the back of his hand. The typical pokes and prods occurred at his doctor's office, and he waited patiently in the examination room to hear how badly he was kicking this pancreatic cancer's ass. "I've never seen progress like this before," his doctor would say to him. "The cancer is halted to a complete stop. Hell, Eli, I'd say no more chemo for you, take two aspirin and call me in the morning if there's any problems. And if I don't hear from you, enjoy your life with Nyla!"

But that's not what the doctor had to tell him today. Today he'd learn that the cancer in his pancreas was metastatic. Not only had it over run his pancreas, it was in his liver now as well. His body was not responding to the chemotherapy at all as planned. After six rounds with chemo, it had finally stopped working. It was just him and the cancer. And this cancer was mean. Eli's cancer clothes barely fit him anymore, they were baggy and loose. He didn't have a hair on top of his head. He was violently ill, daily now. He barely had the strength to walk to his exercise room now, let alone complete his exercises. He had no more tricks hidden up his sleeve. He was dying.

IX

How was he going to tell Nyla? Did she know already? Of course, she had to know. She was on her way over now, after work. She was going to spend the night, it's Tuesday so she's bringing over tacos. She told her girlfriends she couldn't be with them tonight because he said he has something important to tell her. She must know.

The front door was open, and she came in, smiling as always, a food take-out bag in one hand and her overnight bag in the other. She kept a few things at his place, but really, they had only been dating a month and a half. It felt like ages. "No more chemotherapy for you, mister!" she chimed as she made her way into the kitchen. He was sitting at the island, his hat off revealing his bald head. His clothes hung off him in a 90's hip hop sort of fashion; comically big. He just stared at her. "I love you," he said.

She stopped in her tracks for a moment, then continued to the island and sat down her bags. Her eyes filled up with tears. In those three words, Eli had said enough to fill a novel. He didn't start with "so I have bad news..." or "about the doctor today..." or "you may want to sit down..." He said the only words he'd have to say. They meant thank you. Thank you for showing me love. Thank you for showing me caring. Thank you for making me whole. Thank you for giving me the best six weeks of my life. It was never about the money for Eli. It was never about the recognition, the fame, the clout, the admiration. It was about filling up his heart. Feeling accomplishment. Feeling anything. He was so proud about getting to this moment of his life. He took away death sentences from half a dozen people in his life. Gave them a second chance. A cancer free life. But, through all of it, he got to experience life too, if not for just a while, even if it killed him. And it did.