

Smoke

First Place Prose 20006

Stem cells smell like rotten eggs. I learned this standing by my brother's bed, in a clean green room overlooking a sea of housing projects. Our parents were there too, and Grandma Molly, with a tuft of white hair poking up above the back band of her surgical mask. The oncologist, a thin, quiet man in a dark suit, brought the infusion bag, packed in a picnic cooler. It looked like a regular IV bag, with the same square bar code sticker.

"I feel like we should all hold hands and pray, or something," Eli said. Nobody moved, though; we just watched the straw-colored fluid drip through the machine, as the chemical odor filtered into our masks.

In high school, I hid behind my silence and my tortoiseshell glasses. Eli, though, was dangerously popular, and inspired a distracting anxiety in our parents which overpowered our dinner-table conversations like an incessant car alarm. They worried that Eli was cutting class, driving drunk, smoking pot, dropping acid, or knocking up the downstairs neighbors' daughter. It never occurred to anybody, Eli included, to worry that the gnawing ache in his knee was anything more than growing pains.

After the biopsy confirmed bone cancer, a CT scan showed lung metastases. A social worker came to our family meeting, armed with a box of tissues, but nobody cried; we were sure Eli would come out on the winning side of "20% chance of long-term survival". We didn't understand, then, that Eli's odds were really all or nothing, his sentence as predetermined as it was unknowable.

During Eli's first admission, his wild, curly hair added several inches to his height, and he endlessly tormented the staff. He sneaked his girlfriend into his room, and the night nurse found them in flagrante delicto. When he was immunosuppressed, in the isolation room, he hacked his way out of the hospital-approved computer network and tried to sell his cardiorespiratory monitor on eBay.

However, when his cancer recurred, Eli reformed, faithfully extending his arm for blood draws, and taking pills at four in the morning without complaint. Except for the smoking, he was a model of compliance. He had taken up cigarettes while bored at home after his stem-cell transplant, and refused to quit.

"I *like* smoking. It tastes good, it's relaxing, and why shouldn't I smoke- I'll get cancer?"

"Do you have to make this even harder on us?" my mother pleaded. "Ora, you talk to him."

I halfheartedly lectured Eli on the evils of Big Tobacco, but bossing my little brother was as futile as ever.

“All right, then, whatever you say,” he chirped, grinning.

A young resident came into the room, white coat swishing behind her. “How are you feeling, Eli?”

“My pain’s okay. Can I have a cigarette?”

The doctor’s smile never wavered. “Now, we’ve discussed this before. Smoking is against the rules in the hospital, and I can’t let you go outside without an escort.”

“So, where’s my escort?” Eli raised his eyebrows.

“Right now no one is available, but if you’d like to discuss this more later, that would be fine,” she replied, irreproachably kind and professional.

Eli grunted something unintelligible, and the resident pushed a few buttons on the morphine machine, smiled goodbye, and swished out.

“Ora, I want to smoke a goddamn cigarette!” I looked at the pile of rejected substitutes on his bedside table: Nicorette gum, nicotine patches, a cellophane bag of sourballs.

“Eli, do you really need a cigarette? The doctors will flip out if you leave, and you can’t smoke in here.”

“Oh, screw the doctors! They’re so compassionate they could kill you. I though if you got cancer at sixteen you got whatever you want, and I want to feel like a normal person for one afternoon!”

I reminded myself to breathe. That resident was irritating, it was true. “Eli, okay. I’ll sneak out with you, if that’s what you want.”

Eli dressed, pulling his sweatshirt hood over his sad scalp, while I ineptly turned off the IV machines. When the floor secretary took her break, we slipped into the hall.

The children’s hospital elevators were decorated in an outer-space theme, with a shifting, planetlike lamp on the ceiling.

“Tenth floor. Please watch your step!” the elevator announced pleasantly.

“From here, we take the stairs,” Eli said, opening a metal door marked “Emergency Only”. Our feet sent echoes clanging down the stairwell as we slowly ascended five more flights. Panting, Eli shoved open the steel fire exit, and we burst into an early-summer sky, blue enough to swim in.

The roof was a bare asphalt expanse surrounded by a low rail. A few aerials and steam vents protruded, protected by mesh cages.

The sun was warm on our backs. Eli spread his arms, palms upwards, closing his eyes and tilting his head back to catch the light on his face.

We walked to the far end of the roof and stood by the ledge.

“Look that way,” Eli pointed, “there’s the zoo. The elephant pen is over there, but they never come close enough to see.”

Near the zoo, a sparkling glass dome capped a green hill. “Hey- there’s the Botanical Garden!” I exclaimed. “Remember the rainforest room, and all the cacti?”

Eli nodded. He sat down on the ledge and leaned against a low pillar, placing one foot precariously up on the rail. “It’s so clear today. I wish I had binoculars.” When I stood by the edge and looked down, my stomach lurched. Eli, though, was perfectly at ease. He pulled a cigarette out of the pack of Marlboros in the back pocket of his jeans, spinning it between his first two fingers. With his other hand, he deftly flicked open a metallic blue Zippo. As he put the lighter back in his pocket, I spotted the engraved letters: EJS.

“Where’d you get a personalized lighter?” I asked

“Oh, I got the radiology tech to pick it up for me,” he replied. “I have friends in high places.”

Eli exhaled a thick gray stream. “It’s too windy for rings,” he said. “Too bad I can’t smoke inside.”

“All right, give me one of those,” I said. Eli stared at me. “Since when do you smoke?”

“First one,” I smiled.

Eli took out another cigarette, and lit it for me.

“Here-“ he instructed, “Inhale- but not so deep!” He laughed as I bent over, coughing.

I didn’t like the taste, but I persevered. A bit of glowing ash fell onto my shoe as I tapped the cigarette with my index finger.

The sun had dipped below the tops of the high-rises, but the roof was still saturated with warm late-afternoon light. I lit another cigarette myself, then settled onto the ledge and watched the ashes swirl away on the breeze.

The windows turned bright in the nearby buildings. In one of the rooms, a man dressed in white looked up from a microscope.

“We should probably go,” I said.

“Hold on, Ora,” Eli said as I moved toward the fire door. “You take this.” He tossed the lighter and I caught it in my right hand. As Eli pushed the door open, I ran my finger over the engraved initials, the metal cold and heavy in my palm.

The stairwell was hot, and the painted brick walls smelled of latex and soap. Six floors below, the ward awaited us, with its enveloping hum of hopes and anxieties. I blinked under the fluorescent lights, the night’s freshness still palpable on my cheeks as I started down the stairs.

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