

## **Cindy's Orchard**

**By Greg P.**

Cindy plopped down at her desk and sighed. Someone again changed the height of her chair — and thoughtlessly left it up. Had to be a guy, mealy to the core. Like her ex who never lowered the toilet seat after he drained and spat apple seeds into a trash can like they were vanquished victims of war.

As her computer booted, Cindy re-adjusted her chair. She twiddled a pen nervously between her index and first fingers as a blue glow filled the monitor. One by one, the icons on her desktop burst the blue field. Patient records popped up last.

She'd worried about Mr. B so much, she hardly slept last night. Staff called a rapid response at 16:58 yesterday and he was transferred to the ICU just as Cindy's tour was ending.

Cindy chided herself for the one day she couldn't make it over to the VA's Nursing Home. She knew how much Mr. B looked forward to his swallow therapy sessions which included a few trials of applesauce and nectar-thickened apple juice: the supplemental oral feeds Cindy, a seasoned speech pathologist, had recommended after his last video fluoroscopic swallow study. It was not champagne and chateaubriand, but it was the best Mr. B could manage under the grip of advanced Parkinson's. He was resigned to that.

For two weeks, he'd done well. No overt signs or symptoms of distress; no tinged secretions suctioned through his tracheostomy tube.

Cindy double clicked the patient records icon and entered her password, nicking an errant key. Access denied. She entered it again. As the hourglass spun and spilled its pixilated sand, Cindy peered over the monitor to a photo tacked up on the cork board behind her desk.

She was 12. The scent of woodsy mulch swirled the top rungs of the metal ladder where Cindy stood, fearless. Her dad beamed as she cupped the stamen of a plump Jonagold. How far she'd ventured from the apple orchard in upstate Washington and the family legacy she could've carried into a fourth generation. An only child, Cindy wished this image could scrub the memory of dad's scowl upon her news that she'd not run the orchard when her dad retired. Instead, she tromped off to a school where the raveled anatomy of speech and swallowing strangled the roots of Breaburns and Pink Ladies.

Mr. B's record blazed across Cindy's computer screen. He'd reflux aspirated his gastrostomy tube feeds. The rapid response team pulled him back from the brink. This is what he wanted, despite dying motor synapses leaving him barely able to smile and the tubes tethering him to his primary nutrition and oxygen supply. Curiously, the team didn't place him on a ventilator. Perhaps he'd recovered enough to have a snack.

Cindy sprang to her feet and slid the earpieces of a stethoscope around her neck. She raced to the galley and retrieved chilled containers of applesauce and apple nectar. Waves of cold pulsed through the worn, front pocket of Cindy's lab coat as she scurried to Mr. B's room in the ICU. A plastic spoon clinked against the metal penlight clipped to her breast pocket.

When she arrived, doctors huddled in the hallway. Cindy recognized the head of the palliative care team. She nodded gravely and leaned in to whisper as Cindy approached.

"He's comfort care now," the doctor said. "Very weak, but he's asking for you."

Cindy parted the wall-sized glass door to Mr. B's room, walked in, then closed it, dulling the din of a code blue blaring on the next pod. Mr. B was propped up in bed, a faint blue cast washing over his dark brown skin. His closed eyes snapped open to Cindy's voice. He glanced at

her, stretched his lips into an almost imperceptible grin and motioned toward a bedside drawer for his speaking valve.

Mr. B's O<sub>2</sub> level was 84 percent and dropping. Respirations at 32 per minute. Mucus gurgled in Mr. B's trach tube each time he took a breath. Cindy suctioned Mr. B and placed the speaking valve on the end of his trach tube. Within a minute his O<sub>2</sub> saturation bumped to a marginal 90 percent and his respirations quieted to 26.

"Went home—to North—Carolina—last night," Mr. B drawled, his voice thready, his phrases halting. "Had to climb—backyard tree—take one last—bite of—Rome Beauty."

"How was it?" Cindy asked, stifling a tear.

"Hea—ven—ly," Mr. B said, tilting his head impishly toward the front pocket of Cindy's lab coat. "You have—something—for me?"

"Maybe," Cindy said playfully, pulling out the applesauce and thickened juice. Mr. B's eyes glistened.

"Ready—when—you are!" He said.

Cindy peeled off the containers' foil tops, dipped the plastic spoon into the applesauce and fed him a level teaspoonful.

"Remember, swallow twice, then clear your throat and swallow again," Cindy said.

The applesauce's frosty pulp spread over Mr. B's tongue and spilled between his cheek and gums. He rolled his eyes with pleasure, delaying his swallow until the liquified filaments pooled at the base of his throat. Mr. B's larynx lifted sluggishly and limped forward as he swallowed. No telltale crinkling sound of aspiration in the larynx as Cindy listened with her stethoscope.

"Ahh, just like—home," Mr. B moaned.

Then, Mr. B's eyes fixed upon a black T.V. screen on the wall above Cindy's head. He wrinkled his brow.

"Hey—That's not true—Bill—your daughter—can grow any—thing!"

"Wait—*What?*" Cindy gasped. "That's my *dad's* name. How'd you know—"

Mr. B. stopped breathing. Bedside alarms shrieked and buzzed. The medical team filed into the room and stood by solemnly as Mr. B's vitals flatlined.

Cindy wept softly as Mr. B's nurse rushed past her to silence the alarms. When the nurse leaned forward, Cindy noticed her earrings: two cloisonné apple slices dangling from her lobes.