

## The Cookie Intervention

By Albert Howard Carter, III

Oh, there's the PT's car pulling up. Is it 11:00 already? Must be; Laura's always on time. Actually I would love to go upstairs and have an hour of peace, but I do like her. She's always so upbeat and just full of energy. Besides, she always sees progress in my husband Tom, seeing him just once a week. I see him 15 hours every day, and his recovery from the stroke is so slow that sometimes I see no progress at all. None. I'm so worn down, I just feel numb.

Laura doesn't seem to mind how bad our front yard looks these days. She comes right up the wheelchair ramp I paid to have put in, knocks, and comes in the front door.

"Say, Tom, you're looking well," Laura says with a big smile. "Good color. You've been doing your exercises?" She's a small woman with dyed-black hair. Her energy fills the room. She's like a knife entering the gloom of our house.

Tom's in his wheelchair. I have him groomed and dressed in sweat clothes. He wears a sling for his weak right arm and a gait belt around his waist. Actually, he's done his exercises about every other day. I'm afraid he's losing heart after all the fast gains in the first three months. I'm terribly afraid that he'll be like this forever.

"Almost...every day," he says, "Al...most."

"Good for you, and every day is best," she says, encouraging but also prodding. "We want all the new pathways we can get." She knocks her knuckles on the side of her head.

"Yeah...right."

With effort he raises himself out of the wheelchair and steadies himself with his quad cane. Slowly he makes his way over to the dining room table. Cane first, then the barely working right leg, and then the good left leg. Cane, right leg, left leg, cane. And him, once an athlete!

At first he couldn't move anything. Couldn't talk. Couldn't eat. I feared he would die. In some weak moments I actually thought death might be the best thing.

It's summer and Sally's home from college; she has a job in the afternoon and evenings. Somehow she always shows up for PT, if not for breakfast. She is fascinated by the exercises and tries to push Tom through them. Sometimes he rebels, though, and even says nasty things to her, his beloved daughter. Breaks my heart.

She's a mixture of hope and despair. From time to time she asks me, "He will keep on improving, right? He'll get back to normal, won't he?"

I temporize in my answers. I don't know what will happen. All I know is I want all the same things...and more. I want my husband back.

Sometimes she just sulks and says nothing.

Laura is stretching his wrist now. I can see pain in Tom's face, but he won't complain or say anything. He wants to get well, drive a car, do things—anything—around the house. Or does he? Sometimes I'm afraid he's given up, and then where will I be?

"That's good, Dad," Sally says. "That's really good!"

Tom smiles. He doesn't get a lot of praise these days. He had many rewards at work. There are beads of sweat on his forehead. I want to wipe them away. Or kiss them. "You're doing great," Laura says. "You have more range of motion and more strength now."

Tom looks doubtful.

"Last week you could only bend about this much," she says, showing him. "And now, you're up to this much."

It's just a fraction of an inch, but I know they add up. Bit by tiny bit, he can do more with his right hand, but usually his left hand, nimble and strong, leaps in.

"Let's see," Laura says, looking into the kitchen. I've gotten used to her bayonet-like improvisations, as if this were her own house. She goes through the door. I can hear her poking around. At first I resented this, but now I'm more or less used to them.

"OK," she says, returning. She's found three cookies and lays them out on the table. Tom reaches with his good hand.

"Hold on a sec, Tom," she says, blocking his hand with hers. "I'll bet your right hand would just love to bring one of those cookies up to your mouth."

Well, he's not done anything like that since the stroke, and I'm sure he won't today.

Tom reaches for the cookie with his right hand and slowly curls his fingers around it. Very slowly his hand rises up, then pauses. He reaches down with his head, his mouth wide open.

Actually he looks grotesque, like a turtle or a fish gulping for food.

"Oh, that's fine, we all do that," Laura says.

The heck we do.

He's straining...and straining...the distance between mouth and cookie slowly narrows. Sally and I are transfixed, silently urging him on. Nothing else matters at this moment. I assume he'll never work again. I have no idea how our finances will be. I don't know if I can hold up, caring for him like this for year after year—but all such matters are far away now.

To my astonishment, Tom now has the cookie touching, barely, his lower lip.

His lips and tongue pull it in.

He looks at each of us in triumph, a broad smile on his face and fire in his eyes.

We all shriek with joy.

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Albert Howard Carter, III, is faculty affiliate, Trent Center, Duke University. He has taught literature at Eckerd College, St. Petersburg, Fla., for many years and been a pastoral care volunteer in an ER/Trauma Center; Carter is also a licensed massage therapist and certified Qigong healer working with cancer patients. He and his wife now live in Chapel Hill, NC. His latest book is [In Peril: All People, All Life, Our Earth; In Prospect: Better Healthcare and Medicine: Exploring Massage, Cancer, Qigong, & Climate Change](#) (San Francisco: U of California Medical Humanities Press, 2019).

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