

The Water Glass

By Kalin Ringkvist

Ronald Powell took a deep breath, his lungs painfully full, and blew. The first candle went out immediately, which surprised him. As quickly as possible, he moved on to the second, and after a moment, it too, extinguished. Nearing the end of his breath, he aimed at the third and last, praying he had the force to do this one in as well. *Dear lungs don't die on me now. I'll be truly an old man when I can't blow out three lousy candles.*

The third candle went out with a puff of smoke as Ronald reached the end of his breath. He gasped, clutching the table, and felt his head start to spin. His family clapped joyously, covering the sound of his labored breathing.

A moment passed after the sound died, and Ronald's daughter, Carolin, came forward, wielding a knife. Ronald grinned at her, still breathing deeply, as she plucked the three candles from the dark chocolate cake, and made the first cut. She served a small corner piece on a colorful paper plate, and handed it to him. "There you go, Dad," she said.

He tasted it with a plastic fork. "Mmm... It's rich," he commented.

"Good?"

"It's good." He took another bite.

Carolin plopped a ball of vanilla ice cream on his plate and continued serving the cake to the rest of her guests. Ronald stood up and slowly backed away from the kitchen table, carefully balancing the plate. He walked to the living room, sat down on a long blue sofa and set the plate on the coffee table.

Others joined him after several moments. A long period of silence followed. They were all family but, so unfamiliar with each other that conversation could be difficult. They sat quietly and ate their cake and ice cream.

"This always happens at family gatherings," Bill, Ronald's grandson commented. "The men in one room, the women in another."

Ronald noticed then that everyone in the living room was male. He could hear the women off in another room. Carolin was giving a tour of her house, which was still a fairly recent purchase.

"You're not eating your cake, Grandpa," Kevin said after a while.

"I'm savoring it," Ronald said.

"You like it?"

"Yeah, it's good. Real good. Did Carolin make this all by herself?" He took another bite of the rich chocolate, swallowing carefully.

"I assume so. You talk about her like she's still a child, don't you?"

"Sometimes it seems like she still is," Ronald said, thinking back on all the years since she had been born.

A silent moment passed. Then Kevin asked, "Why three candles on your cake? Why not just one? Is there some significance to the number?"

"I couldn't tell you," Ronald replied. "One for every three decades I suppose." He took another small bite of cake. "Jeez, this stuff is making me thirsty."

"You want a glass of water?" Kevin asked.

"I'll get up and get myself a glass once I get really thirsty."

"Don't worry about it, Grandpa. I'll get you a glass of water." Kevin stood up, hurdled the coffee table and went to the kitchen. He returned a moment later and set the glass next to Ronald's cake.

He didn't immediately take a drink. Ronald took a coaster from a stack at the end of the table and placed it under the glass.

Slowly finishing his ice cream and cake, he set his plate and plastic fork off to one side. He picked up the glass of water and carefully brought it to his lips and took a tentative sip. He needed to be cautious about drinking. Mechanisms in his throat didn't work quite like they used to and he needed to make sure he didn't get anything down the wrong pipe. He'd been careful with the cake and ice cream, but liquids were more tricky.

He took a longer drink, holding it in his mouth a moment before swallowing. He hadn't realized how thirsty he was. Cool, clear, clean, water that tasted wonderful, nearly as good as the cake, but in a different sort of way: refreshing, not overpowering.

Momentarily pulling the glass from his mouth, he stared at the liquid, then took another drink. And as he swallowed, Kevin asked, "You're being pretty careful about that. You worried it's gonna shoot up your nose?"

The voice startled him, and he lost his concentration. A pain quickly built in his lower throat and he began to cough. At first it seemed like the pain might go away quickly, but the coughs kept coming and the pain kept building. He put his hand to his throat, not even noticing the glass dropping to the floor, bouncing on the carpet, and the water spilling across his lap,

He stood, both hands to his throat now, his eyes watering. His mind raced, trying to think of some way to stop the pain and bring things back to normal, but he came up with nothing. Vaguely he thought that this could be the end. A little bit of water in the lungs can do a lot of damage.

The voices of the others in the room were loud in his ears, but he didn't pay much attention. They wanted him to answer them, but Ronald was forced to ignore their pleas. Instead, he prayed that this would end quickly and he would be able to tell them he was okay and not to worry. Right now, though, he was not okay, so he did not attempt to communicate.

Somebody suggested calling for an ambulance, but another said that it would pass. *Yes, yes, it will pass. It has to pass.* These coughing fits had always gone away after several moments. But they had never been quite this painful.

He felt weak. His legs suddenly buckled, and he dropped to his knees. Somebody ran across his field of vision, to catch him, but did not quite make it. Ronald fell to the floor, his eyes suddenly forced closed.

"So what do you want me to do, Doc?" Ronald asked. "I've tried to be careful when I swallow, but it's hard sometimes."

"I know," Doctor Ferrell replied. "It's not your fault, of course. Your epiglottis has weakened so much that whenever you take a drink, there's a tiny bit of liquid that gets through. You can't feel it because the nerves in that area are also weakened. It's only when you lose your concentration and a big swallow of liquid goes down the wrong passageway that you start a coughing fit like the one you experienced yesterday."

"But what am I supposed to do about it?" Ronald said.

"Well, what I'm suggesting is to take you off liquids entirely."

"What? How is that possible? I need water to survive."

"It's not necessary that you take it orally, though," Ferrell said. "I want to hook you up to an IV."

"And confine me to a hospital bed? No. Out of the question. I don't want to spend the last years of my life staring at walls. What other options are there?"

"Well, I figure you'll be able to last a while longer going the way you are. Maybe another year or two. But the next time you lose your concentration it might be fatal." The doctor leaned closer. "But Mr. Powell, I'm not asking you to spend the rest of your life in a bed. Only the next couple weeks. We can insert a permanent hookup in your arm and you can connect yourself to an IV in your own home. Just hook yourself up for half an hour, three times a day. And steer clear of all liquids."

"I'll still be able to eat?"

"Yes. You'll have to be very careful about swallowing, but you're used to that. I wouldn't make you get all your sustenance from an IV, because that probably would confine you to a bed. You'd just have to avoid soups and watery foods. Does this sound like something you'd be willing to try?"

Ronald thought about the proposal. He didn't like the idea of being hooked up to a machine. It seemed like there would be a little loss of freedom, but it was probably better than living in fear of drinking a glass of water. "Okay Doc," he said, slowly. "I guess we can give it a try."

Carolyn came to visit him the next day. "How do you feel, Dad?" she asked, standing next to his hospital bed.

"Physically, as well as can be expected, I guess." Ronald said. "The doctor came up with a solution that I'm still a little nervous about."

"What's the solution?" Her face seemed to brighten. Perhaps she had thought that there was nothing that could be done.

"It involves giving up liquids entirely, and getting hooked up to an IV."

"Won't that make your mouth pretty dry after a while?"

"I asked the doctor about that too. He said dry mouth isn't fatal. Water in the lungs generally is."

"So you're going to go along with it?" Carolyn asked.

"I don't see any other choice."

She nodded. "I'm glad to hear it. The family's really worried about you. You gave us quite a scare."

"I know," he said. "I'm sorry about that."

"Kevin's especially upset," his daughter said. "He thinks he caused this whole thing."

"He does? Why?"

"He says he distracted you when you were drinking."

"Did he? I don't remember."

"Even if he did," Carolyn said, "it was going to happen eventually anyway, right? It's not his fault."

"No. No, of course it's not his fault."

"You should tell him that."

"I will. Next time I see him. Is he going to come see me?" Ronald said hopefully.

"I can ask him to."

"Okay. How long are you going to stay, today?"

She looked at her watch. "I can stay a while longer if you'd like."
He smiled. "I'd like that."

Ronald shuffled slowly into Pete's, the breakfast diner that he frequented, and sat down in a booth. A waitress came to his table a few seconds later with coffee.

"No coffee this morning, thanks--" it took him a second to remember her name, "--Wendi."

"All right," she said. "No coffee. So what will you be having?"

"Oh--" He paused. "Jeez, it's been a long time. What do I usually have?"

"Do you just want the usual?"

"Do you know what that is? I can't seem to recall at this moment."

"Sure, I remember," Wendi said.

"Okay, the usual then."

The waitress left for several minutes, then returned to his table. "We've missed you around here, Ron. Where've you been for the last few weeks? Did you have a nice birthday celebration?"

"Yeah, it was a real blowout," said Ronald. "Actually I've been ill." He didn't feel like describing his situation any more than that.

"Really?" Wendi seemed surprised. "You're better now, though?"

"I'm better now. I'm a little surprised. At my age, recoveries are rare."

She nodded. "How old are you, Ron?--if you don't mind me asking."

"Ninety, as of two weeks ago."

"Wow... Oh, I think your order's up." She went toward the kitchen.

"Already?"

She came back several moments later and set a plate down. "Your usual, scrambled eggs, wheat toast, bacon." She plopped a glass down. "Orange juice."

He stared at the glass. Wendi started to leave.

"No, wait. I'm sorry. No orange juice."

"You don't want it?" she asked.

"No."

"Don't you want something to drink?"

He paused for a long moment. "I'm not really thirsty. Thanks though."

She shrugged, took the glass, and he watched her carry it away. He would have to remember that the next time he came in.

The years passed as usual and after a while, it became like second nature to never have a drink. A dozen or more times in three years he was tempted, his mouth so dry it was almost unbearable, but each time he held himself back from taking that first sip.

He would return to the doctor periodically, but these trips usually consisted of nothing more than getting his IV refilled.

Life went on. His mouth and throat were almost constantly dry, but it was rarely painful. And after only a short time, it seemed as though it had been this way for his whole life.

He rarely saw the rest of his family anymore. It seemed like they were all changing careers and didn't have any time to visit. On his ninety-first birthday, there was no party. He received a half dozen cards and a couple of emails, but that was about it. They wanted to have a gathering, but they

just couldn't coordinate their schedules. Or maybe, Ronald thought, they were afraid this time he'd drop dead.

He called Carolin several months later. "We should all get together sometime. We could have something like a miniature family reunion, if not everyone can make it. Maybe just you and the kids."

"You're right," she said. "We should. Sometime." But nothing ever became of it.

They had a small gathering at his house on his ninety-second birthday--about half the size of the one on his ninetieth. Carolin brought a small, white, store-bought cake with a single candle.

They sang happy-birthday in low voices, as if loud noises frightened him. After Ronald blew out the candle, they clapped, like spectators at a chess match.

Ronald took only a small taste of his cake, for fear of aggravating his thirst. There was no ice cream. Too much like liquid.

They did not gather for his ninety-third birthday.

He sat in Pete's, eating his toast, sausage, and poached eggs (his regular had evolved slightly). It was a busy morning, and the waiters didn't have time to give him any personal attention. That was why he came in here--because the workers always seemed eager to stand around and chat with him. He liked the company.

But not today. For some reason the place was swamped with people. The sound of various conversations and clanking dishes was all he could hear--until the baby started crying. Ronald ate quickly, hoping to get done and out of there so he could enjoy his peaceful walk home. Occasionally he would get a smell of the air being wafted from the smoking section. As he ate, he kept thinking, *they should make the wall higher. Just a couple more feet would be a perfect barrier. The one they have now is highly inadequate.*

At first, the overwhelming annoyances masked the pain. When he finally noticed it, he thought it might be his lungs again. But no, this was a different kind of pain. A rapidly growing ache, not a scratchy coughing feeling.

The pain grew as the situation slowly came to his attention. Dropping his fork on the table, he put his hand to his chest, wishing that it could just go away.

A waitress passed his table and he nearly fell out of his booth as he instinctively grabbed for her sleeve. She stopped, looked at him, but he couldn't frame his request. He stared up at her helplessly.

"Ron," she said, "I have another table--I--" She paused, staring at him with a growing expression of concern.

"Please--" he gasped.

"Do you need me to call--?"

He cut her off. "Yes, yes. Please."

"Okay." She turned and ran toward the kitchen.

Ronald gripped the edge of his table.

He woke up slowly, thinking he must be dead. It didn't exactly feel that way, but after everything that had happened at the restaurant, Ronald couldn't see any other likely possibility.

He saw light. It was all that he could make out. He assumed that this was the light that people are supposedly drawn to after they pass from the land of the living. But as his eyes focused, and he brought himself further into consciousness, he realized he was lying in a hospital bed.

He groaned--a sound that was probably totally inaudible, as a nearby nurse didn't seem to hear. His whole body ached. His vision blurred in and out, and his face felt tight, as if on top of everything else, he dealt with a bad cold.

The nurse started to leave the room. As she passed his bed, Ronald said, "Hello?"

She turned. "Did you say something, sir?" she asked quietly.

"I wanted to ask you--" he started.

She moved closer to hear his weak voice.

--how alive am I?"

She smiled, a quick on and off. "I'm sure you're very much alive."

"Oh." He realized that that wasn't exactly the answer he was hoping for. "I don't really feel alive." He paused to think of what he wanted to ask her. "Could I see a doctor or someone who knows what's happened to me."

"Sure," she replied. "It may take a few minutes." And she turned and left.

"I'm not going anywhere," he said to no one.

All by himself now, he felt miserable, weak, incapable of lifting even a finger. If it wasn't for the aches, pains, and cramps all over his body, it would have felt as if his mind was completely detached from the rest of him. The physical pain and the weakness felt awful, but underneath it all lingered something worse, the sense that this was a mistake. It was the growing knowledge that he had lived through his medical problems one too many times.

"I'm sorry I didn't come sooner," Carolin said. "But the doctor told me that you'd probably be unconscious for a week or more. There was no point in coming just to see you fast asleep."

"I understand," Ronald replied, slowly. "I only woke up a couple hours ago."

"There were business dealings I had to take care of--the last of them before my retirement--I really wanted to come and see you--"

"It's okay," he cut her off. "I understand."

"How do you feel?" she asked him.

"I don't know. I guess I'm better than I was when I first woke up. But I haven't spoken to any doctor, or anyone. I don't know what's going on."

"Maybe they don't know that you're awake. I could go tell somebody, maybe speed things up."

"No, no," said Ronald. "Don't bother. Stay here for awhile. I don't get to see you much."

She looked down, suddenly, as if she couldn't look him in the face. "I know, I know," she said. "I'm going to start visiting you more often once I get the job off my back."

"I know you will," he said, though he didn't truly believe it.

A long moment of awkward silence followed.

"So do you really feel okay?" Carolin asked.

"Physically maybe. But no. No, I don't really feel okay. I'm ninety-three years old, Carolin. I shouldn't be here."

She stared at him, a sad look on her face.

He looked around at all the machines attached to him. "I have this feeling that I'm going to spend the rest of my life in this bed. There's nothing I can do about it. I should have died at that restaurant, and in a way, I almost wish I had. Do you know what I mean?"

She was very slow in replying. "No. No, I don't."

He was equally slow. "Well, be thankful for that."

"You have an amazing amount of strength for someone your age," the unfamiliar doctor told him.

Ronald stared at him, annoyed by his patronizing. He didn't buy it. "I don't feel strong," he said.

"Well, of course not," replied the doctor. "You haven't really moved in three weeks. Once we get you into rehabilitation, and some physical therapy, you'll feel your strength returning. You'll feel like you're seventy again." He grinned, but Ronald did not return the smile.

"That should have been the end, Doc. I had a heart attack. That's not something that happens to healthy people, and it's not something a person of my age should survive. It's a miracle I'm here talking to you. There's no way that I can go back to the way I was twenty-some years ago. There's just no way."

"You're certain of that?"

Ronald paused. He'd expected the doctor to argue with him. "Don't you see it that way?" he asked.

"No. No, I don't," the doctor replied. "Okay, maybe I was pushing it to say you're exceptionally healthy. I was looking more at the possibilities, what you could become with a little determination. I've been reading over your medical history and it's apparent that your lungs have improved dramatically in the last three years. You're physically very strong. Before your heart attack you could walk without even a cane for support. Your hearing and eyesight aren't wonderful, but they're certainly better than can be expected."

Ronald waited a moment before speaking. "I've been lying here," he said, "trying to come to terms with the knowledge that this is my death-bed. Now you're saying that's not so?"

The doctor said, "Not if you're determined to get up and out of there."

"Do you think--You really think...?"

"Yes, I do."

"Okay then," Ronald said. "Let's do it."

The next two months were spent in training, getting his strength and agility back. They strictly regulated his diet. He had a rigid schedule. Everything in his life was scheduled ahead of time--his meals, his exercise periods, everything. It began to seem like it had always been this way--a constant struggle to get back up to where he had been before. He forgot about everything else.

He improved surprisingly and could see it everyday. He got better and better, just like the doctor said he would.

And after a long time, he was ready to go home again. It seemed like it had been almost an eternity.

He was excited about going home, and could hardly wait to see his old house again. But when he arrived, and they left him all alone there, it seemed strange, lonely. Without the schedule now, he could do anything he wanted, but he still didn't feel free. He still couldn't have any liquids,

and now, he had diet guidelines. Very strict guidelines, actually. Anything he could think of to do seemed pointless. After being shut up in the hospital for so long, he wanted to go out and experience the world. He wanted to walk to Pete's, have some company. The problem was that his diet guidelines would not allow him to eat hardly anything that they served there.

He had what he wanted, now. He'd come back from the dead, basically. There was still life in him. Life he had fought hard for. Thinking back on how hard he had fought, gave him a smile. He had fought, and won. Now he wanted to experience what he had earned. That's what he had been waiting for. But he just didn't know how.

Wandering into the kitchen, he looked at the sink. He noticed his thirst for the first time in a long time. It had always been there, he knew: buried, forgotten. He thought about taking what he had been denying himself for more than three years. But that would ruin everything I've worked for, he thought. Get water in my lungs, set me back on the opposite track than the one I've been shooting for.

He stopped. His whole body seemed to freeze solid.

No, it wouldn't. I've been working for a taste of life. Just one really good taste. I don't need to last another ten or even fifteen years, like everyone told me I could. There's no reason for that.

He turned the water on, thrust his hands under the flow. He cupped some of it and let it seep through his fingers.

There it is, he thought. Is that what I really want? Here's the chance to taste. Or do I want to go through the rest of my life just looking at it and running it across my hands?

He cupped his hands again, filling them, and he brought it to his lips. As he swallowed the first drops of the liquid, it silenced a pain that he hadn't been aware of in a very long time. And as the rest of it went down, it cleansed the throbbing feeling, the sense, deep in his soul, that his life lacked something.

And he experienced the greatest ecstasy of his life.