

# Apple Sauce for Albert

By Danna De Boer

Albert was about to die.

He lay on a crusty bed in the quarantined section of a military hospital. There was an old television blaring infomercials in his dark room, but Albert wasn't paying attention. His body was pumped so full of drugs that he couldn't really understand his surroundings. He could only think of apple sauce; he pictured it filling a big bowl right in front of him, cold and lumpy, tasting vaguely like cinnamon and sliding down his throat.

Albert had been dying for the past month and a half but his body was being very stubborn about it. The nurses didn't understand how he continued to defy death, but every day, his body chugged on against all odds, determined to oppose and mock the will of the universe.

He wasn't an old man. Albert was forty-two years old and had never had any major health issues. He was always very health-conscious—he followed the food pyramid, exercised four times a week, and went to the doctor whenever anything was wrong. If he hadn't been so hapless, he would have lived to be ninety-seven.

A month and a half prior, Albert went to a clinic to get a flu shot. He did it every year because he didn't want to get sick, and because the high school he taught at asked all its teachers to get vaccinated. The procedure was mundane and only took about two minutes, so Albert thought nothing of it.

He lived his normal life for the next few days. In the morning, Albert woke up at six to shower and get ready for the day. Then he commuted to the high school to teach chemistry to kids who didn't care, and when his work day ended, he would pick up his two daughters, Emma and Claire, from elementary school. He looked after them for about two or three hours until his ex-wife would return home from work, at which point he'd drop the girls off at their mom's house. His ex-wife and her new husband both worked long hours, so they figured it would be better for the girls'

actual father to watch over them instead of a babysitter. Albert was happy to spend time with his daughters and he didn't mind dropping them off.

After being with his girls, he would go to the gym or home, depending on what he had planned to do that day. He'd make himself dinner and watch a little television, then he'd find a book to read or grade some homework and fall asleep by ten o'clock every night. That was Albert's routine and he was very content.

Two weeks after he got his vaccination, he began to feel weak. He was clammy and dizzy, and his stomach felt like it had ants walking inside it. Albert made a doctor's appointment scheduled right after school ended and told his ex-wife that she would have to pick up Emma and Claire that day.

But Albert never made it to the doctor's appointment. During fourth period, Albert began to feel nauseous and his vision started fading. He sat down and tried to drink some water but he was only feeling worse, and when he stood up to give a lecture over the conversing students, he collapsed unconscious. He threw up all over the white-tiled floor and began violently convulsing, each muscle painfully straining as he flopped and writhed in his own vomit. The class awkwardly erupted in hysteria because nobody was mentally prepared for this situation, except two Boy Scouts in the back. One of the boys called 911 while the other rushed to get help, and the paramedics arrived in eight and a half minutes. Albert was taken to the hospital where the doctors stabilized him and used drugs that made him feel like he was floating on fluffy clouds.

He was supposed to remain in the hospital for two days, but he overstayed the estimate. Every time the doctors took him off drugs, he would feel horrible and tell the nurses he felt the same way he did before he had his seizure. They took his blood and tested his organs and the doctors knew something was wrong. In his blood, they detected some sort of festering virus, conquering his immune system and decaying his organs.

The doctors had never seen it before. While they considered the options for Albert's treatment, a high school student was hurried into the hospital because she was seizing too. They dealt with her the same way they dealt with Albert, and although it stabilized her, it did not cure her. The next day, another student was rushed to the hospital, and the next day, another. Each one had the virus.

The doctors informed the Department of Health and Human Services, and in the next week when twenty-three other students were taken in, people outside the hospital began to realize how serious this was. The virus was spreading and kids from other schools and adults in the workplace were being taken to the hospital daily. News networks reported on the strange plague spreading around, and the country was uneasy.

Four weeks after Albert got his flu shot, a video was released and went viral on Twitter. The video featured a man with a grey mask who claimed to be one of Satan's children and behind him, there were ten other masked figures standing at ease. The speaking man's voice was distorted into a low, grumbling whine. The man claimed to be part of a group that leaked the virus and that there was a cure, but the only way to get it was if the government complied to a few of their terms. They wanted to begin a eugenics movement to cleanse the earth for Satan and they would need the government's help to impose their system. They made it clear that a genocide of people with pure faith was inevitable, but more would have to be discussed with officials in secret. If the government did not agree, everyone would die anyway—the virus was so strong that they had only needed one random person to be infected for now hundreds of people to be hospitalized.

Almost immediately after the video's release, everyone with the virus was quarantined and Albert was taken to a military base. There, they quarantined him too and began running tests on him. If they wanted to find a cure, it would have to be through patient zero. Every day, silent men

took Albert's blood and examined him. They would scan him, feel his body for any abnormalities, and inject him with unknown fluids and observe the reactions.

This was exhausting to Albert. He was always scared and unsettled and he wasn't even feeling better. He was in a perpetual sweaty chill, and as more time passed, the more he could feel his insides dying, like a hammer slowly pounding the life out him. His finger and toe nails peeled off, his hair fell out, and his skin developed long, stringy dark purple scabs lined with infected pus.

Mostly, he missed his daughters. He wished he was better so he could take them out for ice cream and go to the park, but he hadn't been able to speak to them or see them since the doctors found the virus; his ex-wife denied his many requests to see his precious girls. Day after day, he rested in the clean white room watching television to distract him from the smell of medicine and death.

At first, the government refused to work with the Satanic terrorist organization. "We don't negotiate with terrorists," they said, and they were determined not to. They had the smartest military scientists working on Albert to find a cure, and many virologists working on other patients, but despite their best efforts, the cure was unreachable. More people were getting sick each day, and when people started dying, they knew something had to change.

The government agreed to meet and discuss the plans with the organization. The CIA set up a secret meeting and met the top members of the group, negotiated the terms, and acquired the cure. The members of the organization were quite naïve about it though, which was something nobody expected from such a serious plan. Once the CIA agents obtained the cure, they arrested the Satanists, sent them off homeland soil, and assassinated them.

The cure was promptly distributed to everyone who was sick and vaccinations were made for those who had not yet been infected. People stopped rushing to hospitals seizing, and those who

were on the brink of death were restored to full health. The ominous cloud that had been shading the country disappeared and there was a new sense of freedom and happiness for everyone.

Except Albert. When they first introduced the cure to Albert, nothing happened. He continued to feel ill and ask for the drugs which made him feel good and fall asleep. Maybe because he had the sickness the longest, he needed more of the cure? They tried again two days later and got the same results.

The military doctors ran more tests on Albert; he was so tired of the tests. They ran him through several, long CT scans to see if his organs had already failed him, but they hadn't yet turned to jelly like the other people's insides. What else? They examined his blood again and saw the virus changed; they had injected him with so many different drugs trying to find an antiviral that the virus mutated and the cure would not work on him. He was the last person who would die from this plague.

The public was never made aware of what happened with Albert, for that would have been an embarrassment to the government. His ex-wife and daughters would hear that he died but never get to see him again. He was taken to a better room in the quarantined section where he would be pumped full of feel-good drugs while he slowly withered away.

But now Albert was dying and the only thing he could think about was apple sauce. If he wasn't so high, he'd be thinking about his daughters and their futures and hoping they would be happy without him. He'd try to ignore the impending doom that lay only seconds away because death was always something that scared him and he had always hoped that he wouldn't have to deal with it at an age as young as forty-two. He would be angry because none of this was his fault and it wasn't like the world changed from anything that happened. He might have prayed to God to reach a temporary peace in his last second, or he might have let the terror overrun his conscience while he stopped existing and disappeared forever.

Instead, Albert died while drooling and thinking about mushy fruit gravy.