



All That Glitters May Not Be Gold: A Troublesome Case of Transgenic Rice

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It had taken some time for this self-described country girl to become comfortable with the 50-minute metro commute to work each day, but as she signed in at Longworth Building security desk, Cindy Stacey realized she was starting to feel at home in Washington. Quite a long way from Fargo, she mused, in *so* many ways.

Cindy had come to her present position a bit by chance, although others might not have seen it that way. She was a Peace Corps volunteer teaching English in Bangladesh when, as her tour was coming to a close, a friend at the U.S. embassy told her about a job posting on the Internet. A congressman's office was looking for someone with a background in agriculture and international development. She attributed the positive response to her initial query to the fact that the congressman in question was Carl Pomerantz of North Dakota, her home state. But when she had finally interviewed with Campbell Hurst, Rep. Pomerantz's executive assistant, she saw that they were genuinely impressed by her Peace Corps experience.

At any rate, here she was, in the most interesting job she could imagine. It had taken her a few weeks to learn the ropes, but Campbell was giving her more and more responsibility, and she no longer felt quite as much like a "go-for."

Rep. Pomerantz was now in his fourth term. He had the anomalous distinction of being a popular urban Democrat in an overwhelmingly conservative Republican agricultural state. His background was in the insurance industry, and his expertise in agricultural insurance had landed him a seat on the House Agriculture Committee, on which he was now the ranking minority member. He also sat on the Risk Management, Specialty Crops and Research Subcommittee, as well as the House International Relations Committee. He seemed to get along very well with the other members of Congress.

Cindy had met Mr. Pomerantz once before, at a reception in Fargo when she had been home on a winter break from Cornell University, but she was certain that he had not remembered her. She now found him to be considerate of his staff and committed to his job. She liked him very much.

Cindy's feelings for Campbell Hurst were not quite as warm. She realized that his job was to make sure that Mr. Pomerantz had the information he needed when he needed it, which required that he be mindful of the congressman's political agenda. Still, she couldn't help but see personal ambition in this. After all, his career future was tied to Mr. Pomerantz's political success. She suspected that was why he tried to steer the congressman into the most politically safe decisions whenever he could.

Two days ago, Campbell had given Cindy her first meaty assignment: to draft a review of the needs and opportunities in agricultural research with relevance to international markets. This was to be used as part of Mr. Pomerantz's work on the new House agriculture bill. In fact, Mr. Pomerantz had asked her specifically to look into issues surrounding what he had called "hidden hunger," micronutrient malnutrition, since he was interested in redirecting funds now being spent on U.S. surplus commodities under PL480. Campbell had added that she should look through the current activities of the USDA Agricultural Research Service related to GMOs (genetically modified organisms) that might offer potential to increase international markets for American agricultural commodities. It was also clear to her that Campbell would not want to hear much about direct research needs concerning micronutrients since he was very sensitive to what he saw as political liabilities in the use of USDA budgetary support to address non-domestic problems.

But Cindy knew that Campbell had never seen those problems. Neither had she, until she went to Bangladesh. In the poor villages where she had lived, outside of the port city of Chittagong, she had been shocked at the blindness and bone deformities, the goiter and diarrhea she saw. She was also amazed at the number of kids who suffered from stunting and the crippling, brittle bones of old women, both of which were so prevalent that they became an accepted part of the lives of these very poor people. Cindy didn't like the term "hidden hunger" for something that had slapped her in the face. But she was very pleased that Mr. Pomerantz wanted to address. That, in fact, had been the major reason she had taken this job.

Though she had never discussed the matter with the congressman, Cindy suspected that his interest was connected to the fact that his daughter had cerebral palsy. One couldn't miss the passion with which he talked about "hidden hunger," referring to it as a "preventable source of disability." Others in the office dated his interest in this area to an official trip he had made to Mozambique in his second term.

Cindy suspected that for Campbell, on the other hand, "hidden hunger" remained something abstract.

For the last two days, Cindy practically lived at the Library of Congress. She poured over everything she could find, which came mainly from UNICEF and FAO publications as well as some recent research in the plant breeding area. She called one of her old professors at Cornell and talked to a friend at the Beltsville Agricultural Research Center of ARS. During this process, she had come across Golden RiceTM, the transgenic rice into which a beta-carotene gene had been added from another plant species. This foodstuff was being promoted as the solution to global vitamin A deficiency by its developers at the International Rice Research Institute.

Golden Rice fascinated Cindy. She was aware of its politically sensitive GMO status but saw enormous opportunities for products of this type to help millions of children. In fact, Golden Rice seemed to be the *only* micronutrient-enhanced staple being developed by any means, conventional or otherwise. Cindy wondered whether its development might really be sufficient to address the malnutrition in places where rice was the major staple. She wondered whether it might carry any of the risks being suggested for other transgenic crops. She wondered what kind of political resistance it might face. Even if it were effective, she wondered whether somehow its efficacy might be used as an excuse not to fund other international efforts related to food, agriculture, and market development. In short, she was coming up with more questions than answers.

The elevator door opened on the third floor and Cindy stepped out, heading down the long corridor toward Mr. Pomerantz's offices. Campbell asked her to present her initial findings to Mr. Pomerantz after lunch, so she planned to spend the morning preparing her synopsis. Until she finished her research, however, even she didn't yet know what her final conclusions would be.

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