

LOOKING FOR BERNIE

CHAPTER ONE

Unpaid dentures never fit

October 1956

Bernie Hirsch pulled a used towel from an operatory disposal and wiped the damp sill, then stuffed the towel into the crevice between the sill and the rotting window pane. On the street, rainwater pooled around the corner sewer grating. If it increased, the sewer would eventually overflow, flooding the corner. Bernie couldn't remember the last time the city had cleaned out the sewers on Ferry Street. When he opened his dental practice twenty-seven years ago in 1929, Newark had been a proud city that attended to these problems. In recent years a weekly street cleaning was about all a citizen could hope for. He thought about calling City Hall, but chances were he'd wind up complaining to a janitor.

Bernie turned his attention to Mrs. Lombardi, his patient, who was trying to push a newly inserted upper plate firmly against her palate.

"How does it feel?" Bernie asked.

"Funny. And it doesn't stay."

"Give it a chance. It takes a while to develop a suction." Over the years Mrs. Lombardi's bony ridge had atrophied, and she would probably need denture powder to hold the plate in position. He felt sorry for denture wearers like Mrs. Lombardi, who were forced to live and eat with globs of gook stuck on

Unpaid dentures never fit

their gums. Sometimes they'd blame the dentist, which made about as much sense as blaming the weatherman for snow and ice. "Smile . . . don't grimace. Yes, yes, it's gorgeous. You look like a million bucks."

"Feels funny," said Mrs. Lombardi.

Satisfied that he had done his best for this sad, wrinkled woman, Bernie excused himself. "Get used to it," he said. "I'll be back shortly."

He wondered how he was going to get past Dolores, his assistant, and into the lab where he kept his Old Grand-Dad. At the moment Dolores was sterilizing instruments, blocking the entrance into the lab. He went into a small inner office, a six-by-six cubicle barely large enough to accommodate a desk, a chair, and a filing cabinet. On top of the filing cabinet, an old Philco radio was broadcasting the fourth game of the 1956 World Series between the Dodgers and the Yankees. Bernie flopped down in the chair, grateful for the moment's respite.

In his quiet, southern drawl, Red Barber described the action on the ball field. Tom Sturdivant had pitched a strong game and the Yankees were ahead six-two going into the ninth. It looked as if the series was about to be tied up at two games apiece, and Bernie was about to lose another two hundred bucks to Sid Schwartz.

Bernie turned up the volume and went back into the operatory. Mrs. Lombardi had picked up the tiny dental mirror from the ceramic tray attached to the old Ritter unit, and was frantically trying to see how she looked. Bernie called for Dolores to bring in the hand mirror.

"How come it doesn't feel like my old one?" Mrs. Lombardi asked. Before sitting in the dental chair, Mrs. Lombardi had announced that she wasn't paying

LOOKING FOR BERNIE

the eighty dollars balance until she was *completely satisfied*.

"You have to get used to it. It's like putting on a new pair of shoes." He hadn't been a dentist for more than half his life without knowing a trick or two of his own.

"Dr. Wilson's denture fit like a glove from the moment he put it in," she said.

Wilson, four blocks down at the five corners, made dentures like a shoemaker. Mrs. Lombardi knew it, which is why she had come to Bernie's office. "We'll do a little adjustment and it'll be just fine," Bernie said.

Dolores came in carrying the large hand mirror. She looked at him quizzically. Had she uncovered his supply of Old Grand-Dad while cleaning up the lab? You could never trust Dolores.

"You look marvelous," Dolores said to Mrs. Lombardi, handing her the mirror. Dolores' soothing voice had a way of placating the Mrs. Lombardis of the world.

Mrs. Lombardi viewed herself from every conceivable angle. "They look big," she said.

"Just perfect," said Dolores.

Bernie strained to hear the radio. Two outs. It was hopeless. He should have known better than to bet on the Dodgers. When the chips were down, they could never beat the Yankees. After next year, the team would be moving out to Los Angeles, where attendance was guaranteed to double in a year. Traitors! As if Larry MacPhail and Branch Rickey gave a damn. But you couldn't hate the Dodger organization altogether. Bringing in Negro players like Jackie Robinson and Roy Campanella had been strokes of genius.

"You look twenty years younger," said Dolores.

Unpaid dentures never fit

Mrs. Lombardi returned the mirror to Dolores. "I still think the teeth look too big," she said.

"You need a lower partial," Bernie said. Stoically, Mrs. Lombardi lived with only her six lower anterior teeth, all ground down by excessive wear, which made the uppers appear unnaturally large.

"What's that?" Mrs. Lombardi asked, turning her head to the right so she could hear better.

"Make a lower plate!" Bernie said loudly. Then he mumbled, "Then you wouldn't have to chew your food like Bugs Bunny." The problem was that she couldn't afford a lower. A widow living on social security, she could barely afford the upper, though he had given her a big discount. Life could be a pile of manure for old widows on social security.

The drizzle turned into a downpour. Why couldn't that have happened two hours ago, he thought, and the game would have been postponed?

Whenever rainwater flooded the sidewalk, it would run into the basement and put out the hot water heater's pilot light. He'd have to bring in a plumber to pump out the water and relight the heater. Steiner, the landlord, cared about Bernie's office not having hot water about as much as he cared that the windows were warped and leaked. "Call the gas company, or light it yourself," Steiner told Bernie on his last trip to New Jersey several years ago.

"Put in a sump pump," Bernie begged him.

"It's not my problem," said Steiner. "I pay taxes, let the city worry about it." Nothing was Steiner's problem since he had retired and moved to Arizona.

Bernie received from a plumber an estimate of ninety dollars to dig a trench and put in the pump. The next time he hit a score, he'd take care of it himself. Steiner could go to hell.

Usually, when it rained the office became busier.

LOOKING FOR BERNIE

Many of Bernie's patients were construction workers who waited for inclement weather, then would come in and expect him in a single visit to deal with every lost filling and nagging toothache they had been living with for months, sometimes years. Today had been the exception. The day was even slower than what might have been expected. Regular patients had canceled because of the threatening weather, and the only walk-in had been an old Negro who had lost a front tooth from an upper denture. Bernie had repaired it himself, charging five dollars. The man paid three, which was all he had on him, and promised that his daughter would bring in the balance next week.

"Sure," said Bernie, pocketing the two singles, three quarters, two dimes and one nickel.

"Three dollars for a repair," Dolores groaned after the patient had left. "Just because he was colored."

"How would you like to walk around without a front tooth?"

"Dr. Hirsch, I would like to remind you that you still owe half a month's rent."

"Yeah, I'm crying for Steiner. Let him replace a few windows around here, then I'll worry about his lousy rent."

He knew Dolores could have added that the office owed on the lab bill and the supply bill, not to mention that he hadn't given her a raise in two years. At the State Dental Convention held in Atlantic City last spring, he had met old classmates. They talked about their expanded practices, their color television sets, their vacation homes. At fifty-two, Bernie Hirsch was probably the only member of his graduating class of 1927, who didn't hold title to a single piece of real estate.

Unpaid dentures never fit

Mrs. Lombardi hovered around the front desk, fumbling inside her purse. She finally pulled out a ten dollar bill and handed it to Dolores, who marked the payment on the patient's record card.

"There's a balance of seventy," Dolores politely reminded her. She handed Mrs. Lombardi a plastic container to keep her plate in at night and a Dr. West toothbrush.

"I'll bring you more when my social security check comes in," Mrs. Lombardi said.

Bernie, who was standing at the doorway, considered grabbing the plate out of the woman's mouth, remembering the words of Dr Stutzel, his old prosthetics professor: "Unpaid dentures never fit." Mrs. Lombardi would come up with the seventy soon enough.

The patient left and Bernie sat on the edge of the desk. "She'll never pay up," he said to Dolores.

"She might--eventually."

"It's like the depression all over. Everybody's broke, and all Eisenhower worries about is his golf score." He glanced at his wristwatch. Quarter to five. "Anyone else coming in today?" he asked.

"Mrs. Hoskins canceled out. This is her fourth straight cancellation. We should forget about her."

"Doesn't she owe us money, too? Call her daughter. Maybe she'll bring her in."

"I'll do it tomorrow, but it's a waste of time."

"For Christ's sake, Dolores, you've got to go after these deadbeats."

"I'll think I'll clean up."

Dolores brushed past him and went into a waiting room crowded with three chairs and a small couch. There was a coat stand with one of the wooden spokes broken off next to the door, and, between the couch and the radiator, a magazine rack loaded with

LOOKING FOR BERNIE

old copies of *Time* and *Liberty*. The rest of the dental office consisted of a tiny lab crammed with a stone lathe, casting equipment and supplies, and a dark-room barely large enough to fit a sink, a shelf, and a standing person. Off the waiting room, next to the entrance to the office, was a tiny bathroom, which meant that Bernie had to walk through the waiting room when necessary.

He called Paula at her real estate office. The line was busy. He waited two minutes, then dialed again. Still busy. He wondered how her office ever did any business the way her phone was always so busy. After trying the number a third time, he slammed down the receiver in frustration.

Dolores knocked on the door, then opened it without waiting for a response. "No sense hanging around," she said. "I want to get to the hospital and feed Theresa."

"Good idea."

"I put the receipts away. Mrs. Gorman sent a check for fifty, which brought us up to a hundred and thirty-five, not counting the three dollars the colored man gave you. Tomorrow I'll finish paying the rent and send the lab some money."

"Can't Rubin wait?"

"We still owe ninety-five on last month's bill."

"I've been sending work to Charley Rubin for twenty-five years. He can carry me for a week or two." Bernie caught the little pout on Dolores' lower lip, her almost indiscernible gesture of reproach. She could be a terrific pain in the ass. He changed the subject. "So how's Theresa doing?"

"They've got her on penicillin again."

As an infant, Theresa Rodriguez had been diagnosed with Cystic Fibrosis. Seven years later, in and out of hospitals, she was still alive, a tough little girl

Unpaid dentures never fit

who never complained. She had Dolores' long dark hair and big round eyes the color of smooth walnut. Sometimes after school, she'd hang around the office waiting for her mother. Bernie would let her squirt the water syringe on the old Ritter unit and ride up and down the mechanized chair. When things were slow, he'd put her on his lap and read her the comics from the *Star Ledger*.

"We've been through this before," Bernie said. "She'll be just fine. So cut out the face." He watched the slow nod, the automatic shrug.

Dolores had been working for Bernie since high school. She was now almost thirty. Over the years, he had watched her round, cheerful face turn gaunt and sad. Last month he'd caught her crying when she thought no one was looking. Two years ago, her husband had flown to Spain to visit a sick father, and never returned. She seemed to accept her life with a sort of fanatical stoicism that at times drove him mad. She had all this goddamn Spanish pride. He vowed that one day he'd do something big for her if she ever gave him half a chance.

"Why don't you take the day off tomorrow?" Bernie asked. "Stay with Theresa."

"It's okay. My sister Angela will be with her. You're going to need me."

"I can manage." He didn't like the way Dolores grinned. "You think that's funny?" he said.

"About tomorrow, we'll see. I might give her breakfast, then come in. Your first appointment isn't until ten."

He didn't argue. No matter what he said to her, she'd do whatever she wanted. Over the years he had slowly, almost without realizing it, abrogated authority to her, and now she made all the important decisions in running the office.

LOOKING FOR BERNIE

"Want to bet on the game tomorrow?" he asked.

"Maybe it'll be rained out."

"Prediction is for sunny skies. Maglie's pitching against Larsen. Bet on the Dodgers. Larsen got bombed in the second game."

"A quarter, but I'll take the Yankees."

"You're going to lose."

"I like Mickey and Yogi."

"You're on."

Tomorrow, she wouldn't remember the bet until he'd remind her. Aside from Theresa, all she ever seemed to think about was the job. When she wasn't assisting him, she was sending out recalls, billing patients, pouring up stone models, casting inlays, sterilizing instruments. Twice a week she mopped the hallway. Periodically he'd want to grab her by the shoulders and shake out some of her robot-like efficiency, her maniacal attention to details. As far as he knew, she never went out with a man, or even to a movie with a girlfriend. In another ten years she'd be like her mother, wearing oversized black dresses down to her ankles, and spending most of her spare time on her knees in church, crossing herself every other second.

Once Dolores left, Bernie locked the outside office and went directly to the lab. Behind a can of plaster, he located the Phenol bottle still half full of bourbon. He could always outsmart Dolores, he thought with pride. After taking a long hard slug straight from the bottle, he breathed easier, then poured an unmeasured shot into a coffee mug and mixed it with a few cubes of ice from the small refrigerator under the metal workbench. Carrying the bottle, he went back to his desk and leisurely sipped the drink, his fourth of the day, the other two having been downed while Dolores was at the post

Unpaid dentures never fit

office on her lunch break. He had started drinking again about a week ago, but he wasn't worried. He knew he could quit any time he felt like it.

The Old Grand-Dad settled nicely into his system, and he leaned back with his feet on the desk, then dialed Sid Schwartz's dry cleaning store. Everyone, especially the cops, knew the store was just a front for Sid's bookie operation. Though it was after five, Bernie guessed that Shyster Sid would be hanging around because of the Series.

"You just got me, Bernie," said Sid. "I was on my way home."

"What are the odds on tomorrow's game?"

"Six to five, pick-'em."

"Two hundred on the Dodgers."

"No can do, Bernie."

"Come on, Sid. I need the action."

"I got rules, Bernie. I break them for you, I've got to break them for everyone."

"So I owe you a couple of thousand. Big deal!"

"After today's game, two thousand, three hundred and fifty, to be exact. I trust you will eventually pay off, which is why I wait patiently. Don't abuse the friendship."

"You know what it's like to listen to a Series game and not have a few bucks running?"

"I don't bet. I'm just a businessman."

"Please, Sid, for old times."

"Twenty-five. That's my limit."

"Are you kidding? What kind of chicken-shit bet is that?"

"You're losing your sense of reason, Bernie. What happens when a patient who owes you serious money for over a year calls for an appointment? I don't understand you--a guy who makes all sorts of dough--always broke."

LOOKING FOR BERNIE

Bernie finished off the drink, then poured himself another. "You'll get your money, Sid. I've never welched on a bet. You know goddamn well you'll get your money!" He hung up.

Once again Bernie leaned back against the chair. Who the fuck was Sid Schwartz? He stared at a picture of himself in uniform hanging above his framed dental school diploma--Captain Bernard Hirsch, one inch short of six feet, a trim one hundred and fifty-five pounds, slim as a reed. with a pencil-thin black mustache. Over the years his thick, wavy hair had grayed at the edges, and he had put on a few pounds, but who would guess that last month he had turned fifty-two? Maybe he'd grow back the mustache. The photo had been taken just before the automobile accident. By the time the fractures had healed, the war had been over and he had been discharged. Hell, the way the army had gone after him, one would have thought he had wanted to have two broken legs. He had been as sober as a saint when he ran that jeep off the road into the Officer's Club. The guy they should have disciplined was the mechanic at the motor pool for dispatching a vehicle without any brakes. Before processing his discharge papers, one son of a bitch colonel had actually recommended a Discharge Without Honor.

Bernie polished off his drink and returned the bottle to the shelf in the lab. Then he opened the safe and took seventy-five dollars from the day's receipts, which left only a sawbuck and the fifty dollar check from Mrs. Gorman. "Whose goddamn money is it anyway, Dolores?" he muttered. Bernie Hirsch wasn't about to walk into the street with empty pockets.

He went back to the desk and tried to call Paula once more. He was ready to throw the phone against the wall when she picked up.

Unpaid dentures never fit

"I was about to call you, Bernie," she said. "I'm having dinner with a client tonight and won't be home until after eight." There was an edge to her voice that bothered him as much as what she was telling him. To add to his annoyance, she added, "There are cold cuts in the fridge. If you want, I can make you a hamburger when I get home."

"Do you have to work late again tonight? God, we hardly ever seem to spend any time together these days."

"I've got an interested client, Bernie. In this business you nail them right then and there, or just like that--"

He could hear the snap of her fingers. "--you've lost them to another agency."

"I thought we'd go out to dinner ourselves. Maybe go to the Chanticler, dance a little."

"Another night, Bernie."

"Please, Paula. Cancel it."

"I've worked too hard on this deal. Try to understand."

"We haven't had a night out in ages. Come on, Babe. We'll order the prime rib, a little red wine, dance 'till we drop." Just the thought of holding Paula in his arms warmed him.

"We'll do it another night--soon."

"Sure, sure."

"Bernie, we need this income. You know that."

"Hey, don't worry about me, kiddo. I can take care of myself."

"I'll try to get away as fast as I can."

"Don't do me any goddamn favors!" She was going to make him a hamburger. Big fucking deal!

"Bernie, are you okay?"

"I don't need your lousy hamburger." With a malevolent pleasure, he envisioned her leaning

LOOKING FOR BERNIE

forward, taking off her reading glasses, puzzled, concerned that he might do something desperate. "Don't rush home on my account, kiddo."

"Bernie, have you started in again? You swore that after the last time you'd quit forever." Good. Now he really had her sweating. "Bernie, have you finished working? Answer me! Bernie, don't let your patients smell liquor on your breath. You don't want trouble with the State Board again. Are you listening to me, Bernie? Let me talk to Dolores."

"Hey, Babe, you have your big dinner with your big client. Bernie Hirsch takes care of himself." He slammed down the receiver.

Before leaving, he went back into the lab where he reopened the safe and removed the lonesome ten-spot still sitting on top of Mrs. Gorman's fifty dollar check. He took the check, too, just to let Dolores know who was the boss.