

# 1

## Danny

I was doing a difficult root canal on an upper second molar when Carmen, my receptionist, a middle-aged Portuguese woman who had been working for me since I went into practice with my father fifteen years ago, entered the operatory flustered and out of breath.

“We’ve got a problem, Doctor,” she announced imperiously.

“This is a bad time.”

A #2 file was wedged in the distal-buccal canal. Poor technique and the file might snap. Given the anatomy of the tooth, there’d be no way I’d be able to retrieve it. The consequences were unpredictable, including the possible loss of the tooth, which would not sit well with the patient who had originally opted to have the tooth extracted, until I had convinced him that I could save it by doing a root canal.

Carmen was insistent. “We have a young woman dressed in rags, staggering around in the hallway near the front desk. She claims she has a toothache and demands to see you. I’m reluctant to call the police, but she refuses to leave.”

I started to wiggle the file out of the root, ever so carefully. Beads of sweat began to form on my forehead as I struggled to remove the file without breaking it. I wanted Carmen to take a powder, but my concerned receptionist was unshakably welded to the floor at the entrance of the doorway.

“Don’t call the cops. Give me a few seconds,” I said, after taking a breather.

My dental office is located on Ferry Street in the Ironbound section of Newark, New Jersey, a busy, viable, commercial hub, in contrast to other parts of the city where economic destitution abounds. Homeless people wandering up and down the sidewalk is not the rule on Ferry Street. What Carmen is describing to me doesn't make much sense. Nevertheless, with my operatory door open, I could hear a derisive shouting coming out of the hallway. The voice was thick and dangerous.

"Don't move, Mr. Rodriguez," I said to the patient. I slid off the movable stool attached to the mechanized dental chair and stood up. "I'll be right back."

The patient grunted several indiscernible sounds, clearly displeased that I was leaving him with his wide-opened mouth covered by a "rubber dam," a demonic device that isolates the tooth being worked upon from the rest of one's dentition and does not allow the patient to close his mouth, let alone breathe very easily.

I discovered a young woman in the hallway traipsing about like a caged animal. She was dressed in layers of filthy clothing, though the weather was unusually balmy for the early part of April. It looked as if she hadn't washed her face or combed her long black hair in a month. Her unsteady gait and uncivilized behavior seemed to indicate that she was either drunk or high on drugs, perhaps both.

As soon as she spotted me, she ran over and grabbed my arm with surprising strength. Though I was much bigger, I had difficulty shaking the hand loose.

"Please, Doctor," she cried in a harsh, unwavering voice, "help me." She slammed a hand against her cheek. "I like to die, it hurts so *fucking* much."

"Do you have an appointment?" asked Carmen, calling out from behind me, unwilling to talk to this maniac without my acting as a buffer between them.

By asking the woman one of your all-time dumb questions, Carmen had precipitated an unforeseen, totally unexpected reaction. The woman fell to her knees and

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threw her arms around my thighs. With a frantic burst of energy I pushed her face out of my groin and grabbed her shoulders, forcing her to stand up. I then dragged her into an examining room where I pushed her into a dental chair.

Her breath was morbidly fetid: cheap wine, I guessed. I wore two pairs of gloves while examining her. Her first and second molars, both lowers and uppers on her right side were in various stages of decay, either one of which could be causing the pain she was experiencing. After she realized that I might actually treat her, she began to calm herself and allowed me to examine her without any further hysteria. She closed her eyes and stretched open her mouth to its max, becoming almost catatonic as I probed about. I was able to take several X-rays and then tried to explain to her that if she waited patiently while we developed them, I would be able to help her with her pain.

While moving along the corridor to finish off with Mr. Rodriguez, Carmen told me that she thought I was making a mistake treating this patient. “Call the cops, Dr. Hirsch, and get rid of her.”

“The way to get rid of her is to treat her. We don’t need the police dragging someone out of the office in cuffs.”

I was taking a chance not listening to Carmen, who had better instincts than I when it came to dealing with the local population. I wondered how my father would have handled the situation. Since he was at this moment probably playing gin with some sucker at a condo recreational center in North Miami Beach, and he refused to carry a cell phone (“*I’m not getting a brain tumor*”), there was no way to reach him. Not that I would necessarily take advice from that grizzly old *sonuvabitch*, though I have to admit that now and then his cockeyed view of what is right and wrong made sense.

Was it bad luck or nerves? In trying to extricate the file lodged in Mr. Rodriguez’s root, my worst fears materialized as the file snapped. An X-ray showed that the

broken piece was about one mm in size and less than half of a mm from the apex of the root. Trying to remove the piece was virtually impossible and any attempt would probably result in perforating the root. Since the file was sterile, I could plug the rest of the canal with gutta-percha, and with a little luck still manage to achieve a successful result. The question was: do you inform the patient that there's a broken file in his root? Though you might have been able to convince the patient that the tooth would be fine, you would risk generating serious doubts in his mind as to your competency. Not to tell him, however, was unethical and grounds for malpractice, especially if the tooth later became infected.

I could hear my bag lady beginning to moan again and I made the decision to close up the canal and defer dealing with the problem of the broken file until our next appointment, when I would plug all three canals. To appease a blunted conscience, I marked on the chart that the patient was to receive a 10% discount. He viewed me quizzically as he left the operatory and headed for the exit.

I looked over the X-rays of the woman's posterior molars and deduced that the offending tooth was probably a lower right first molar, which was rotted to the gum line. Since an upper right second molar looked also to be infected, I decided to give the woman an injection of lidocaine to block the lower right quadrant. If the pain quit, then I'd know that the offending tooth was the lower one, not the upper.

Within thirty seconds after I gave her the injection, the woman smiled. I had correctly found the source of her pain. However, extracting the tooth would not have been a simple procedure. It would have been impossible to get a viable purchase on the tooth with a forceps and I would have had to lay a flap and surgically remove it. One couldn't be sure what kind of post-operative reaction you would encounter with a patient who could have a diseased liver as a result of her chronic alcoholism and drug abuse.

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With an altered blood clotting time, she could easily hemorrhage, not to mention the possibility of a serious post-op infection. I wasn't interested in having her stagger back to the office in a day or two with a swelling the size of a ripe plum. At which point I would be responsible for treating her whether she paid me or not.

Once she was fully anesthetized, I drilled directly into her pulp chamber with a large round bur. With broaches, I removed the necrotic tissue within the canals. As I had hoped, a purulent, bloody exudate oozed out of the canals. *Olé!* It was the equivalent of lancing an abscess. With good drainage, relief from one's pain is almost instantaneous. After placing a small wad of medicated cotton into the pulp chamber, I could now dismiss the patient and be reasonably sure that she would be more or less pain-free for the next few days. Of course, once the canals clogged up and there was no more drainage, the pain would return with a vengeance. Hopefully, before that happened, the woman would go to a clinic and have the tooth extracted.

At the front desk, I explained to her that while she would feel better after the anesthetic wore off, what I had done would only give her temporary relief. I warned her that the pain would return and she needed to have the tooth extracted as soon as possible. Her best bet would be the Beth Israel Hospital where I knew they had a decent dental clinic.

“How the hell am I supposed to get there?”

Carmen wrote down for her the buses she would need to take, but you could see that giving out this information was a big waste of time. She immediately crumpled the piece of paper and stuck it in a side pocket of her coat with no more regard for the information than if it were a stick of chewing gum.

“Can't you pull it?” she asked me.

“You don't want to have this tooth extracted without first having a blood test. They can do that at the hospital,” I said.

“I ain’t going to any lousy hospital. You pull the *fucker*. Don’t worry. I’ll pay you. Tomorrow I’ll be back with a goddamn check.”

The hour was late and the office was ready to close down. I was beginning to lose patience with this drunken vagrant.

“Good, you come back tomorrow and give me a check,” I said. “Now if you don’t mind, we’d all like to go home.”

No longer in pain, she became aggressive. “Sure, throw me out. I know I’m just a worthless piece of shit. But I wasn’t always like this, you know. You won’t fuckin’ believe that I went to college for two years.”

“That’s terrific.” An unintelligent response, but at the moment I could think of nothing more persuasive that might somehow work to maneuver this woman out of the office.

I made a few cursory notes on her chart in which Carmen had jotted down a confused medical history that seemed not to have any possibility of accuracy. The address scribbled unintelligibly on the chart was in Fort Lauderdale. The woman listed her name as “Angel.”

“You don’t fuckin’ believe me, do you?” The woman was visibly insulted that I doubted her story about her college education.

“Angel, I believe you. I really do. Sometime we’ll sit down and you’ll tell me all about your college days. Now I want you to go home. Remember that you’ve got an infected tooth. You must keep your mouth as clean as possible. Tomorrow, you’ll go to the Beth Israel where they’ll pull out this tooth and fix up the others. You don’t want to let your teeth get any worse, now do you?”

She looked at me with a confused expression. Then to my surprise she started for the door. At the entrance of the doorway, she turned. “You’re a good person, Doc. Thanks for fixin’ me up. Don’ worry, I’m gonna pay you. One day I’m gonna be a person again. One day I’m gonna show up

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at your door and you won't recognize me, 'cause I'm gonna be all dressed up, and then you'll see how pretty I am. My Mom used to tell me I was the prettiest child in the whole world. She'd say to me, 'Angel, you should be a movie actress.'"

She pushed against the door leading into the waiting room. The door opened unexpectedly, causing her to keel over and stumble halfway across the room. I followed her and opened the outside door leading to the sidewalk. Before I went back inside the office and locked the door, I made sure she had turned the corner from Jackson onto Ferry.

I was counting the day's receipts in my inner office when my mother called me. Not a woman to waste words, she came directly to the point.

"I wanted to remind you that I've decided to do the *seeder* this year."

"What day?"

"The first, of course."

"Can you do it on the second day? My sister-in-law has invited us for the first day. I thought I told you that."

"No, you did not. Have Caroline call her sister and see if she can switch to the second day. I've already invited Phil's two sisters and their families."

"Can't you switch them to the second day?"

"You know how sensitive Phil is. And his sisters? My god, such *prima donnas*."

My mother had married my stepfather, Phil Markowitz, about twelve years ago after she had kicked out my father. Both Diane, my twin sister, and myself, were pretty shaken up about it, though we were already young adults when she divorced Bernie Hirsch, that renegade father of ours, who thought nothing of polishing off a bottle of gin and blowing a thousand bucks at the track whenever the mood suited him, which was more often than not. Though my father had undertaken a serious campaign of reform at the time she had decided to throw him out of the

house, she claimed that their marriage was over, that he had destroyed whatever love she had once felt for him. Phil Markowitz was a soft-spoken, decent guy, quite the opposite of Bernie. He doted on my mother, and after a while I couldn't help but feel good for her, considering all the shit she had taken from my father over the years.

"Listen, Mom, it's been a tough day. Could we postpone this big *Pesach* decision until later? I'll talk to Caroline, but if she gives me a hard time, you're going to have to work on Phil."

Then, quite unexpectedly, she changed the subject. "Have you spoken to your father lately?" she asked.

"Why would you care?" I was being unnecessarily abrasive, but I hated when she would start in with questions about my father.

"What's so hard about giving me a civil reply?"

"You know his number."

"I'll never call that man."

"Admit that you still worry about him."

I was hitting below the belt. Paula Hirsch Markowitz, my mother, was a terrific human being who had put up with an alcoholic and compulsive gambler for years before divorcing him. Who could blame her for having had an affair before she left him? At the time I had condemned her adulterous behavior and accused her of being no better than my father, who for all his sins, as far as I knew, never two-timed her with another woman. And now because she still retained a soft spot in her heart for him, to my discredit, I continued to harbor a curious resentment toward her, as if she should have no right to think about him, let alone continue to feel this curious affection toward him.

"I spoke to him a couple of weeks ago," I said. "He seemed okay."

"Was he drinking?"

"He sounded sober to me."

"He could be dead drunk and still sound sober over a telephone."



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“Not likely.”

“If he keeps drinking, he’s going to need a liver transplant.”

“He’s not your headache anymore. Get him out of your system and take care of yourself.”

“What about that bimbo he’s living with?”

“What about her?”

“Do you think it’s right for a man of sixty-six to live with a twenty-eight year old prostitute?”

“She’s not a prostitute and she’s not twenty-eight. Anyway, it’s none of your business.”

“She’s going to milk him for everything he’s got.”

“How do you know? Maybe she loves him.”

“Don’t make me laugh. Anyway, I doubt if he can even get it up anymore.”

“Mother, this conversation is starting to make me very upset.”

“You were always such a prude, Danny. I can see that you still are.”

“Okay, I admit that talking about my father’s sexuality upsets me, so don’t do it.”

“I can talk to your sister about your father, and it doesn’t seem to bother her.”

“Diane is tougher than I am. She always was.”

“That’s true. Things haven’t always been so easy for her either, which is why she has more understanding and more compassion than you.”

“She’s a psychologist. That’s her job. I’m just an ignorant dentist who only knows about teeth. Nobody ever gave me lessons on the human heart.”

“Call Diane and make sure she comes to my *seeder* the first day. Who’s she living with these days?”

“If you’re so curious, call her yourself.”

“How are her children?”

“Good. They’re fine kids. You should be proud of them.”

“It’d be nice if she’d bring them around once in a while.”

“Don’t you know where she lives?”

“Last month I called her. She wasn’t friendly.”

My twin sister Diane also had strong ambivalent feelings toward her mother, which went back to those days when she left my father. My mother had locked him out of the house without a cent in his pocket and obtained a restraining order preventing him from going near the house without her consent. Granted that the man had it coming to him, but he was, in his own way, a faithful husband for twenty-four years, someone who would have laid down in front of a locomotive for her. He was so beaten he actually became sober for the next five years, but she never considered taking him back, although I think he continued to harbor hopes that they would reunite one day. Only in recent years, when his health began to fail, had he begun to modify his drinking and gambling. Though he gave me a hard time, he agreed to an early retirement after I promised him a steady income and bought him out for forty-thousand, a lot more than the practice was worth. With two kids and a sick wife, it was more than I could afford. He complained that he was being chiseled but he took the forty thousand and that was that.

I was about to defend my sister’s hostility, when Carmen burst into the office and demanded that I hang up the phone. “You must come quickly,” she said. Her face was flushed. She was breathing in short, fast breaths. I quickly said goodbye to my mother and followed her into the waiting room.

There, in the arms of Marisa, one of the other dental assistants, was a small child whimpering for her mother. Marisa handed me a note that had been pinned on the front of the tattered coat of the child. The note was scribbled in pencil on the back of an envelope.

*“My name is Mimi. Please take care of me until my mommy comes back.”*

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“I was cleaning up,” Marisa said, “and found her behind the couch. It must have been that awful woman who left her.”

I took the child out of Marisa’s hands and held her up. She was light as a feather and though I was later to discover from a pediatrician that she was probably slightly more than two, she was so thin and scrawny that to mistake her for a younger child was not unreasonable.

“Where’s your mommy?” I foolishly asked this child named Mimi.

“Mommy, mommy,” she cried.

I lowered her and she rested her face against my shoulder, while she continued to whimper and call out for her mother.

Carmen spoke to her in Spanish and Portuguese, but the child didn’t seem to understand what she was saying any better than when we spoke to her in English.

I could feel the child’s heart throbbing against my body. I gently stroked her on the back of her head as I had done with my own children when they had been this age and in pain. I talked to her softly, lyrically, as I attempted to assuage her anxiety.

“Call the police,” I said to Carmen.

“I don’t know who left her,” I said over the phone to the desk sergeant, who appeared more interested in the mother than in the condition of the child.

“You’ve got to have some idea.”

“She said her name was Angel. She wrote on the chart that she was from Fort Lauderdale,” I said. “Can you send someone over for the child?”

“What are we going to do with her? It’s after six. Tomorrow is Good Friday. Nobody’s around. You’re going to have to call DYFS.”

The sergeant gave me a number. After a dozen rings, an answering machine came on. I called back the police. I

had to start all over since a different cop picked up. After explaining the situation, he recommended that someone from the office take the child home and return her in the morning. By morning, the mother might sober up and come back looking for her child. If not, they'd send someone over to get her. In the meantime I should give them a description of the mother and they'd alert the patrol cars in the area to look for her.

"It's not my job to take care of an abandoned child." I could barely disguise my indignation at this moronic officer of the law, whom I supported with my taxes.

"Have a heart, Doc. We got nobody here who can watch her. It's just for one night."

"Send over a car and pick her up," I demanded.

I explained the situation to both Marisa and Carmen and told them to go home. I'd wait around for the cops. You couldn't tell how long it would be before they showed up.

After an hour, I called the police station again. Would you believe it? A different desk sergeant picked up. He didn't know what I was talking about. In the meantime, there had been a major accident on Market near Penn Station. He didn't have the faintest idea when a car would be able to get over to my office. When I offered to bring the child to the precinct, he vetoed the idea. He was there alone. How was he supposed to deal with a two-year-old by himself? "Call back in the morning" were his final words.

I strapped Mimi in the passenger car seat as best I could. I decided not to call Caroline on my cell phone and give her any prior warning of the guest I was inviting into our home. Accounting for Mimi on the telephone wouldn't have been easy and anyway, what was the point? In thirty-five minutes I'd be in Scotch Plains. Caroline would take Mimi into her arms and in two minutes know what to do with the child with or without any convoluted explanations from me. How nice to have such confidence in a woman. I

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couldn't help but reflect what a lucky man I was to have married a person, who, if she were a Catholic, would one day become a candidate for sainthood.