

1

1974

The Gold Man

While Herman Aaronson drove through downtown Newark, he kept telling himself that a man didn't work all his life so that he could have a little security in his old age, and then not have an old age. He was angry, but at whom he wasn't sure. It was nobody's fault, yet somebody ought to take the blame.

He swung the old Chevy down Bergen Street, passing University Hospital onto Clinton Avenue, past Lincoln Park and the Medical Tower before swinging into the driveway next to his lab building. He noticed a large moving van parked in front of the Medical Tower. Another doctor closing down his office and leaving the city. He wondered who was still left in the ancient medical building, built in 1927, once the pride of downtown Newark. Most of the old doctors were dead, the new ones were moving out into the suburbs. One morning he'd read in the *Star Ledger* that the building had burned down during the night. It had been seven years since the riots of 1967, still nobody gave a damn about the city. Newark was sinking to its knees in a quicksand of indifference. It was a lousy shame, for it had once been a fine city, always good to him. He was glad he wouldn't be around to bury it.

He parked his car in the lot behind the lab and walked to the front. Several youths were standing across the street, idling near the liquor store, drinking beer and smoking. Too smart for school, too lazy to work. He shook his head sadly.

The Gold Man

On the door marked AARONSON DENTAL LAB, he noticed that the “D” in DENTAL had been partially scraped off. Why would anyone scrape off a “D” on a sign? Later he’d call the sign company. He walked inside the lab where he was greeted by his nephew, Gerald.

“I thought you weren’t coming back until tomorrow, Uncle,” Gerald said.

“The convention bored me.”

He had lied to both Rebecca and Gerald that he was going to a dental technician’s convention in Atlantic City. For three days, the specialists brought in by Jake, had been testing him at the Beth Israel. X-rays, blood tests, tubes down his throat, incisions through his chest—the works. How come, he had argued, that except for an occasional cough, which was what you’d expect from a man who smoked two packs of cigarettes a day for the last forty years, and a little pain in his chest and back, he felt fine? Jake had kept nodding as if he were at a funeral.

“I’m glad to see you,” Gerald said. “Without you, this lab goes downhill fast.”

Herman noticed that when Gerald became excited, he’d rise up on his toes. Even with the added height, he barely came up to Herman’s chin. He often wondered why his brother’s son, and even his own son Stanley, were such shrimps. Both were five or six inches shorter than their fathers. Some sort of genetic aberration, he thought.

“I’m glad to see you too, Gerald,” Herman said.

Gerald was standing behind a chest-high counter. Lined up in one corner were small bags marked Aaronson Dental Lab. Inside the bags were finished and unfinished cases: bridges, crowns, full dentures, partial dentures, repaired dentures: all waiting to be picked up

Richard Karlen

by the Mercury Delivery Service, who would then distribute them to dentists throughout Northeast Jersey. Gerald pointed toward the bags. “Mercury is on strike again. The phone hasn’t stopped ringing all morning.”

“I’ve got something to tell you, Gerald.”

“Dr. Pincus has called six times already. He says he’s suing us. Do you understand that, Uncle? Pincus is suing us.”

“Calm down, Gerald, my boy. Pincus has been suing us for fifteen years.”

Gerald Aaronson was the only child of Herman's younger brother Sam, who had operated a candy store on Hawthorne Avenue before moving to Miami. Since the riots, Sam's life had been a succession of tragedies. He had been the constant victim of robberies, swindles, and fires. He seemed always on the brink of bankruptcy, yet would somehow manage to bounce back. At age twelve, Gerald came down with scarlet fever. After recovering from the scarlet fever, three weeks later his joints became inflamed and painful. He was diagnosed with rheumatic fever and was in and out of bed for the next eight months. Though he made an almost complete recovery, Gerald had been afraid that each step would be his last. By the time he was seventeen, he had the mentality of an old, invalided man. All day he would lie around the house watching television, eating candy and doughnuts that he had swiped out of the store. His body was flabby, and his mind was obsessed with death.

“Are you going to call Dr. Pincus?” Gerald asked. “He doesn’t want to talk to me anymore.”

“Pincus can wait.” Herman studied his nephew. Gerald's large brown eyes seemed constantly filled with worry. Men like Pincus terrified him. Gerald was the wrong one upon whom to unburden himself. “First,” he said, “I want you to get me the number of the guy who

The Gold Man

painted the door sign. The ‘D’ in DENTAL needs to be redone. Some hooligans must have been playing around again.”

“You’re worried about a letter on the door!” Gerald slapped his forehead. “Uncle, we are in the eye of a hurricane! Forty-five dentists are waiting for their work to be delivered. Pincus claims there’s a fourteen-unit bridge missing. A roundhouse, Uncle! Months of hard work, and we’re responsible.”

Nine years ago Sam had come to Herman. He was a desperate man. Though Gerald was only five feet, seven inches tall, he weighed two-hundred and forty-five pounds. He was eating himself to death. Neither he nor Rose could do a thing with the boy. Herman always had a way with him. Maybe he could talk to him, get him out of the house, get him to stop eating all the candy in the store. “What about school?” Herman asked. “Hopeless,” said Sam. Gerald refused to study. He was so far behind that it was senseless for him to continue. Was it possible for Herman to take him into the laboratory? Gerald could learn to be a technician. He could always color very well, and besides, what could you find to eat in a dental laboratory?

Reluctantly, Herman had agreed to give the boy a job, and to everyone’s surprise, Gerald had cheerfully accepted the offer.

“It doesn’t look good,” Herman said. “AARONSON ENTEL LAB. What’s an ENTEL LAB?” He took off his suit coat and put on his white lab coat. It hung loosely on his broad frame. So who noticed the loss of a few pounds on a man who weighed two-hundred and thirty-five pounds and was six-feet one-inch tall? He coughed, then held his breath, and then coughed again.

“You’re coughing worse than usual,” Gerald said. “Are you feeling okay, Uncle?”

Richard Karlen

“I’m terrific,” Herman said half-heartedly.

For more than a year Gerald had stalked about the laboratory, a fat, dark shadow. He was always chewing on something. Herman said nothing, though he paid him twice what he was worth. The other employees complained privately that Gerald got on their nerves. Five years ago, Herman pulled Gerald into his inner office and read him the riot act. Number one: no more eating during working hours. Was he a pig or a human being? Number two: when was he going to start doing a job, accept some responsibility? Herman gave him six months to lose fifty pounds and to earn what he was being paid, or, nephew or no nephew, he was going to throw him out on his chubby *tuchas*. He didn’t really mean it, but Gerald couldn’t be sure. Herman’s angers were runaway express trains.

Herman sat down on the stool in front of his workbench. Several new cases were waiting for his approval before being packaged and sent out. Lately he always seemed to be behind, never having enough energy to finish the same day what he had started. He dialed out on an extension phone and asked to speak to Dr. Pincus.

“Herman, I’m still waiting for Teitelbaum’s case.” Pincus’s voice was its usual growl.

“It’s probably on one of the trucks,” Herman said.

Morris Pincus, with his manicured fingernails and transplanted hair, practiced in a recently constructed medical complex in Millburn, one of those fashionable brick edifices designed to house suburbia’s medical and dental elite. Let the old medical tower in Newark crumble into dust as far as the residents of Millburn were concerned. Pincus had doorknobs for fingers, but made a living because he had the good luck that Herman Aaronson was a genius in transforming his rotten impressions into decent crowns.

The Gold Man

“Herman, we’re talking about a five-thousand-dollar case.”

“It’ll show up. They always do. You ever lose as much as an inlay from this lab? What’re you worrying about?”

“Herman, I want to know where that case is—right now!”

“Right now is impossible. Mercury is on strike. I don’t do the impossible.”

“What am I supposed to tell the patient? For months that woman has been bitching to me; her temporary crowns have been snapping like potato chips. She owes me a fortune. Next week her daughter is getting married, and if the case isn’t in her mouth for the wedding ceremony she says she will blow up my office. We’re talking about the wife of an Italian building contractor. Herman, are you listening?”

“Relax. You’ll get it.”

“I’d better. You’re not the only technician in town.”

Herman smiled. He repressed an impulse to tell Pincus to find some other gold man who could perform miracles with his crappy impressions. But it was bad business insulting a dentist, even a bum like Pincus. “Be patient, doctor,” he said. “I’ll do a little research. If it shows up today, I’ll have Gerald deliver it on his way home.”

“We close at five.”

Herman hung up and checked the castings for a three-unit bridge that one of the crown and bridge men had dropped off while he was talking to Pincus. The margins were overextended and Herman carefully planed them down with a sandpaper disc. There was an undercut on one of the dies. The crown would fit imperfectly. He fixed the problem by grinding the inside of the casting, being careful to avoid perforating the gold. Hadn’t the

Richard Karlen

dentist seen the undercut after he had taken the rubber base impression? Probably too worried about collecting his fee. Let Herman Aaronson make it right. And if there was an open margin, who got blamed? In five years the tooth beneath the crown would rot out and the patient would either lose the tooth or be strapped with the expense of a new crown, following root canal therapy.

Some of the gold dust flew into his mouth and triggered a fresh round of coughing.

Gerald rushed to his side. "Are you okay?" The young man slapped his uncle's back several times.

Herman straightened up. "Cut out the banging."

"You don't look good, Uncle. Maybe you should see a doctor."

"I'm okay. Go back to work."

Herman breathed heavily. Gerald was a good boy. At age twenty-four, he had turned out a lot better than anyone had expected. He had knuckled down and had lost seventy-five pounds, while assuming more and more responsibility around the lab. Last year he had married a Jewish girl from South Orange, a schoolteacher who taught retarded children. If only his son Stanley would stop clowning around and graduate from dental school, maybe he'd be able to find himself just as nice a girl.

He thought about the second-floor apartment above the lab that for years he had planned to renovate into a dental office. There was space for at least three, maybe four operatories, plus a good-sized office and waiting room. With Stanley taking care of the patients and Gerald running the lab, a dream of sorts would come true.

Except that since the riots, Newark had turned into an economic catastrophe. Clinton Avenue, Springfield Avenue, South Orange Avenue, the main arteries that ran from the suburbs and cut through the heart of downtown

The Gold Man

Newark looked like disaster zones, with every other store boarded up. Hardly the sort of town where a young dentist would want to open up. Tomorrow he'd start checking property outside of Newark. On Route 22 in Springfield he had passed a sign advertising the sale of an old house. He could tear it down and build a beautiful office for Stanley and a new lab for Gerald.

All his life he had been dreaming, planning. What did it cost? Last month he had turned sixty. Not so old. According to insurance stats on longevity, you were guaranteed three-quarters of a century of life. And what about those TV commercials where spry old people danced the hula under palm trees in Hawaii wearing necklaces of flowered leis? So there was Jake ruining his old age, holding the chest X-ray up to the fluorescent light, pointing with his pen at some invisible shadow, lecturing him in tones that he might have used for a group of medical students.

He stood up and stretched, but feeling weak, sat down again. No strength at all. The lung specialist had said that the tumor was partially occluding a large bronchiole, and that he could expect to experience difficulties in breathing, a chronic cough, an occasional pain. What else was new? The surgeon had wanted to operate, but the specialist had made the sort of face that said, "What's the point?" Jake had offered no opinions. Later they'd talk, he said. Herman was bewildered. No one wanted to give him a straight answer.

He looked through the glass partition that separated him from the other technicians—twelve of them, lined up in rows at their benches, grinding out the dentures and bridges that serviced almost fifty dentists daily. Thirty-five years building a business, a reputation for excellence: balanced dentures, fixed bridges that fit and lasted, porcelain jackets that looked natural. Could Gerald run

Richard Karlen

it, or would it all go down the drain? Gerald was a good boy and had developed into a competent administrator, but he still didn't understand the difference between a straight-line and a Hanau articulator. Dentists wanted to talk to a technician who knew more than they did, but pretended to know less.

He stood up again and went back to the front counter, where he took off his lab coat and put on his suit jacket. "Gerald," he said, "I'm going home. Call Aunt Rebecca and tell her to make my bed before she goes out to play tennis."

"You *are* sick, Uncle."

"I've got a cold, a touch of bronchitis. I'll rest a day or two and be fine. You run things, Gerald. I'm counting on you." He started for the door, then turned and said, "If Mercury doesn't show up, you may have to deliver a few packages yourself. Check on Pincus's bridge. It's probably sitting somewhere on his shelf, but check anyway. And don't forget about the sign."

As Herman walked around the corner toward the parking lot, two teenage boys blocked his path. Herman moved to avoid them, but they moved with him. "What do you want?" he asked.

"Maybe you can lend us a few dollahs, mistah?" one of the boys said. He was the taller of the two and had large, sad eyes.

Herman reached into his pocket and then withdrew his hand. "You're begging? Two, strong, husky young boys."

The other boy pulled out a switchblade knife and with a quick, practiced flex of the wrist snapped open the long, sharp blade and aimed it at Herman's chest. "Who's begging?" the boy said.

Herman glanced about. These two boys were insignificant. What was significant was that he was being

The Gold Man

robbed in the middle of the city at eleven-thirty in the morning, while rays of sunshine had somehow managed to slice through Newark's perpetually gray polluted sky to warm the sidewalks. What about the tall man who was less than a block away and who could see what was happening, but kept on walking? Across the street, two passing women turned and looked into the window of a candy store, indifferent to the impending tragedy that seemed about to occur on the opposite side of the street. Herman wondered: was he truly alone in the middle of the day in a city with a population of more than three-hundred-thousand people?

He stared at the boy with the knife. The boy was sweating as he inched the knife closer to Herman's chest. His broad lips were tight and his heavy eyes expressed a boy's anxiety.

Herman said, "Put away the knife, sonny, before I hurt you."

The boy didn't answer. He continued to press the knife against Herman. His hand was shaking. The other boy whispered, "Give us your money, mothafucka!" There was a hesitation in his voice, a lack of conviction.

Herman backed against the building. A truck roared by, its diesel fumes thickening the air. The bell of the candy store clinked as the women entered it. He heard Jake's voice telling him that he had smoked too many cigarettes in one lifetime. There had been tears in Jake's eyes. Now there were tears forming in Herman's eyes, as he felt sorry that Jake had to be the one to pass a death sentence onto to a best friend. Through his blurred vision, the two boys wavered like obtuse shadows. His throat was dry, and he wanted a glass of water.

"Your money, mistah!"

The point of the blade began to penetrate the thick fabric of Herman's coat. He felt the nick. With a light-

Richard Karlen

ning move, his large, clenched fist smashed the boy with the knife in the face. He watched with horror as the boy's head bobbed back and forth, his eyes swinging upward like a saint having a revelation. Blood gushed from a broken nose as he sank to his knees. The other boy froze, and then ran as Herman's gaze drifted mindlessly toward a pigeon perched on a low-hanging eave over the candy store, its short round head jerking back and forth as it eyed the violence below. The knife dropped from the dazed boy's hand and made a hollow cracking sound upon the sidewalk. Herman kicked it away as the pigeon flew to the roof.

Herman bent down and examined the stricken boy who was half-conscious and moaning, blood draining from his nostrils across his mouth and chin. He speculated on his age, as he tried to remember Stanley as an adolescent. In his entire adult life he had never lifted a hand against his son, against any boy. The boy opened his eyes and gazed at him in fear.

"Are you all right?" Herman asked, relieved that he hadn't killed him. He pulled out a handkerchief and tried to clean his face, but the boy reeled to one side, then jumped to his feet. In an instant he was gone, racing down the block, yelping like an injured dog. Herman dropped the soiled handkerchief and leaned against the building, struggling for a breath. He coughed hard several times, then straightened up and walked to his car.

He drove directly home. The house was empty. Rebecca's car wasn't in the garage, though it was too early for her tennis game with Belle. Perhaps she was shopping. It seemed that when he needed her the most, she was never around. He should have called her from the hospital, told her he was coming home from the convention a day early.

The Gold Man

He went into the bathroom and scrubbed his hands and face, before brushing his teeth and painting Merthiolate on a small cut on the knuckles of his right hand. He stared into the mirror and looked with annoyance at the large, square head. “Who are you kidding?” he said to the image. Then he touched his ragged mustache. It needed trimming, but he didn’t feel like searching for the scissors. “What makes you think you can’t die?” he asked. The deeply set eyes blinked. Then he walked into the bedroom, undressed and slipped into bed.

Though exhausted from restless nights in the hospital, he was still unable to sleep. He kept seeing the terrified brown face of the boy as he was hitting him. Why had the boy been afraid? He was the one with the knife. He would never understand human nature—not even on his deathbed.