

## **Chapter 8**

### **Gertrude**

My mother-in-law, Gertrude Lockhart, hated me from the minute she laid eyes on me. I represented everything she despised in a human being. In her mind I was just another New York City carpetbagger who came to Pennsylvania to defile its maidens, infiltrate its Puritan culture, and dilute the gene pool with my city slicker ways. That I was also lazy, smoked pot, and was a swarthy Italian-American with long hair and a black beard added insult to injury. As far as Gertrude was concerned, I was a good-for-nothing miscreant who would rather lay on the couch watching basketball than do an honest day's work. I resented this assessment as unfair and inaccurate. I would much rather be laying in my recliner while watching basketball. As for the honest day's work, I didn't bother to contest that.

Gertrude and I had gotten off on the wrong foot since my insinuation, made when she and I met several days before my wedding, that I would abandon plans to marry Sabrina if the price was right. She didn't appreciate the sarcasm or the humor. She resigned herself to the fact that this despicable character, this New York City Slicker who walked into her life unannounced, would be her son-in-law. She didn't like it one bit, and she didn't like me.

For me, what rankled most was that Gertrude had pegged me for the charlatan that I was. She saw right through any pretenses of legitimacy and respectability that I proffered. She could care less that I was studying to be a dentist at an Ivy League university. She wasn't fooled by my altruism for joining the public health service. Gertrude believed that everything I did had ulterior motives. I tried every trick in the book to gain her good graces — bribery (she didn't appreciate the bottle of whiskey, poker chips, and deck of cards I gave her for Christmas), gratuitous flattery (my compliments about her svelte figure did not go over well with a 62 year old woman who was 20 pounds overweight), and bold-faced lies (she scoffed at the notion that, because of her influence, I was a born-again Christian). Nothing I did could endear me to this hard-nosed Puritan matron. After a while, I stopped trying. In fact, I looked for ways to piss her off. Two can play this game.

On the other hand, my father-in-law, Loren Lockhart, was a good old boy who liked to party. He especially liked to party with me because his wife would spend most of her time bitching at me and cut him some slack. Loren and I became good buddies, not only because we liked to hang out together, but also because we knew how much it pissed off Gertrude.

In the two year period between getting married and moving to Crownpoint, Sabrina and I would visit her family in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. On those occasions, while staying at Loren and Gertrude's house, Gertrude did nothing to conceal her contempt for me. The nagging started as soon as I arrived. "When are you going to cut your hair?" "When are you going to shave off that black beard? You look like Haile Selassie." "Why do you have to use that foul language all the time?" "Have you found a job yet?" "How come you don't go to church on Sundays?" The religion thing really upset her. Gertrude was

a devout Lutheran. After I abandoned any pretense of being a born-again Christian, she quickly recognized that I was an atheist who scorned not only Lutherans, but all religion. She thought she could convert me by getting Sabrina and me to attend church with her. I took the high road on this one. "I would love to go to church with you, Gertrude, but the presence of a heathen and disbeliever like me inside your church might make the church's walls crack. I wouldn't want to saddle your church with that expense." Whenever I said that, I could see the enmity in her eyes. Sometimes the best defense is a good offense.



**Cashman with father-in-law Loren Lockhart, snowmobiling in the Pocono Mountains**

After a hard day hiking or snowmobiling through Pennsylvania's forests, Loren and I liked to drink whiskey on Gertrude's front porch, while he regaled me with rowdy stories about growing up in Lancaster and his travels to the West before he was married. Loren was a natural raconteur who loved an audience. One time while he and I were drinking on the front porch, and Sabrina and Gertrude were in the adjacent kitchen preparing dinner, they could hear everything we said. Loren was telling stories about his life before meeting Gertrude. I saw an opportunity here and went for it.

"Did you have any girlfriends before you met Gertrude?" Loren fancied himself quite the ladies' man, so he took the bait. "Did I have any girlfriends? There was Blanche Peterson, Loretta McPherson, and Betty Germane, to name a few. That was a feisty bunch. And there was no shortage of pretty Italian women when I was in Italy during the war. I liked the ladies and the ladies liked me," he boasted.

Gertrude was getting annoyed. "Is he telling those stupid stories again? He's nothing but a pathetic old man," she chimed in from the kitchen.

Loren continued, undeterred. "And there were the two girls I met in El Paso. Boy did they like to party."

Then I saw the perfect opening. "Did the women have big breasts in those days like they do today?" I figured this would get either a spirited response from Loren or a rise out of Gertrude. I didn't have to wait long. She came rushing out to the porch, knocked our drinks over, and grabbed the whiskey bottle off the table. "The two of you are disgusting. I expect this kind of gutter talk from a reprobate like you, Cashman. But Loren, you should know better. Now both of you get out of here, and **no more** drinking."

I smirked as Gertrude stormed off. This round clearly went to me.

But the battle wasn't over, and Gertrude had another trick up her sleeve. She tried to poison me. Gertrude was a terrible cook. When she made spaghetti, she put barbecue sauce on the pasta. I gagged when I tried it. Her epicurean specialty was casseroles. She would take a can of tuna, throw in some canned corn, American cheese, and cream of mushroom soup, put it in the oven for 40 minutes and serve it as a Tuna and Mushroom Casserole. It was beyond disgusting; even calling it revolting was

giving it some culinary merit. If there were leftovers, she would put the casserole in the refrigerator uncovered, and leave it there for days. After 24 hours, there was white fuzz growing on it. After 48 hours, the first signs of mold appeared. If you cultured that stuff, you could grow out penicillin.

During one of our trips to Pennsylvania, Sabrina and I arrived late at night and were ravenously hungry. Gertrude served a leftover Tuna and Mushroom Casserole well beyond its expiration date. It was mixed and warmed up so the mold was not visible. Sabrina tried to warn me, but I was too hungry and dove in. The nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea I had for the next two days was Gertrude's revenge. She smirked every time I ran to the bathroom. That round went to Gertrude.

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Taking the job with the Indian Health Service in Crownpoint had one ancillary benefit; it put 2,000 miles between Gertrude and me. However, because Sabrina was pregnant, Gertrude and Loren came to stay with us in Crownpoint before her delivery, ostensibly to help Sabrina. That they arrived one month before her delivery date, when Sabrina didn't need any help, led me to believe that Gertrude had come primarily to make my life miserable. It was with great trepidation that I awaited her arrival.

Well, Gertrude didn't disappoint. In defiance of probability, her loathing for me had grown even more intense in the intervening months. She picked up right where we had left off. She nagged me relentlessly for drinking too much, for not going to church, for smoking too much pot, for playing poker with my buddies when I should have been home with my eight month pregnant wife. No matter what I did, she found fault.

Listening to Gertrude's harangue made me think of that old Ernie K-Doe song "Mother-in Law."

*Every time I open my mouth  
She tries to put me out  
She thinks her advice is a constitution  
If she would leave that would be the solution  
**MOTHER-IN-LAW, Mother-in-Law***



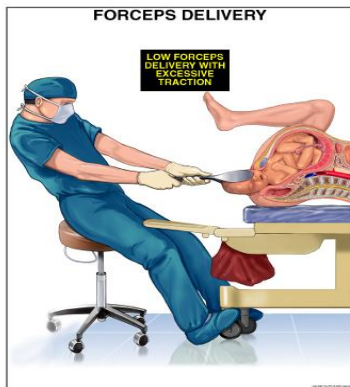
Ernie K-Doe was thinking of me when he wrote that song.

I did find one way to appease Gertrude, by agreeing to do some dental work on Loren. He had a badly decayed upper first molar that needed to be extracted. So we cut a deal — I would extract Loren's tooth if she would get off my case.

This deal bought me some respite from her wrath. As long as she needed something from me, Gertrude was civil with me. The longer I put off Loren's extraction, I figured, the more peace I would

get. Every day I would find some excuse to delay it. The longer I delayed, the testier she got. She could see through my ruse, but there wasn't much she could do about it.

Our dearest daughter, Carmencita, was born on April 23, 1975, four months after we arrived in Crownpoint. She had a head full of black hair and looked like a Spanish bambina, hence her name. The twenty hour period from onset of labor until delivery alternated between chaos and crisis. Clark MacKay, the hospital director, was the attending physician. He had delivered many babies, but the Navajo women just rolled them out effortlessly. Sabrina's labor was long, difficult, and risky. After 20 hours of labor and two hours being completely dilated, the situation was serious and the options were limited. There were no surgical suites at Crownpoint Hospital, hence a Cesarean section was not an option. There was no epidural anesthesia. The only thing Clark could do was a forceps delivery. Unfortunately, this would be his first one.



**A forceps delivery —Cashman passed out when he saw this.**

I had never witnessed a delivery before, and was not prepared for the spectacle. There was blood everywhere. Sabrina was screaming profanely – at Clark for fidgeting while trying to insert the forceps, but most of all at me for getting her pregnant. Nurses were darting about frantically, monitoring the baby's heart rate, adjusting the oxytocin drip, preparing for the delivery. Gertrude was there too. She was a trained nurse and was supposed to be helping. What she mostly did was lambast me for bringing Sabrina to this god-forsaken place to deliver her baby. As the scene became more chaotic, I glanced at Sabrina, who had two huge forceps protruding from her birth canal and clamped around the baby's head, and did what any expectant father would do. I passed out. Gertrude tried to revive me by kicking me in the ass and calling me a wimp. I doubt that was a resuscitation technique she learned in nursing school. The nurses, in addition to ministering to Sabrina and the baby, now had to minister to me.

Clark came through in the end. With the forceps firmly secured around the baby's head, he gave several yanks and out came Carmencita. Her head was disfigured, shaped like the forceps, and she was pretty bruised from the trauma, but she started breastfeeding immediately. The next day the WIC program showed up at our home with a year's supply of baby formula. I told them to take it back, since Sabrina was breastfeeding. Bureaucracies do not take things back. I had to drink "café con baby formula" for months.

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Two days later, while we were recovering from the whole experience, Gertrude announced that she and Loren would be leaving in one week. Deliverance in one week — this was music to my ears. "But you better make sure you've finished Loren's dental work by then, you slouch," was her departing

rejoinder. The gloves were off now. I made arrangements to extract Loren's tooth on Sunday at 5 P.M., exactly three days before they planned to leave.

On Sunday at 3:00 P.M., Stan Robertson and Marlene showed up at our house. They had been in Albuquerque shopping for their wedding, and stopped by Crownpoint to see Carmencita on their way to Many Farms, Arizona where Stan worked.

"The baby looks great," Stan said as he held Carmencita for the first time. "She has the great good fortune to bear little physical resemblance to her father. Let's celebrate." Out came Stan's finest Colombian, a bottle of wine was uncorked, and we were ready to celebrate. There was one problem. "I have to extract my father-in-law's first molar in two hours," I told Stan. "No problem," he assured me. "You can do that with your eyes closed. Besides, you'll be fine in two hours. Here, have a hit on this joint and stop worrying." Emboldened by Stan's confidence in my modest clinical skills, I lit up that doobie and it knocked me from door to door.

At 5:00 P.M. Gertrude showed up with Loren in tow for his extraction. She knew Stan and Marlene had dropped by — she had met Stan and disliked him almost as much as she disliked me. "I hope you and your buddy didn't get into any trouble while he was here. I don't want to hear any more of your lame excuses to postpone this," Gertrude cackled. "We're leaving in three days." There was no way for me to weasel out of this one.

"Do you think you can do it?" Sabrina asked as she took me aside. My cognitive and motor skills were still a bit impaired.

"You heard what Stan said. I can do an upper first molar extraction with my eyes closed. Let's get this over with." And there it was, bubbling to the surface again, my enduring limitation — hubris. Off we went to the dental clinic. Sabrina came along to assist me. Gertrude stayed home to take care of Carmencita.

As luck would have it, there was a power failure at the hospital, and no electricity in the dental clinic when we arrived. This meant there would be no light to illuminate the operative field. Even more inconvenient, all the dental chairs were in the most elevated, upright position, just as they always were when the clinic was closed, so the cleaner could mop the floor. I usually did surgery while seated, with the dental chair in the most reclining position so the patient's head was literally in my lap. If I were to proceed with Loren's extraction, I would have to stand up in an awkward upright position with no lights.



**Crownpoint Indian Hospital, the sight of the impending debacle**

“Are you sure you can do this with no electricity?” Sabrina asked again, concerned about the deteriorating situation. Still brimming with my hubris-instilled confidence, I said “I can do this with my eyes closed.” I also knew that, if I returned without finishing the job, I would never hear the end of it from Gertrude.

In short order I had anesthetized the entire upper left quadrant of Loren’s mouth. He was feeling no pain. Still a bit woozy from the combustibles, standing in an uncomfortable and contorted position, with no lights to illuminate things, I clamped the forceps on Loren’s upper first molar, rocked it from side to side in the recommended fashion, felt it loosening, and started to pull. Then I heard that piercing sound I’ll never forget. *Cra-a-a-ck*. Something snapped as I pulled the tooth out. When I examined the bloody remnant of Loren’s molar, I saw that the two roots closest to the cheek had come out cleanly, but the inside root, or palatal root, had cracked off and was still firmly embedded in Loren’s palate.

Now I was in trouble. Having a root crack off is not uncommon. Getting it out can be quite difficult, especially when you’re standing in an awkward position, can’t see what you are doing, and you are still recovering from some fine Colombian weed.

“What will you do now?” Sabrina asked, quite distressed by the whole situation. “You can’t continue in this condition. Let’s stop for now.”

“Are you kidding? I can’t stop now. Your mother will kill me. I’ve got to get that root out. Then I have to go home to get some aspirin for this huge headache I have.”

The task now facing me was technically very difficult and medically quite risky. To remove a retained root, an instrument called a “root pick” is required. It looks exactly like an ice pick, about the same size, except that the end is blunt with a rounded curvature which is inserted between the root and the bone to wedge the root out. The medical risk is due to the close anatomical proximity between a maxillary molar and the maxillary sinus, an air space between the upper molar teeth and the orbital bone of the eye. Any foreign object entering the maxillary sinus can cause an infection that is difficult to treat because of the poor blood supply to the sinus. From the x-ray, I could see that Loren’s molar was close to the maxillary sinus. If I tried to wedge that root out and it went into the sinus, it was big trouble.

In spite of all this, I still felt confident that I could get that root out and put an end to this fiasco. I had done it many times before. For his part, Loren was sitting there as happy as can be. He couldn’t feel a thing, and I certainly wasn’t giving him a play-by-play of the unfolding disaster. I decided to proceed.

To get some light, Sabrina stood by the window with a mirror reflecting the light from the setting Southwestern sun on the operative field. I still couldn’t see much, but it was better than nothing. I positioned the root pick, got a solid purchase between the bone and the root, exerted upward pressure and began to rotate it. All of a sudden, the root pick slipped from its purchase into the sockets vacated by the two extracted roots, and the next thing I heard was a dull “thud” as the root pick



**Light from the setting southwestern sun was the only illumination Cashman had for the ensuing fiasco**

pierced Loren's maxillary sinus and embedded firmly in the floor of the orbit of his eye. The worst thing that could happen had happened. Not only had I invaded the maxillary sinus, the root pick almost went through the orbit.

When I told Sabrina what I had done, she was not happy. "That's it. We're stopping this right now." I agreed with her assessment. I was in serious trouble now, with my father-in-law as the patient. There was no way I could continue under these conditions.

"Let's go home, I'll sleep this off, and we'll come back later when the electricity comes back on. I'll do a proper surgical removal of the root and close the sinus opening. But don't tell your mother what happened. She'll crucify me."

When we got home, Gertrude could see the worried look on our faces. "What took you so long?" she asked. "Did something go wrong? Oh, I knew I shouldn't have let that good-for-nothing work on my husband."

Sabrina reassured her that it was only a minor problem, the root had snapped off, and I would fix everything when the lights came on. She didn't mention anything about the root pick perforating the maxillary sinus, nor its unfortunate final destination in the floor of Loren's orbit. Gertrude was a nurse and would know the serious nature of what had happened.

Gertrude had fixed dinner in anticipation of our arrival. I had no appetite, especially for Gertrude's cooking. But Loren was hungry and wanted to eat. He was so anesthetized that he couldn't feel a thing. In fact, he felt just fine and wanted some grub. I didn't like this one bit — eating with an exposed maxillary sinus. I could see disaster looming, but I hunkered down and hoped for the best.

So Loren started chowing down. I was watching every move for signs of any noxious sequelae. Then Loren said, "I'm thirsty. Let me have a beer." Before I could react to intervene, Loren took a big swig of beer, and the next thing I saw was a stream of beer coming out his nose and right onto his plate. As he drank the beer, it went into his exposed maxillary sinus through the opening I had made by extracting the tooth, then came out the sinus opening in his nose.

Gertrude knew exactly what had happened too. She was irate. "You no good bum. You butcher. Look what you've done to my husband!" She proceeded to make derisive comments about my clinical skills and unkind remarks about my character, which were probably justified under the circumstances. Sabrina then came clean and told her exactly what had happened - every excruciating detail from Stan's arrival to the beer flowing out of Loren's nose. Gertrude was incredulous, as she

directed the final salvo at me. “How could you do that? How could you be so callous? Have you no scruples? Have you no judgment? What do you have to say for yourself?”

I was in deep shit now. My mother-in-law didn’t like me to begin with, now she had me on a clear case of medical malpractice. What could I say in my defense? How could I get myself off the hook? So, like the coward that I am, I blamed the whole thing on a convenient scapegoat. “I don’t know why you’re so angry at me. It was all Stan’s fault.”

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After several hours of sleep and copious promises to Gertrude to reform my errant ways, I returned to the dental clinic with Loren as my patient and Sabrina as my surgical assistant. Fortunately, there was electricity by that time. With Loren reclining in the ideal surgical position, I performed a surgical procedure, dexterously removed the retained root, and surgically closed the maxillary sinus opening. I put Loren on a stiff course of antibiotics, and he healed up just fine. And I decided right then and there that half a continent was not enough distance between me and my mother-in-law. If I wanted to be sure she wouldn’t show up to haunt me, I needed to put half the world between us. And that is exactly what I did.