

Anna
A Doctor's Quest into the Unknown

By Michael Derechin
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CHAPTER 1

"I brought this curse on myself. God is punishing me!"

Willie Mays "Bernie" Bernstein, MD, fell back into his chair. He looked at his patient, Marge Whitestone, and then at her husband sitting next to her. His mouth opened and shut. Bernie thought, *Shit, not again. No, Marge, you didn't do it. God doesn't care about you. In fact, he or she doesn't know you exist. God is screwing you, along with everyone else. Don't take it personally. You see, Marge, there is no God, so get over it.*

The thought lingered until he found his voice. "Marge, cancer is not your doing. It has nothing to do with sin ... Is there something you'd like to talk about?"

She shook her head. Bernie shrugged, looked again at his patient, and then stared at the floor. She looks awful. Last month, full of energy—now a shadow of what was. The good old Hippocratic oath: "First, do no harm ..." Hippocrates never heard of cancer docs—we hurt, then they die.

He looked at the old woman, at the same time gripping his oak desk. Her hair was now gray, her eyes red and sinking into their sockets, her skin turning gray to yellow.

I failed again. It's 1973, and Nixon speaks about a cure for cancer in the next decade. What bullshit.

Bernie felt cold. He started to shake and knew fear was in him. George Whitestone looked at the doctor. "You're pale. Are you all right?"

Bernie nodded. "Marge, the tests came back. The cancer is growing." His gaze returned to the desk.

"I know, doc. The pains are back, and I got no appetite. I'm just one of my old horses ready to be hauled away. What's next?"

Bernstein took a deep breath. "Make you as comfortable as possible. I've exhausted all drugs used in cancer of the cervix. As I told you before, you could get another opinion at the university."

Marge and George shook their heads no.

Tears ran down George's face as he held his wife's arm tightly. His right eye twitched; his tanned face aged in seconds.

"Doc, Marge was lookin' so good a month ago. She looked a lot worse when you first saw her. You helped her good. You got to do something." He spoke the words through sobs and tears.

Damn you, George. Stop your sniveling. Shit, don't tell me how she looked. I thought she'd be cured. I should have known better.

He calmed down and was able to control his voice. "I've looked at different research drugs. There aren't any that have promise in cancer of the cervix."

His mind wandered back to the way he introduced himself to patients during his first few months in practice. He told them that he was an oncologist and treated cancer. Many of the doctors grew upset with this approach, telling Bernstein that he'd never get another consult. "After all, you don't tell patients they have cancer, especially when I just told them they had a bad infection."

Bernstein's response was always the same: "I'm not about to tell patients that they have an infection and then give them drugs that'll make their hair fall out, get them deathly sick, and continue insisting that it's a bad cold."

The doctors weren't the only ones that lied; families insisted on it. "If you tell Ma she has cancer, she'll die."

Marge Whitestone was different. Her voice jarred him away from his reverie. "How long do I have?"

Shaking his head, he replied, "I don't know. The average is six or eight months. No one is the average—might be a lot longer."

Marge looked at him. "You didn't answer me earlier. My sins have come back to me. Why else would I be punished so much?"

"Marge, there isn't a known cause for cancer of the cervix or, for that matter, any cancer. It might be associated with a virus, but it's certainly not the result of sin. Is there something you'd like to talk to me about in private?"

Bernie looked at George, hoping he'd understand and leave, but it was not to be. Marge shook her head again.

"Maybe another day."

She needed more pain medication. Bernstein wrote the prescription for much more than she needed. Warning that too much could be fatal, he wrote for three refills.

Marge looked at the piece of paper and nodded. Bernie realized that he had made his point.

By this time Bernstein's back was painful, his shirt soaked. He sat back in his overstuffed chair, trying to relax.

It never gets easier. Why am I trying to treat cancer?

He looked at the diplomas hanging on the pale yellow walls of his office: college, medical school, internship, residency, and a postdoctoral degree, all from the best programs. *Not much good when treating cancer.*

The intercom buzzed him back to the present. He pushed the buttons of the machine, gave up, and ran into the hall, yelling at his secretary, "Maria, is it an emergency?"

"Doctor, it's Leah, your wife."

"Maria, I'm fully aware of my wife's name. Tell her *later*. I'll call later," he said and went back into the room. "I've asked Maria not to interrupt a hundred times. It doesn't sink in. I'm sorry."

"She means well, doc. When do you want to see me again?"

He started to give her a date, then stopped, looked at her again, and tore up the appointment. "Don't push yourself, Marge. I'll stop by the house within the next two weeks—earlier, if needed."

George looked at him as they both headed for the door. "Our daughter Jo wanted to be here, but the kids stayed home from school today; they're sick. Can she call later?"

"Of course, George. Have her call about six this evening."

Marge gave him a hug. He held back. The couple left the room.

She's going to die. I can't stand it. Another death. I feel damn helpless.

Before calling home, he took a few deep breaths and then dialed the number. Leah answered on the first ring; the dogs had diarrhea but not the cats or the raccoon.

"It's the food," said Leah. "All my beautiful German shepherds are sick."

"So change the food. Why call me like it's an emergency?"

"Well, no need to get so huffy. I won't call you again." The call ended with a bang.

"I'm acting like an asshole," he mumbled.

Lunchtime. The waiting room was empty. Bernstein punched the intercom, which responded with a squawk.

"Screw this goddamned contraption," he said and then yelled through the closed door, "Maria, break time. No interruptions for twenty minutes, unless emergencies."

She walked into his office. "Doctor, you don't have to scream. The intercom works fine."

"I don't trust these things. Besides, it doesn't work for me." He was still holding the intercom receiver and screaming.

"Dr. Bernstein, stop screaming into the intercom. I'm standing in front of you."

"Oh right, sorry." He took his hand off the button. "Maria, please, no calls. I need the break. Only emergencies—and there are very few cancer emergencies."

His secretary nodded and left the room, slamming the door shut.

Bernstein stripped to his briefs, sat on the floor crossed-legged, and started to meditate, counting his breaths, feeling his abdomen expand and relax, continuing to count his breaths.

Relax ... relax ... in ... out ... in ... out ...

Marge, damn it, dying soon, can't do a thing ...

One ... two ...

Two of them. Christ, she looked good for a year and more. I thought cure—stupid.

Deep breath ... in ... out ...

His back pain lessened.

Slow breathing—count the ins, let out the bad air, bring in the clean.

The intercom screeched.

Bernstein jolted upright, ran to the door, and pulled it open.

"Now what?"

"Doctor, put your pants on."

He stood there, refusing to move. "What is the problem?"

Maria rolled her eyes, gave a sigh. "It's Jessica Coles on line two. She's the head nurse ..."

"I know she's the head nurse. Is this an emergency?"

"Jessica wants to speak to you about a consult. She said it was important."

He wondered what the penalty would be for strangling his secretary; decided that, under the circumstances, it would be a small fine; slammed the door; and picked up the phone.

"What's up, Jessica?"

"Dr. Mortimer wants you to see a patient. Please, Bernie, see her tonight."

Very few nurses called him Bernie, but Jessica was one. She had taken him under her wing when he was first starting out, put up with his hysterics, and treated him as the son she never had.

The nurse went on. "Her name is Anna Bing, and she's eleven."

Bernstein stood, shaking his head no as though they were face to face.

"Jessica, no children. You know I don't treat kids."

"It's my granddaughter."

He stopped shaking his head and sat on the side of his desk. Jessica brought him up to date.

Apparently, the girl had developed large masses in her neck, started losing weight and, when she saw the family doctor, was diagnosed as having an infection. She was given antibiotics, which didn't work. The swellings enlarged, and her mother brought her to Dr. Mortimer. He promptly admitted the child to the hospital and sent a consult to Bernstein.

Jessica started crying. "Bernie, please see her. Let us know what you think. She's all we have."

He started shaking his head again. Without saying anything, he stood up and paced about the room, the phone still held to his ear and the overly long extension cord following close behind.

Bernstein stopped, looked at an old photo that stood atop his desk. It showed a small group of kids, about eight or nine, smiling.

Among them were Bernstein and Zack.

"Shit!"

His mind focused on that time.

"Mama, what's wrong with Zack? He lost all his hair, and he's walking funny."

His mother spit twice, always a bad sign. "You shouldn't know.

Go play. Forget about him. You're only eight."

"But he's my best friend." Bernie had visited him every day—until Zack died.

He kept the picture of his friend on his desk.

Bernstein went back to pacing, still shaking his head, and tried to tell Jessica that he didn't have enough experience treating children with cancer.

He remembered a friend cornering him in medical school. "Hey, Bernie, guess who's stuck with the pediatric oncology floor—Willie Mays Bernstein, junior medical student!"

He never forgot the six weeks with the cancer kids. Bernstein bit his lip and picked up a Spalding ball cradled in a holder on his desk. It was the hollow, all-purpose pink ball of his youth, and he threw it against the wall. *Fuck it.*

He told Jessica he'd see Anna that evening in the hospital. Bernie hung up the phone and felt a cold hand on his shoulder. He looked back into darkness—nothing.

When the office hours ended, Bernstein made his way across the parking lot thinking of Anna and the futility of oncology. He stopped. "Something's wrong," he muttered. "It's the trees ... the branches lost their hair."

A cold wind blew through his coat, and he couldn't stop shaking. "Shit, it's only November." Winter was coming early, and the barren landscape of New England drew him further into darkness. The knot in his chest tightened. It was fear—fear of hurting, of killing, of failure.

"I can't treat a kid. Let someone else do it." He spoke the words into the wind. No one heard. Only the wind knew it was not to be.

Driving to the hospital, one mile away, Bernstein told himself that he'd keep his distance. No emotion. Say hello to the family, look at the x-rays and the medical chart, examine the kid, tell them he couldn't help, and send her to Bayside University Hospital. *Great plan, Bernie.*

Feeling better, he thought it best to call his wife and apologize, which he did on arriving at the hospital. "Leah, I'm sorry I was short. Bad day."

She let his voice sit out on the airwaves before answering. "I'm getting used to your lousy disposition. By the way, Russell showed up this afternoon."

Bernstein shook his head. "Is he okay?"

Leah seemed to lighten up. "The usual. He had a fight with Rob. Russell caught him with another man and is hysterical. Besides that, he's showing a few dogs at the greater Boston show this weekend. He's not going to be in a rush to leave."

Russell was a dog handler, one of the best in the business. Leah was his best friend.

"So what's new? This happens every two months. He'll get over it. Rob will drive up to the house, there'll be a big scene, and they'll go home. Meanwhile, we'll have gourmet meals."

"He's already planned the menu for the week. I sent him to pick up the boys from school. They missed the bus."

"Now I know everything is back to normal. Did David have problems with the late note I wrote today?"

"You didn't write the note, and the two of you have to stop. David was given detention because of your shenanigans. He wrote the note, and you signed it."

"So what's wrong with that?"

"You signed it 'David's father.' They gave him detention."

"Those teachers have no sense of humor."

The call ended. He'd be late for dinner.

The hospital loudspeaker notified him that he had an outside call. It was Jo Adams, Marge Whitestone's daughter. He answered immediately.

"Dr. Bernstein, I spoke to my father a few hours ago. He's beside himself. I'm just as worried about him as I am my mother."

Bernie sat down in an overstuffed chair in the lounge. He fished the Spalding out of his pocket and started tossing it.

"I know, Jo. He was broken up when they were in the office. Marge accepted the prognosis better than he did. They're both going to need help."

"Mother said there's not much you can do other than make her comfortable. I've accepted it and wasn't surprised. It's still hard to take."

"I know. I can't accept it either. I want to ask you something. Marge seems to believe she's sinned and that brought on the cancer. Are you aware of a reason she'd think that?"

"No. I do know that since she was diagnosed, she's referred to sin. In fact, she now goes to church regularly. My mother was never a churchgoer."

Bernie nodded and looked at his watch. He had spent too much time, and there was work to be done. "Okay, Jo. Let me know if I can help. Otherwise I'll be there in two weeks." He hung up the phone.

Bernstein couldn't delay any longer. He had to see Anna and decided to start in the x-ray department looking at her chest films. They showed a mass in the middle of her chest.

Shit.

From there he went to the nurses' station and grabbed Anna's chart. She had been feverish for three weeks, had not responded to a big-time antibiotic, had lost five pounds over the same time period, and was now anemic.

Fever, weight loss, anemia. All bad signs.

"This sucks," he said to no one in particular. Pam Nichols, the charge nurse, ignored him.

Finally, Bernie took a deep breath and headed toward the kid's room. Pam Nichols followed him. The walls of the corridor were hospital dismal: cold and gray. The lightbulbs cast a pale yellow glow throughout the hall, flickering off and on at times. Some were out. It was chilly inside those walls, and he again buttoned up.

Keep going, Bernstein. Just see the kid and go home.

Jessica and another woman stopped him.

"Bernie, this is my daughter, Bella, Anna's mother." Bella was a large woman, a good six feet tall with broad, muscular shoulders and large hands. Her face was ruddy and her eyes bloodshot. She smelled of wine.

Bella jabbed the doctor in the chest with her hand, catching him off guard and driving him against the wall. Instinctively, he pushed her away.

"I don't want any bullshit with my daughter. Take a look at her, and then get her out of this shitty hospital to Bayside University Medical Center. I don't want any of you hacks."

"Bella, stop it! He'll do what's best." Jessica stood between her daughter and the doctor. "I'm sorry, Bernie, we've been on edge ever since Anna became ill. She's our life."

"I understand," he lied. "I'll see Anna and be back to speak to you." He continued toward her room.

I really need this crap. Bella, you just made my life a lot easier. I can send Anna to the university without a second thought.

He resolved to be cold, aloof.

Sorry, kid. We can't help you here; got to send you to Bayside. They'll make you better.

His back stiffened, and he marched to the room with the women following him.

Bernie suddenly turned. "Please wait outside. Let me see Anna with Pam." He pointed to the nurse tagging behind.

Jessica and Bella backed off.

I can't believe it. They listened.

Anna was sitting up in bed. She had thick brown hair and dark eyes to match. Her face was pure sunshine, especially her mouth. She was clutching a teddy bear.

"Hi, Dr. Bernie." She hesitated, looked him over, and went on. "You don't look like a doctor. Are you sure?" she said with a twinkle.

"Damn, I've been putting it over on everyone. Now a smart-ass kid catches me."

"Well, it's easy. No tie, wearing jeans, and a beard. A beard! Doctors don't have beards. Nope, you can't be a doctor." She tried to hold in a laugh.

"How about Jerry Garcia?"

"He's a musician. The lead in the *Grateful Dead*."

"You're kidding. I thought he was a doctor. He's always talking about drugs."

Anna couldn't control her laugh.

The nurse, meanwhile, had taken a standing position on the far side of the bed.

Anna continued the patter. "What about the clothes? I wanna see your diploma."

"I loved the sixties and couldn't part with the clothes. Did graduate. Class of '63. Correspondence course. No diploma but a very nice letter. I'll show it to you tomorrow."

"That was ten years ago. When did you get the letter?"

"Yesterday—don't open my mail much."

She threw the bear at him.

(Continues...)

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