

+Dershman Unbound

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- Reader 1: Max Dershman was the only patient I had in 40 years of practice who would break wind in front of me without apology. I think Max saw it as both his God-given right and some kind of personal statement. Max was also the only man who ever called me a fat Polack without getting his butt kicked. I never told him I had a Jewish grandmother on my father's side, or that some of my family got gassed during the war. I don't think I wanted to reveal any weak spots to Max Dershman. You had the feeling that if you did that, Max would find a way to exploit it.
- Reader 2: So why didn't I hate the guy? After taking care of a patient like Max for 40 years, you settle into something a little more complicated than hate, and maybe richer. Marriage is the closest thing I can think of, only without the sex. Oh, yes-sex was Max's coffee and doughnuts. I had the feeling that in his prime, the man used to inhale women, or at least made me think so.
- Max: So, Gorecki...
- Reader 2: He'd greet me, slapping me on the back – I don't think he ever called me "Doctor" or even "Doc."
- Max: Getting laid these days? Listen, I went out with this little blond chachke last Saturday, lemme tell ya, I thought I'd have to come by your office and pick up some more nitro tablets! Talk about moves!
- Reader 3: And talk he did, until I'd get so fed up I'd tell him to can it. I don't know how the nurses at Honeybrook put up with Max those last two years. Of course, back in the 50s, women did put up with stuff they'd never swallow nowadays. In my family, the girls got treated a little like expensive suitcases: you filled them up with good Polish-Catholic teachings, loaded them into the trunk, and drove off, never mind there's no air back there. My sister Rosemary was smart enough to get into med school, but wound up doing stenotype at the Drumville Courthouse and marrying a drunk. But that's another story.
- Reader 4: I think I didn't hate Max Dershman because he liked the music from Scheherazade. I doubt he knew, or cared much, that somebody named Rimsky-Korsakoff wrote the damn thing. But when he played Scheherazade on that old Victrola, Max's face would lose that bull-dog look, like an old leather belt loosening up a couple of notches.

- Max: That violin tune right at the beginning, Gorecki – it reminds me of some kinda breeze across the flowers. You can smell it, like being up close to a woman’s hair.
- Reader 1: That’s how he put it, and I couldn’t argue with him. When he went into the nursing home, he took the Victrola and that scratched-up 78 with him. Riva told me that when they found Max dead in his room – stinking of cheap cigars and surrounded by Playboy centerfolds – Scheherazade was playing. Oh – I can’t forget about Riva Greenberg. As social workers go, she was one of the better ones at Honeybrook. A lot of the gals there figured...
- Riva: What’s the point of sweating over these duffers? Half of them don’t remember you from day to day, and the other half don’t like what you did.
- Reader 2: There was some truth to that, what with most of the residents having Alzheimer’s or just being bitter about their kids dumping them in a nursing home. But Riva was different. She took a lot of guff from the staff, who probably figured her for a lesbian or pinko or both. Back then, there were two things nice gals didn’t do: wear pants to work, and speak their mind. Riva got in trouble on both counts – but I liked her.
- Reader 3: Once I diagnosed Max’s lung cancer, I knew there wasn’t a hell of a lot I could do for him, and I looked to Riva for help. Max wasn’t the type who wanted hand holding from his doctor, and he didn’t believe in pain pills. Remember, this was a guy who could lift a pile of two-by-fours like he was carrying a baby. He ran the biggest lumberyard in Drumville, but he didn’t do it from an office. He was out there hauling, loading, and of course, yelling – always yelling.
- Max: Get that crate the hell out of here, putz! Watch that band saw before you lose the family jewels!
- Reader 4: Max was rough on his men, no question, but they respected him. I never believed Max Dershman had it in him to kill a man, but some people in Drumville did. When Lou Shapiro wound up with his brains all over his bedroom, a lot of people figured Max was involved – and not just because Shapiro ran the only lumber yard in town. There was also the matter of Shapiro’s wife, who – no doubt about it – was a real looker, and had caught Max’s eye. But in the end, the coroner called it a suicide. Still I always watched my back around Max.
- Reader 1: We had one argument that festered for nearly five years. It all began around the time I put Max on some medication for his blood pressure, back in June of ’53. Of course, Max would have told you it was a month before they grilled the Rosenbergs – Julius and Ethel. This case is ancient

history, I guess, but back in 1953, it stirred up a lot of feelings. As far as I could see, here were two rats who sold out their country to the Russians. Max saw it as

Max: ...two Jews getting framed by the government.

Reader 1: One day when Max came in for a refill, we had a blow-up about it.

Max: What should I have expected from a Polack? Who else has persecuted the Jews for five hundred years? Who else could have produced a Chmielnitzki to kill 100,000 Jews?

Reader 1: Well that did it for me.

Reader 2: Listen, you dumb gasbag, Chmielnitzki was not a Pole, he was Ukranian – a Cossack, damn it!

Max: The hell he was!

Reader 2: The hell he wasn't! Chmielnitzki overthrew the Poles, for godssake!

Reader 1: We carried on like this for 10 minutes, until I finally just shut up. Max's blood pressure had gone up to 170/120.

Reader 2: Here, Max, take the damn refill and get out.

Reader 1: It wasn't until just before he died that I found out what Max was really mad about that day.

Reader 3: Anyway, Riva Greenberg was pretty good with Max. She was polite, but she didn't take any crap from him. And when Max got depressed toward the end, I know that having Riva around made a difference. The last thing he wrote was a card to Riva but, of course, I never read it. I can't imagine it was anything but some kind of thank-you note, and yet, two days later, when I asked her about it, Riva looked like I had just put a knife to her throat. I never brought up the topic again.

Reader 4: As for me, I had one chance to make my peace with Max Dershman, but I don't think I managed much more than a stalemate. I was visiting him at Honeybrook three days before he died of a pulmonary embolism. He seemed placid, polite, even a little friendly. I should have known that was Max's equivalent of a death-rattle, but I missed it.

Max: Gorecki, Listen: that day we argued about the Rosenbergs? It was something else, I mean – that lousy medicine you gave me for my blood pressure. You know what it did? Ha! – It seems a little silly now, but at

the time, I was really steamed at you. Those pills – they took away my fire! What do I mean? Are you even dumber than I thought? Down here, schmuck! I couldn't get it up! For three months I couldn't get it up, until I threw that garbage down the toilet. It cost me, Gorecki, let me tell you. You remember Shapiro's wife? Of course I was putting it to her – what, you thought we were going to the library together? Anyway, thanks to your lousy medicine, she left me! I've been pissed off with you for the last five years. But, well, I just wanted you to know, Gorecki – it wasn't about the Rosenbergs.

Reader 3: Well, Max, that's a relief.

Max: That's all you can say, Gorecki?

Reader 4: His voice – usually booming – sounded like pennies dropping into a worn-out pocket.

Reader 3: You want an apology, Max? OK, I'm sorry the medicine did that to you. We should have put you on something else. Maybe then I wouldn't have had to take your crap for five years. Listen, I gotta see 30 more patients this morning. You take care.

Reader 4: You take care. We mouth this to our patients every day, but it takes death to make us see what a pitiful excuse this phrase really is. Max Dershman had stolen fire from the gods, and I had stolen it from him. Three days later when I got the call to come over to Honeybrook, "stat," Max's room had already been emptied, right down to the old Victrola. But Max wouldn't quite let go. You could still smell those cheap cigars.

