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Busman's Holiday

Rodriguez was liberal with the tequila, which probably accounted for the fact that I was talking as much as anyone else at the party, even though I know only 2 words of Spanish, one of which is *hola*.

Language barriers notwithstanding, I was having a great time. "Gracias," I said, thanking Rafael, a friend of mine, an internist originally from Peru, for inviting me to this party.

In India, I'd taken my social life for granted. But I was now thousands of miles from home, displaced and isolated, and this was the first time in almost a year that I was meeting people not connected in some way with my profession. I spoke with patients all day and usually socialized with colleagues; it struck me that I was enjoying myself in large part because, other than Rafael and me, there were no physicians at this party. After a long week of listening to stories of depression and despair, there is nothing more relaxing than taking a break from the workplace.

Things were going swimmingly until Jorge, a rookie cop I'd met earlier, asked what I did for a living. Rodriguez answered for me: "He's a psychologist."

"Like Dr. Phil!" Jorge exclaimed.

I shrugged. There seemed to be no point in getting into the differences between a psychologist and a psychiatrist, so I tried to change the topic. "What do you think of that game last night?"

Jorge, though, had other ideas.

"My wife and I are having problems," he said, sitting down next to me. I suppressed an urge to edge away. Normally, I would've said that I could not be of much use here, and that he should see a therapist or make an appointment to see me at my clinic. But then I thought, why should I feel obliged to respond to him as a psychiatrist? Surely I can have a conversation just like anyone else?

"Yeah, man," I said. "That's rough. You know, I saw this movie the other night . . ."

He interrupted me. "I had an affair, and *mi esposa*, my wife, she find out," he said. "I stopped seeing the other woman, but my wife don't trust me no more."

There was a time, before I trained as a psychiatrist, when I would have responded with something flippant. "You cheat on the wife, Jorge," I might've said. "And you pay the price, my man."

But I found myself responding differently, as if I were his therapist. "Sounds like you are going through a difficult time."

Was it just age and maturity that had changed me, or was it my profession? I pondered this as he continued with details about his affair and his marriage.

Rodriguez, who was in a poker game with some other guests, looked over. "Senores!" he shouted. "Why don't you guys come join the game?"

But Jorge was not to be deterred. "*Un momento*," he said. He continued, speaking urgently, as if in a therapy session with his time running out. "I want to save my marriage, doc. What I gotta do? Tell me what I gotta do."

I wanted to say: "Jorge, man, wrong place, wrong time; give it a rest, and have a brew," but by this time he looked like he was going to cry. Tears welled up in his eyes as he talked about his family, "I love my kids. I can't let them go."

"That must be hard," I said. I felt like a therapist faking empathy, counting down the minutes until the end of the session.

But as I watched Jorge struggle to keep from crying, I felt guilty about wanting to relax and rejoin the party. Clearly, he had breached social etiquette by telling me, a relative stranger, these intimate details of his life, but he was doing so because he thought that I, the "psychologist," could help him. I wondered if I should give him a few words of trite advice, a friendly pat on the back, and move on. But that would seem condescending and inadequate. Such a superficial maneuver might only perpetuate the myth engendered by quick-fix TV psychologists—that significant change is merely a matter of being given paternalistic advice, a myth that probably inspired Jorge to confide in me in the first place.

So I sat it out. Shouts and laughter from the party spilled over us like a light fog, as Jorge talked and I listened.

My therapy supervisor from my residency days might even have been impressed by my nondirective Rogerian technique, though it actually stemmed from a combination of indecision and hesitation. Perhaps this was why physicians often socialized only with other physicians. Paradoxically, there may be more respite from one's work in the midst of peers.

As Jorge kept talking, he seemed to grow less tense, like a balloon gradually deflating.

Finally, he was done and looked at me expectantly. I sighed inwardly. "Jorge," I said, "you need to talk with a therapist who will help you work through the guilt and also a marital therapist for you and your wife, so you can rebuild the relationship."

"*Muchas gracias*, doctor," he said. "Thanks for listening."

"You're welcome," I said, and headed to the poker game.

An hour later, after I'd lost a considerable amount of money, Rafael, who was the designated driver, indicated that he was ready to leave. I thanked the host and we walked through the door, out onto the spacious front yard, when the door opened and Jorge stepped out. He

placed a hand on Rafael's shoulder. "*Pare*. Stop," he said. "You gonna drive?" he asked.

Rafael looked nonplussed. "Yeah, why?"

"How much you drink?"

"Only one beer and that was 2 hours back. I am fine, Jorge," Rafael replied.

"Let us see. First, I want you to walk like this," he commanded, demonstrating a tandem walk.

"You are kidding, right?" Rafael asked, but Jorge's expression was stern, his squat and muscular frame blocking Rafael's path like a miniature tank.

"This is not a joke," he said, and I was reminded that he was a policeman.

I watched as he put Rafael through the paces, essentially making him take a field sobriety test. It was amusing to see Rafael, the respectable internist, hopping on one leg and then walking and turning.

"You have the grace of a model, *amigo*," I joked, but Rafael was clearly not amused.

Next, Jorge had him do the horizontal gaze test. "Aha!" he said. "You have nystagmus."

By now, I was irritated as well. "Look, Jorge," I said. "He has had almost nothing to drink. And anyway, transient horizontal nystagmus is normal."

"I have training, doc," Jorge said. "I know what to look for."

I kept quiet, and finally, after a few more tests, Jorge relented.

"You're OK," he said. "Drive carefully, guys."

We left, Rafael cursing under his breath. "Can't he stop being a policeman even for a second? Next time, I ask if he's had a colonoscopy recently."

I laughed. But later that night, I wondered why Jorge had behaved in that unusual manner. Had he been genuinely concerned about Rafael's ability to drive? Had he been trying to return the favor of therapy, by ensuring my safety? Or was it something else? I thought about Jorge's demeanor, his satisfaction at making Rafael do his bidding, and it came to me then. Sharing his troubles with me had made Jorge feel vulnerable and weak. By exercising his authority as a policeman, he had attempted to regain a sense of control. Transference, countertransference, resistance, the activation of defense mechanisms—all the challenges of therapy had played out over the course of an evening.

I closed my eyes and drifted off to sleep. This was supposed to be my weekend off. ♦