



The birthday party

Martina Scholtens MD CCFP

Party for Junah's birthday," said Bahir, with his Arabic accent. "You come, Doctor?"

Tall, with his shoulders squared back and hair and mustache conservatively groomed, it wasn't hard to imagine him a school headmaster in Iraq before he came to Canada as a refugee. Eager to practise his English, and also, I suspected, to optimize the intimacy of the visit, he always insisted on seeing me without an interpreter.

Junah, his wife, was my age but the loss of 2 of their 5 children to a car bombing in Baghdad had aged her severely. She often came to see me, shoulders sagging and a hijab wrapped tightly around her tired face. I didn't feel that I offered much as her doctor, but I did make her laugh at every visit. When she told me that just seeing my face lifted her spirits, I replied that there was no need for her to come into the exam room then. I could just hurry by the waiting room and glance at her sitting there and she could go home. She was delighted by this, either by the joke itself or the fact that a physician would be playful with her.

When Bahir invited me to his wife's birthday party, it was midafternoon and I was cheerful and unguarded. "I don't know," I said as I printed his prescription. "When is it?"

He seized on this suggestion of interest. "You come? My wife so happy! I tell her Doctor come."

"Well, I don't know if I can make it," I cautioned. "What day is it?"

"You tell the day you can come."

That felt all wrong, organizing a party around the doctor's availability. I refused to name a date.

"I choose date," Bahir said agreeably. "I e-mail you. You cannot come, I change date." He gathered his coat

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and umbrella and murmured again as he left the exam room, "Junah so happy when I tell her." The next day Bahir e-mailed me at my work address. The line breaks were odd, and he had clearly used an online translation service; the effect was poetic:

Hello my doctor,

*From the first day in this most beautiful city
you eased the pain of alienation.*

*We see you as more than a doctor for us we consider
you a close friend.*

*For all of this we will be very happy if you celebrate
the ceremony of*

Junah's birthday on Saturday, August 10, at 6 PM.

From there he detailed an elaborate itinerary that involved a tour of Surrey in his car and a visit to the Peace Arch monument before the birthday party.

I was moved by the invitation; I resented it. A relationship with a physician, I e-mailed him back, was special, with limitations on how we could engage outside the clinic. I declined the tour, but would try to come by the house briefly during the party to give my regards to Junah.

He replied immediately. *Yes, yes, of course, Doctor.*

The Surrey address was a few minutes off the freeway, in a neighbourhood of low apartment buildings with old couches on the balconies and scrappy lawns. As I approached, I saw Bahir at the parking entrance, waving at me.

He welcomed me with formality. He wore a suit jacket and cologne. I was deliberately dressed exactly as I did for the clinic: navy pants, a print blouse, and low heels. Business attire was unimaginative, but festive dress felt downright dangerous. I was determined to preserve some kind of boundary.

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We walked into the building together. I knew that my patient demographic lived in poverty, but I had never witnessed it. The halls were dim, and garbage was piled outside some units. I could taste something sour—stale cigarette smoke or cat urine. Had I been alone I would have felt unsafe.

Upstairs, Bahir ushered me into his apartment. I entered the living room, which was beige, unadorned, and harshly lit by a bulb hanging from the ceiling. In the centre of the room was a table loaded with food. Next to it stood Junah, smiling shyly, with make-up on and her children lined up beside her.

A Middle Eastern couple rose from the love seat and introduced themselves. They had met Junah and Bahir 2 weeks earlier at the neighbourhood elementary school, they explained. We were the only guests.

I presented Junah with a small plant wrapped in green foil that I'd picked up from Safeway on the way over. I'd had to choose between discomforts: buying a gift for a patient or showing up at a party empty-handed. The plant was well received.

So was I. I sat on the couch, and Junah and Bahir sat on chairs opposite and beamed at me. I was clearly the guest of honour.

We sat in silence. Never at a loss for words in the clinic, I could think of nothing to say. I already knew the intimate details of their lives, down to their monthly budget and what they dreamed about at night. In the office, nothing was off limits. Here, nothing seemed appropriate.

"I show you house?" asked Bahir.

"Yes, please." I followed him through the apartment. The kitchen was warm and savoury, dishes piled on the counter. The master bedroom had a double bed and a blanket on the floor next to it, where the 10-year-old slept, Bahir indicated. The teenaged daughter shared the second bedroom with her 13-year-old brother. There

were no sheets on the mattresses, just a rumpled blanket on each bed.


I thought back over conversations I'd had with this family in the clinic and retrofitted them into the context of this apartment. I matched the insomnia to the bed, the trouble concentrating on homework to the shared bedrooms, and the loneliness to this anonymous Surrey apartment complex. The family had been in clear focus for me in the clinic, the rest of their life a blurred abstract. They lived here, though, not in my exam room.

"Eat!" Bahir commanded when we returned to the living room. It took me 3 servings to realize that clearing the plate indicated that I was still hungry and signaled Junah to heap it with more dumplings and date-and-sesame balls. I finally tried setting it down with a few forkfuls of food remaining, and my hosts nodded with satisfaction.

Shortly after, the other 2 guests excused themselves. I followed suit.

I drove home to the North Shore, to my weathered 1970s home overlooking the waters of Indian Arm, neighbours obscured by massive cedars, with a minivan in the driveway and bikes strewn across the yard. It had never seemed so splendid, or so preposterous.

A few days later I received an e-mail from Bahir with a photo attached. The plant I had given Junah was in bloom. The text, poetic as always, had been garbled in translation. I gathered that the flowers reminded them of my visit, and both made them extraordinarily happy.

Another patient invited me to her wedding a week later. I didn't hesitate. "I wish you all the best," I told her. "But due to our professional relationship, I don't socialize with patients outside the clinic." 

Dr Scholtens was a family physician at Bridge Refugee Clinic in Vancouver, BC, for 12 years and is currently completing additional training in public health and preventive medicine at the University of British Columbia.

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