

I HAVE SUSTO

Johanna Shapiro

CAST OF CHARACTERS

Dr. Eruditius, attending; has completed the university's required certification program on cross-cultural competency; wants to finish writing her ground-breaking paper for *Academic Medicine* on *susto*

Dr. D. Moralized, intern; wants to leave clinic before 6:30 p.m. one night this week

Juan Moreno, aka John, interpreter; wants to get a full-time job in clinic with benefits

Senora Lopez, patient; wants to be cured of the *susto* she contracted when her brother was hospitalized; also wants to get home to make dinner for her four kids before she's due at her evening janitorial job.

The entire encounter should be conducted rapidly, as everyone is in a hurry.

Dr. D: (Enters room distractedly, muttering) This isn't the right chart. Oh, hello, Senora. Habla ingles? No? Well, (speaking very poor Spanish) hola. Me llamo Dr. D. Moralized.

Sra Lopez: (Hopefully) Morales?

Dr. D: Sorry, I don't speak Spanish so John here will translate for us. Ask her what brings her in today.

Juan: Me llamo Juan. What is the problem?

Sra Lopez: (Worriedly) My right arm is numb and tingling. So is my cheek.

Dr. D: How long has she had these symptoms?

Sra Lopez: When my brother went to the hospital.

Juan: No. The doctor wants to know how *long*?

Sra Lopez: (Humbly) A few days.

Dr. D: Has this ever happened before?

Sra Lopez: Every time I get a fright, I feel sick.

Juan: (Patiently, as if speaking to a child) But did it ever happen before?

Sra Lopez: (Humbly) Yes.

Dr. D: When was that?

Sra Lopez: When my other brother died.

Juan: (Exasperatedly) The doctor needs to know *when* was that?

Sra Lopez: Three years ago maybe more. I don't remember. (Helpfully) It was Christmas time.

Dr.D: What did she say? Did somebody die?

Juan: Her other brother.

Dr.D: When did he die?

John: Three years ago.

Dr. D: Ask her what did he die of?

Juan: (To patient) What did your brother die of?

Sra Lopez: My brother didn't die of anything. He's still in the hospital.

Juan: She doesn't know.

Dr.D: Okay. Well, tell her I'm sorry. Now I'm going to do a neurological exam.

Juan: The doctor is going to do a neurological exam.

Sra Lopez: Tell the doctor I think I have *susto*. Can he cure me?

Juan: She wants to know if you're going to fix her.

Dr.D: Tell her I'm looking into her eyes. Follow my finger. Touch your finger to your nose. Touch your finger to my finger. Scrunch up your eyes. Yawn. Does this hurt? Good. Does that hurt? Good. Push when I pull. Pull when I push. Harder, harder, good, good. Raise your leg, raise your arm. Make a fist. Wiggle your fingers. Good. Can you feel this pin? Is it sharp or dull? Dull or sharp? Sharp and dull? (To Juan) There's nothing wrong with her. Tell the senora I have conducted an extensive examination and have found no evidence of disease.

Sra Lopez: But I feel sick. I think something is wrong.

Dr. D: No, luckily you are fine.

Sra Lopez: (A little testily) Then why is my arm numb and tingly?

Dr. D: (Thinks a minute; then with Sherlock Holmes-like intensity) Senora, which side do you sleep on?

Sra Lopez: My right side.

Dr.D: And what kind of bed do you sleep on?

Sra Lopez: (Puzzled) Just an ordinary bed.

Dr.D: Is it hard, like a plank?

Juan: Is it a plank?

Sra Lopez: (More puzzled) A plank?

Juan: She doesn't know.

Sra Lopez: Why am I sick?

Dr.D: Sometimes the best explanation is the most obvious explanation. I can't find anything wrong with you, so what I think is that your arm is numb from sleeping on your side.

Sra Lopez: (Skeptical) I'm sick because I sleep on my side?

Dr. D: Don't worry, it can happen to anybody. Why, it's even happened to me.

Sra Lopez: (More skeptical) What about my cheek?

Dr.D: (Taken aback) Well, I must admit that doesn't fit. It's a different set of nerves. I'll have to think about that.

Sra Lopez: So how do I get well?

Dr.D: (Enthusiastically) It's simple! Sleep on your left side.

Sra Lopez: (Begins to cry)

Dr.D: (To Juan) What's she crying for? Ask her why she's crying. She doesn't need to be upset. There's nothing wrong with her.

Juan: She's worried about her brother in the hospital.

Dr.D: How long has he been in the hospital?

Juan: A few days.

Dr. D: What's wrong with him?

Sra Lopez: His kidneys don't work, they had to put him on a machine.

Dr.D: Does he have diabetes?

Juan: She doesn't know.

Dr.D: Well, is she worried she has the same problem?

Sra Lopez: (Crying) No, but I don't want to end up in the hospital like him.

Dr.D: Tell her she won't. I can't be completely sure because I don't really know what he has, but based on my examination, she doesn't have what he has. Okay? Tell her I'm going to talk to my attending – tell her the *jefe* – and I'll be right back.

Narrator: After waiting in line behind the R2s for 10 minutes, Dr. D presents his patient to Dr. Eruditius, and concludes:

Dr. D: So, to sum up, I think the patient has a mechanical nerve compression due to sleeping on a plank, for which I recommended postural repositioning.

Dr. Eruditius: Wait! Did you say she got these symptoms when her brother was hospitalized, and she had the *same symptoms* when another member of her family died?

Dr.D: (Cautiously) Yes...

Dr. Eruditius: Haven't you ever heard of *susto*?

Dr. D: What's that?

Dr. Eruditius: You haven't done your homework, Dr. D. Jump on that computer. You can use my name as one of your keywords.

Dr. D: (under his breath) It's going to be friggin' midnight before I get out of here.

Narrator: 20 minutes later.

Dr.D: *Susto* is a folk illness also known as *espanto* and *perdida de la sombra*. It means fright or soul loss. You know, I think I heard the patient use that word.

Dr. Eruditius: (Impatiently) What are the symptoms?

Dr.D: (Feeling competent) Loss of appetite, weight loss, poor self-esteem, despondency, difficulty sleeping, nightmares, feeling sad, lack of motivation, muscle aches and pains, headache, stomach ache, diarrhea.

Dr. Eruditius: (Impatiently) Well? *Well?*

Dr.D: (Thinking hard) It's like depression?

Dr. Eruditius: That's the whole point of my paper. It's simple. *Susto* is really depression. We don't have to worry any more about it. Now go in there and do your stuff. By the way, do you think you can get your patient to sign up for my double-blind, randomized clinical trial comparing electroshock therapy to herbal tea?

Narrator: 1 hour after Dr. D left the exam room he returns.

Dr.D: John, tell the senora I have a few more questions to ask her.

Sra Lopez: (To Juan) More questions? Can't he figure out what is wrong? I have to go home.

Dr. D: (To Juan) What's the problem?

Juan: She wants to know is it a lot of questions.

Dr. D: (Heartily) The sooner we get started, the sooner we'll be finished. Now, does she have poor appetite?

Sra Lopez: I am thinking about my brother and I don't eat.

Juan: Yes.

Dr.D: Does she have difficulty sleeping?

Sra Lopez: When I close my eyes, I'm afraid my soul is snatched away.

Juan: Yes.

Dr.D: Does she feel depressed?

Sra Lopez: Right now I am sad my kids are home alone. I got to get home. How much longer is this going to take?

Juan: Yes.

Dr.D: Does she still enjoy formerly pleasurable activities?

Sra Lopez: (Not understanding) Formerly pleasurable activities?

Dr.D: You know, going to the movies, going out to dinner.

Sra Lopez: I don't know, I don't have money for those things.

Juan: No.

Dr.D: Tell her she's depressed, but she can see a counselor here.

Juan: You have psychological problems. You can talk to a counselor.

Sra Lopez: But I feel my whole body is sick. I'm afraid I could die. What will the doctor do to make me well?

Juan: She wants to know what to do to get well.

Dr.D: Go to counseling... (He pauses for a moment) AND sleep on your left side.

Sra Lopez: (Humbly) Thank you, doctor. (She leaves)

Dr. D: (To Juan) What a nice lady!

Dr. Eruditius: (Calling in) Dr. D, did you recruit that patient for my study?

Dr. D: Oops!