The Howard/O'Brien Relate Counseling Session Transcripts - Part 1
by cstross

Summary

Bob and Mo obviously have some issues, and have made a date with a relationship counselor. But there are problems ...

Notes

See the end of the work for notes
COUNSELING TRANSCRIPT #1:

C: Good morning! Come in, make yourselves comfortable, we have tea and coffee—the machine's over there. I'm Mrs. Partridge, your counsellor for today, and just so you know, I'm a fully-qualified relationship counsellor with a degree in social sciences and, as per your request, a security clearance. I usually work with servicemen and women who are experiencing problems resuming family life after deployment overseas; I understand the agency you both work for—that would be SOE, Q-Division—shares some of their requirements. I must say, it's a pleasure to see you both here and obviously well-prepared this morning—did you read the material we sent you in the post?

M: Yes.

B: It's on my desk somewhere ...

C: Not to worry, part of this morning's job is to talk you through it again. But just in case you need a refresher afterwards, many of our clients find the brochure very helpful!

[ SNIP ]

C: By the way, are you the Mr. Howard who was on "Newsnight" last week? You're famous!

B: [Faintly] Oh dear.

M: I told you so.

C: Nonsense, I think you did very well! Paxo eats cabinet ministers for breakfast!

B: I hear he has the heart of an eight year old boy—in a glass jar, on his desk.

C: …

[ SNIP ]

C: But anyway! Let's get back on-script, shall we? I can't fix your relationship—that's entirely up to you. What I can do is provide a framework couples use to work through their problems, and act as a mediator and facilitator for you. Much of the time relationships run into trouble when one or both parties fail to express what really matters to them: what we do here is provide a process for you to work out what you're not saying, and then see if there's some way of dealing with it.

C: But first, I need to just go through my summary and make sure I've got the right people!.So, just to confirm—you are Mr and Mrs Howard? Robert and Dominique?

M: I go by my own family name.

C: Ah, right. How do you prefer to be addressed?

M: I'm Dr. O'Brien. And this—

B: I'm Bob.

C: Yes. And I see here ... Dr. O'Brien, you've worked for this organization for the past 10 years, and Mr. Howard, you've worked for Q-Division for 12 years?
B: Yeah.

C: Interesting. [Pause] This may be a sensitive question so you can tell me it's none of my business, but: did you meet on the job?

M: ...

B: You could say that.

M: [Distantly] Yes. That.

C: You sound a little negative about it, if you don't mind me saying so?

M: I was the job.

C: What kind of job, if you don't mind me asking?

B: The usual. Middle-eastern terrorists tried to summon a dead god in California using Dr. O'Brien as a human sacrifice. Only what they got on the line was an alien ice giant busily sucking the heat out of a dying alter-Earth where the victorious Nazis had engraved Hitler's face on the moon. And there was the thing with the territorial SAS and the zombies and the damaged hydrogen bomb.

M: I had nightmares about tentacles for years afterwards. Still can't abide calamari.

B: But you survived! And prospered, sort-of.

M: Yes dear, that which does not kill us makes us stronger and so on and so forth, do kindly shut—

[ SNIP ]

M: Mrs. Partridge? Hello? Are you all right?

M: This is your fault. You've broken the counsellor. And we've been here less than ten minutes.

C: Excuse me, I didn't quite catch that. Would you mind repeating it?

B: Sure: It was the usual, terrorists—

C: Yes, I understand that. Afghanistan or Iraq, then? Or Dewsbury?

M: [aside] Bob, are you sure she's security cleared? I mean, cleared-cleared?

B: No ... I mean, I asked for a counsellor with clearance, like we agreed. Do you suppose HR got the wrong message?

M: It's possible. Likely, even, after what happened in Leeds. They must be over-stretched right now.

C: Hello? Are we still talking?

M: Mrs. Partridge, about your security clearance—I'm sorry to have to ask you this but, when you were being cleared, did you receive the regular enhanced background check or did you also get a [REDACTED] check?

C: [Blinks] What's [REDACTED]?

M: [Looks at B]
B: [Looks at M]

M: [Standing] I'm sorry for wasting your time, Mrs. Partridge, but we really can't continue this interview any further. I'm afraid there's been a mistake and we really need a counsellor with [REDACTED] clearance. I think someone in HR overlooked the requirement.

C: What's [REDACTED]? Is it really important?

B: It's ... a chunk of what's come between us is work-related, and we really can't talk about it with outsiders. We'd better leave.

C: Well, I'm sorry to see you go, but I wish you the best of luck next time!

END TRANSCRIPT
COUNSELING TRANSCRIPT #2:

C: Good morning. I'm Dr. Marcus Gaston, your new counsellor. Just so you know where we're starting from I've read Mrs. Partridge's notes and unlike her I am pre-cleared for Section 3 and cognizant of Q-Division activities. Karen Cook in HR asked me if I could meet with you today and evaluate your needs. Is that what you were expecting?

B: Well, that's a relief.

M: Can you just confirm your clearance, please? Do you have any codewords under CASE NIGHTMARE or GOD GAME?

C: I gather as of this morning I have RAINBOW clearances—I can show you the paperwork? It was signed off by Dr. Armstrong, apparently. I haven't had time to read the background briefings on those projects yet, but if you need to touch on them you won't be breaching security.

M: Let me just see—ah, yes. That appears to be in order. Good.

B: We can talk under this?

M: Yes, I think so.

C: That's a relief! So, ah, let me see. According to my notes you've been married for over eight years, having lived together for three years before that. No children, hmm, is that a sensitive issue?

B: No.

M: Yes—no.

B: I think you should file it under "it's complicated".

C: I see … moving on, I gather you've been living apart since last September. Is that right? You—can I call you Robert?—

B: It's Bob.

C: Okay, you moved out of the family home. Since then you've spent about three quarters of your time traveling on business. Was this discretionary travel, I mean, trips that you scheduled at your own discretion, or …?

B: Yes—but I mean, it's all necessary. At the same time I moved out I landed a bunch of new responsibilities that have had me running all over the place with my beard on fire.

C: I see you don't have a beard. Very well, moving on—

B: —I was speaking figuratively.

C: Of course. But can we keep this moving, please? I'm trying to grasp the big picture. Dr. O'Brien—should I call you Dominique?—

M: Mo.
C: Okay, so you stayed in the home but you work full-time for—what's this? Temporary posting to the Home Office? Can I ask what you were doing there?

M: Certainly. I was seconded to the Home Office to establish and manage a Police liaison unit for dealing with the superpowered. Which I did.

C: Hmm. (Pauses.) And we skip forward six months and you return to Q-Division in a senior, Audit role—and a month's medical leave of absence?

M: (Tensely) I had a nervous breakdown.

C: Can I ask what led up to it? Was it over-work?

M: You could say so: my violin tried to eat me.

B: Yeah, it tried to eat me earlier; that's why I moved out in the first place.

C: Your violin.

M: It was trying to take over the Police. But you're safe now, we managed to trick it and stranded it in the ruins of Carcosa.

B: Wasn't it made out of the King in Yellow's funny bone, or something?

M: (Icily, to C) My husband's sense of humor can be a little questionable.

C: All right, I will take the violin as a given for now. (Scribbles note on pad.) So what happened then? You mentioned a nervous breakdown?

M: I don't know if you've ever had to set up a new Department from scratch in four weeks flat, but it's slightly stressful. And our usual support mechanism—

B: Wasn't available. For either of us. We tried.

C: What do you mean, you tried?

M: (Deep breath) Just because he moved out doesn't mean he's not, I mean, we're not—

B: We've tried dating. Living apart but seeing each other? But there are problems.

C: What kind of problems? Can you be specific or should we leave it until later?

M: Oh, it's easy enough: the sex is still great, but I can't let him stay the night. I'm afraid he'll eat me in his sleep.

C: (Speechless pause.) You're afraid your husband will eat you.

M: Yes. Ever since he became the new vessel of the Eater of Souls. It's not as if we haven't tried to make it work, but I've caught him levitating in his sleep. Eyes glowing, muttering in tongues, that kind of thing.

C: (Scribbles more notes.) I notice there's a lot of references to fear of, uh, consumption, between you both.

B: It's not all one-sided. She's an Auditor now.
C: An accountant?

B: No, she has the literal power of life or death over those of us who are bound by the oath of office.

M: (Punches B. lightly on the arm) That doesn't help! (To C:) We're afraid of killing each other by accident. It's like sleeping with a loaded Uzi under each pillow.

C: (Removes and polishes spectacles): I see. So, um. (Pauses.) I see. I think. (To M): has your husband, to the best of your knowledge, actually eaten anyone?

M: Of course he has. (To B:) Can you—

B: Can't talk about it, though. It's not covered by CASE NIGHTMARE or GOD GAME clearances.

M: Dammit.

C: (To M): Your, ah, violin with the carnivorous tendencies. Did it appear just before your medical leave? Or does it have a longer history?

B: Oh, she's had it for years—wait, hang on, isn't that—

M: Not cleared.

B: Oops.

C: So it appears my security clearances are inadequate to get to the metaphorical root of your problems. Would it be fair to ascribe each other's difficulties to workplace-induced stress, though?

B: We're not making this up!

C: (Soothingly) I never said you were. But extraordinary assertions require extraordinary evidence, which I don't have at present. So perhaps we can focus on the scope of the problem I can help with, rather than the ones I can't? Bob, you received a sudden promotion with extra responsibilities that coincided with your relationship crisis. In the wake of promotion and crisis, you then undertook a period of protracted work-related travel. Mo, in the wake of the crisis you, too, were promoted—sideways into the Home Office, to what I surmise was an extremely stressful posting that culminated in a nervous breakdown before you were reassigned to a back-office role in your original agency. Both of you threw yourselves into work to the detriment of your ability to resolve your interpersonal difficulty and support each other—is that right?

B: …

M: …

C: So let's leave aside the stuff whereof we cannot speak for the time being and focus on the relationship. You still have one, even though work is eating your lives, ha ha, not literally I hope—but Bob, you have found that you can run but you can't hide from yourself however far you fly, and Mo, you've had a nervous breakdown due to over-work. You're both hurting, but you don't feel safe sleeping in each other's presence: even without any esoteric keyword clearances it's easy enough to see the symptoms of stress-related anxiety.

C: I have one last question. Have either of you tried sleeping pills?

M: Can't take sleeping pills he might eat me while I'm defenseless.

B: I've already survived one murder attempt this month. Dulling my edge is not an option.
C: (Pauses.) Seriously? You expect me to believe people try to murder you on a regular basis?

B: …

M: …

END TRANSCRIPT
COUNSELING TRANSCRIPT #3:

C: Good morning. I'm Margery Cho, your new counsellor. Just so you know where we're starting from I've read Mrs. Partridge's notes, and Dr. Gaston's, I am cleared for Section 3, I do post-mission debriefs for field officers, specialize in PTSD counseling, and oh my word, your earlier counsellors didn't get it at all, did they?

M: You could say that …

B: No shit.

M: Bob!

B: I'm sorry but, just, no, no they didn't.

C: Yes, I'm really sorry about that, by the way, we're booked up eight months in advance here and since the recruiting freeze came in last year we've been falling steadily further behind on our case load by about five weeks per month. We're not even allowed to replace counsellors who leave, and a third of our best people are signed off long-term sick due to stress.

B: It sounds like you need our help more than we need yours.

M: Bob!

B: Sorry … where were we?

C: I'm the one who should be apologizing, but … anyway. To business. What can I do for a Deeply Scary Sorcerer and a member of the Board of Auditors? That's a serious question, by the way: neither your predecessor, Mr. Howard, nor any of your colleagues, Dr. O'Brien—no, I tell a lie. We have had Auditors through the door before: just not for a very long time, and not while active in their official role. It's usually something that happens before they get tapped for the job, not during. How bad is it?

B: Her violin tried to kill me. Then I moved out.

M: The violin isn't a problem any more, but he's the Eater of Souls and he sometimes used to talk—or walk—in his sleep. Sleeping under the same roof was quite dangerous.

B: But we've begun taking precautions, in the past week!

M: (Takes B’s hand) A separate extradimensional bedroom with heavy-duty wards on the door. And locks. Locks that require solving the common prime factors of a very large number before they'll open.

B: Or at least being awake enough to type my GPG keychain passphrase. Which is usually incompatible with sleepwalking.

C: An extradimensional bedroom. Isn't that a bit dangerous?

B: The bedroom has a second door, but it opens in Chingford. If I used it I'd probably be awake before I got home. Especially if I forgot my Oyster card.
M: Also, I can chain him to the bed frame.

C: So this bedroom is a new fixture since, ah, your last session with Dr. Gaston?

M: Yes. It was Bob's idea.

B: (Anxiously) Do you think it's …

C: It sounds like a very pragmatic approach to resolving a very unfortunate situation. How is it working for you? Did you encounter any obstacles?

M: Agreeing on the right color of paint for the wainscoting.

B: Installing cable drops and mains extension wiring before she paints it.

M: And the bed!

B: Yeah, sleeping on a camping air mattress gets old fast. Didn't work with the chain-him-to-the-bedframe idea, either, remember?

C: So, let me see if I understand this? Your relationship problem isn't that you don't like each other, but that for practical operational reasons you were afraid to live under the same roof. You've both been working under extreme pressure for a long time, and lack of time and opportunity prevented you from taking remedial steps. Now you're both in the same city at the same time for more than a week, you're trying to find your way back together … Is that a fair summation?

M: There are some other issues, I think. But nothing we can't handle ourselves—if we talk about them.

B: This would be what we discussed over lunch the other day?

M: That, yes. And the other business. But that's work.

B: Most of our problems seem to boil down to work. Funny, isn't it?

C: I think that's a universal given, these days. Work-related stress, even outside my speciality—the organization you work for—is responsible for about 70% of relationship breakdowns. If it's not direct workplace pressure it's indirect pressure through things like money anxiety. There are signs you should be looking out for; things like insomnia, skipping days off, failing to make time for non-work-related activities together. I can give you a list, if you want. For example, when did you last take a holiday together?

M: …

B: … Four years ago? I think.

C: Well, then.

END TRANSCRIPT
COUNSELING TRANSCRIPT #4:

C: Hello again! So, how are we today? Have you made any progress on the work/life balance?

M: Um. Progress.

B: I've heard of that.

M: No, Bob, let me handle this. (Briskly): We're, things between us are a lot better.

B: (Emphatically): Yup.

M: But that's not why we're here today.

C: Did the new accommodation arrangements work for you?

M: Very well, thank you. We took a week of accumulated leave and we've painted the new room, laid down carpet, and bought a bed and a wardrobe and fitted locks and I can sleep safely now without panic attacks. Most nights.

B: The day before yesterday?

M: Yes. Most nights …

C: What happened the day before yesterday?

B: It was my fault.

M: No it wasn't!

B: Yes it was. If I hadn't opened the new bottle of Merlot after we finished supper—

M: I should have turned the TV off.

B: I shouldn't have turned it on in the first place.

M: We should get rid of the thing.

B: It was my fault because I wanted to watch Newsnight.

C: Were you on Newsnight again? I'm afraid I missed it.

M: The TV's been useless this week. And the newspapers. They're all over the reshuffle like feeders on a balked summoning—feeding on misery and stress, that is. Like ghouls with their "if it bleeds it leads."

B: I wasn't on Newsnight this time. If they ever ask me again I'm buying a new pair of running shoes and I'm not stopping until I reach Leningrad.

M: You mean St. Petersburg, dear. Anyway, that's not far enough—think Chernobog.

B: (Shudders) Nowhere is safe these days. Not even Broadcasting House.
C: Back to your nightmares …?

M: Paxo had a special guest, the new minister. Lord Everyman. His first appearance on TV, quite a coup you might say.

B: There was no run-in, no introduction. Otherwise I'd have turned the bloody thing off. Or thrown a brick at it.

M: It scared the cat. I couldn't find Spooky until the following morning, I was quite worried.

C: How extraordinary!


B: Madder than a box of frogs, of course. And then he came on the TV without warning and you know they broadcast Newsnight live from the studio? And he just started to explain. He made it all sound so plausible.

M: (Tightly) That's what he does.

C: I see. And the nightmares?

M: We work for him now, you know. And he's not a bad minister, not like the last one. But every time I see his … face … I have the most vivid dreams when I go to sleep. Dreams about … I can't discuss them. You aren't cleared.

C: But I thought I had—I'm sorry, I'll take your word for it. But are you all right now?

M: (Nods.)

C: All right, so my understanding of what you're saying is that you have bad memories of a situation you associate with the new minister in charge of the agency, and when ever you see something that reminds you of him you have bad—

B: Anyway, that's why we're here.

C: You're here because there's a new Minister? The dreams? Something else?

B: Something else.

M: Panic attacks and work-related stress is your department, isn't it?

B: We haven't had a holiday together for four years, not even a week lying on the beach on a Greek island, and I've been having trouble sleeping for the past week—

M: —Waking up screaming, you mean.

B: Something like that. Anyway, we were wondering—

M: Please could you sign us both off work—due to workplace stress—for the next couple of weeks? Because things haven't gotten better, not really, not apart from the living apart, and we're both under too much pressure, I'm having nightmare and as for Bob—

B: —Can't sleep, the Minister will eat me—
M: We need to get away from it all, get out of the workplace stress mess and center ourselves. We need to take some time to work through where we stand and plan what we're doing next. And we can't do that in London.

B: It's not that your counseling didn't help: It's us that failed. And I really don't know if we can fix things … saving the world, I mean, not our marriage.

M: (Take's B's hand) But we need to give it the old school try. And if we can't do it? At least we'll be together at the end.

END TRANSCRIPT

(THE END)

End Notes

Confession time: this is an actual off-cut from the original draft of THE DELIRIUM BRIEF, which was cut from the book because Brexit nuked significant elements of the background that this off-cut depended on.

There are more transcripts in this sequence ...

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