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**THE NURSING HOME**

“It can’t be.”

Dennis stared at the bill and shook his head.

“It just can’t be.”

He was sitting at an old roll-top desk in the corner of the living room going over his mother’s bills. He had her checkbook out and had been about to write a check for Braswell’s Nursing Home when he stopped; \$7,500. “You have got to be kidding.” Grabbing up the bill he went to the old wall-phone in the kitchen.

“Braswell’s, may I help you?” chirped the lilting young voice.

“Yeah, Administration,” Dennis barked. He stood there, hand on his hip, fuming. He could see through the kitchen window. The pleasantness of the summer morning was lost on Dennis and he scowled as he watched the next door neighbor, Mrs. Gutierrez struggling to pull out her trash cans. “Nosey old bitch,” he muttered to himself.

“Patricia Smiley, can I help you?”

“Yeah, Dennis Rossi here, you have my mother Cynthia there.”

22

23 “Oh, yes, Mr. Rossi, Cynthia is doing fine. In fact, I just saw her on my rounds.”

24 Dennis paused, the very sound of her voice pissed him off.

25 “Ah yeah, that’s great. I’m calling about her bill. There has to be some mistake here.”

26 “No problem, Mr. Rossi. No problem at all. Let me pull up her account. Just a sec. You know  
27 how these computers are. Don’t like to get started. Sort of like us,” she laughed. “And how are  
28 you today?”

29 Dennis stared at the phone in his hand. Was this woman insane?

30 “Look, I am calling about the bill. There has to be some mistake.”

31 “Ok, Mr. Rossi, just a sec.”

32 Dennis gripped the mint green princess phone in his hand. It matched the ‘décor’ in the kitchen.  
33 The theme continued into the living room which was covered in a thick avocado green carpet.  
34 I’ve hated that color for forty years, he thought. When she passes I’ll have money to change  
35 things up, modernize. Finally!

36 “Here we are, have it,” Ms. Smiley replied lightly into the phone. “Now what can I help you  
37 with?”

38 “The amount... \$7,500. I was told it was going to be \$5,000 per month, which is a small fortune  
39 anyway, but this... You must have mixed up your accounts or something. This can’t be right.”

40 "Let's see. Oh, you are so correct; the base charge is the \$5,000. However," she paused and  
41 hummed to herself a moment, "Ah, yes. Your mother is diabetic, is she not?"

42 "Yes."

43 "Well, sorry to say, but there is an additional fee for Type II diabetics. Also, I believe she just  
44 recently had an episode that caused her to be rushed to the hospital. Am I right?"

45 "Ah, yeah."

46 "So, the additional fees are for the special diabetic care. Still, if the doctors' feel she is  
47 stabilized, that amount could get reduced a bit in the future. If she were Type I, the fees would  
48 be higher. Now, does that answer your questions, Sir?" asked Ms. Smiley sympathetically.

49 Dennis paused. "Well, it's too high. How do you expect people to pay these amounts?"

50 "Oh, I am so sorry. Medical care is very expensive, no doubt about it. But here at Braswell's we  
51 strive to provide the absolute best care possible. Is there anything else Mr. Rossi?"

52 She was so pleasant he wanted to puke. "No," he muttered. "No, that's all." He slammed the  
53 phone down while Ms. Smiley was still saying her goodbyes.

54

55 Ms. Smiley put the phone receiver down and tapped her pencil thinking. Picking up the receiver  
56 again, she made a call to the head of Administration.

57 "Mr. Watkin's office, may I help you?"

58 "Yes, Sue, this is Pat. Is Mr. Watkins in?"

59 "Sure, let me connect you."

60 "Tom Watkins here."

61 "Tom, it's Pat. Could you come over to my office for a minute? I need to speak to you about a  
62 patient."

63

64 Looking out the kitchen window Dennis could see Mrs. Gutierrez had got both trash cans out to  
65 the curb by herself. Better get his trash bins out or she'll be complaining to someone. He threw  
66 the bill down on the desk in disgust. He needed a break from this crap. He slammed out the  
67 backdoor to grab the bins.

68

69 Dennis was feeling fairly virtuous. After writing out the noxious check to the nursing home and  
70 jamming it in the mailbox, he had gone on a yard cleaning rampage. He cut the grass, clipped  
71 some bushes and stuffed it all into the big green bin for pick-up. He was sure he saw the white  
72 lacey curtains next door twitch at least three times. He would show that old bat a thing or two!  
73 He and Mrs. Gutierrez had had their run-ins before. Several weeks earlier he had found her,  
74 unexpectedly, in his mother's room, sitting talking to her.

75 "What's going on?" he had demanded. "Is something wrong?" Always the concerned son.

76 “No, nothing, darling,” his mother waved to him feebly from the rented hospital bed. “Mrs.  
77 Gutierrez just came over to say hello. Haven’t seen her in an age, it seems. Huh, Lucinda?” she  
78 smiled at the old gal huddled on the chair.

79 “Yes, Mr. Dennis. I just check on your mama to see she is okay is all.” The diminutive woman  
80 nodded to him.

81 “Well, it’s getting late and she needs to eat and take her medication,” he added tersely.

82 “No problem Mr. Dennis. I be going then. Adios, Cynthia, I say my prayers for your recovery.”  
83 She patted Cynthia on the hand. “Love you.”

84 “Love you too darling. Come back.”

85 Dennis averted his eyes from this gushy display with his hand on the door handle. He followed  
86 the neighbor out to the back door where she usually came and went. He could have sworn he  
87 locked that door. How the hell did she get in?

88 “Thank you, Mr. Dennis. You take care now. Hope your Mama get better.”

89 She went down the short flight of stairs in a sideways crab-like walk. He never knew why she  
90 did that. He nodded curtly and stood at the door until she let herself out the side gate back to  
91 her own yard. When she was out of sight, Dennis felt all around the ledges of the door frame,  
92 looking to see if there was some kind of hidden key. He searched the plant boxes on the porch,  
93 again nothing. Well, either the old crone could spirit herself through walls or he had left the  
94 back door unlocked.

95 Back in her kitchen, Mrs. Gutierrez put the extra key away in an old tea mug. Cynthia had given  
96 it to her years ago, 'in case anything ever happens' and she had had it since. When she had  
97 seen Dennis drive away she grabbed the key and nipped next door. She wanted to check on  
98 Cynthia without his hovering around like the phony pain in the ass he was. She had been a little  
99 surprised he got back so soon.

100 Mrs. Gutierrez sighed; he had been a nice kid, growing up. Nothing like that horrible drunken  
101 father of his. Mother Mary! She crossed herself. She went back to her cooking.

102

103 It was late afternoon and Dennis was sitting at the bar of his local restaurant. Nursing a beer he  
104 stared sullenly at the wide screen TV flashing pictures of the baseball game. He was so  
105 disgusted, he couldn't even focus on the game, one of his favorite sports. The restaurant was  
106 dotted with small resin bears holding the menus which matched the hokey lodge theme.  
107 "Doing okay there, Mr. Rossi? The barman was polishing a glass and gave a little nod at Dennis's  
108 beer mug.

109 "I'm good Pete." The barman moseyed away. Dennis liked it here, never any pressure like some  
110 places where belligerent waitresses were always asking if you wanted to 'freshen up' your  
111 drink. In other words, plunk down another five bucks. The food here was good, plus, some of  
112 the guys from his old office would wander in from time to time.

113 Dennis sipped his beer and watched the game and munched a few of the free bar nuts. He  
114 never drank at home. He swore to himself he would never become lush like his old man. So, he  
115 only drank occasionally and kept a tight rein on that.

116 “Dennis, hey! Buddy! How you been?” Dennis turned at the hearty salute.

117 “Jerry, long time. How you?’ Dennis actually smiled at his old friend. “Beer?”

118 “Yeah, sure.”

119 Dennis waved to the bar keep. “Beer here, draft.”

120 “So, Dennis, haven’t seen you around much lately. What’s going on?”

121 Relieved to have someone to talk to, Dennis poured out his troubles to his friend. It was a two  
122 beer story.

123

124 “Wow, my friend. Your plate is certainly full. \$7,500!” Jerry whistled. “That is one chunk of  
125 change. Then, you multiply that by twelve months...”

126 Dennis held up his hand and winced. “Stop, I’ll throw up.”

127 Jerry eyed his friend sipping his beer. Slowly he looked around to see if there was anybody  
128 close. “Let’s go over to one of the tables and talk. Order some grub.”

129 A depressed Dennis got up and followed his friend. Jerry waved to the waitress who ran over  
130 with menus. They ordered burgers.

131 “Oh, and Hon, when they arrive, we need a little alone time. Got me?” he winked at the girl  
132 who nodded.

133 Jerry hung an arm around Dennis and said, “My pal, I might have a solution to your problem.”

134 Dennis looked up questioningly.

135 “There’s this hospital across town, nursing home, where, for a charitable donation, they do  
136 things a little differently.” Jerry sipped his beer. “It’s like this...”

137

138 “Really, Mr. Rossi, you don’t have to take that tone. Braswell’s has done nothing to deserve  
139 this criticism.” Ms. Smiley sounded offended.

140 Like a wet hen, Dennis thought happily.

141 “What I am asking is my mother okay for transport to this other hospital?”

142 “Ah, her condition has stabilized, if that is what you are asking. Due to the fine care by our staff  
143 and yes, she can be moved. But where did you say?”

144 “Another nursing home. What do I have to do to get this done?”

145 “Well, you will need to come down here and sign some papers.” There was a pause and some  
146 paper shuffling. “I see that you have the Power of Attorney, so, of course, if you want...”

147 “I do want. I’ll be down today.” He slammed down the phone and almost clapped his hands.

148 Patricia Smiley hung up and sat thinking. She picked up the receiver again.



149 “Sue? Can you put me through to Tom?”

150 “Tom? It’s Pat. Can we talk?”

151 Later that afternoon, Dennis changed out of his gym clothes and put on regular slacks and a  
152 nice shirt. Didn’t want these people thinking he was some kind of charity case.

153 He parked his car in the lot and hustled past the blooming bougainvillea cascading over the  
154 walls. For the first time Dennis noticed the lush landscaping. That’s where all my money goes,  
155 he thought angrily. He was getting up a head of steam. This bitch, Ms. Smiley wouldn’t derail  
156 his plans.

157 “Just have a seat, Mr. Rossi,” Pat Smiley said to him nicely when he came to her office. “I’ll get  
158 your paperwork.”

159 Dennis plopped down on the over-stuffed sofa outside her office with a scowl. He didn’t like her  
160 attitude.

161 Finally, the woman bustled out with a manila file folder and a pen and sat on the little striped  
162 chair next to him. “I had to double check with our administrator on procedure just to be sure.  
163 Your mother’s signed Power of Attorney is in the file, so that’s all okay. And your bill is current.  
164 Now, let me see, there are just a couple of things. Where was it you said you were taking her  
165 again?”

166 Ms. Smiley looked at him with the end of the pen poised against her mouth.

167 Dennis glanced at her darkly. “Corazon Del Oro, across town.”

168 Her mouth made an O shape. “Oh no, Mr. Rossi! You can’t be taking your mother there! She  
169 wailed, “That place has a terrible reputation.” Her face crumpled up.

170 Dennis’s mouth formed a hard, thin line. “Are you telling me that you’re not going to let me  
171 move my mother?” His voice starting to rise.

172 “No, no.” “I didn’t mean to imply that at all,” she was starting to get red in the face. “I was  
173 saying...”

174 “Well, it’s a good thing. I don’t need any trouble. Impatient with the delays, Dennis had pulled  
175 out his own pen and was gripping it hard.

176 At that moment a tall, middle-age man walked by, paused and came into the room. “Patricia?”  
177 he looked at her. She got up from the chair nearly sniveling.

178 “Mr. Watkins, this is Mr. Rossi. He is filling out the forms for his mother’s transfer.” Her eyes  
179 were big.

180 “Ah, Mr. Rossi,” Mr. Watkins said smoothly. “Pat, why don’t you let me take over here?” She  
181 nodded and scurried out of the room.

182 The administrator sat down and smoothed his tie. “So, how far did we get on this?” He picked  
183 up the folder and glanced at the documents then back to Dennis.

184 “She was trying to get down the name of the next hospital and started giving me a lecture,”  
185 Dennis replied.

186 Watkins pulled a fancy gold ball-point out of his pocket. “Yes, I see. Um. What is the name of  
187 that hospital again?”

188 “Corazon Del Oro, though I don’t know what business it is of yours.”

189 The tall man snapped his head up and looked at Dennis a moment. Then, glancing down at the  
190 papers, he filled in the name. “Ah, certainly, Mr. Rossi.” He filled in a few more spaces and then  
191 turned the papers around to Dennis. “And we’ll need your signature here.” He pointed and  
192 Dennis scrawled his name.

193 “I think that is about it.” They both stood up.

194 Dennis turned to leave.

195 “However, if this move is for financial reasons, I am sure one of our financial counselors would  
196 be happy make some arrangements. I believe...” he thumbed through the file a moment, “Mrs.  
197 Rossi has some assets?”

198 Dennis could feel his face getting hot and blood pounding in his ears; his hands balled into fists.

199 “You people are all alike. Nothing but a pack of vultures preying on the old and their families.

200 All you do is take, take, take. My mother’s finances are none of your business. Stay out of it!”

201 He was nearly shouting. The other man backed up a step.

202 “She’s *my* mother and I’ll decide what to do,” waving his hands, spit flew from his mouth.

203 “Of course, Mr. Rossi, it’s your choice,” was the mild response. “But if you or your mother ever  
204 change your minds, our doors are always open,” he added a little bow and wave of the file  
205 folder.

206 “Fat chance,” Dennis retorted. “The transport is coming tomorrow. Get her ready.” With that  
207 he stormed out of Braswell’s for what he hoped was the very last time.

208 Watkins stared after Dennis for a moment, thoughtfully. Then shaking his head, he walked the  
209 file back into Pat’s office and set it down. Almost as an afterthought, he pulled a post-it note off  
210 her pad, wrote on it and stuck it inside the file. He closed it and went back to his own office.

211

212 After Sylvia discovered that her friend had been moved out of Braswell’s she had approached  
213 Dennis.

214 “No, I can’t tell you where she is. She is very ill and needs to rest and not be disturbed by  
215 everyone and their brother.”

216 “Can’t you just tell me the name of the place, Mr. Dennis? She pleaded with him. “I won’t be  
217 any trouble; I’ll just stop for a few minutes.”

218 “Ah, no, I don’t think so. I will...when she gets a little better. Okay? Now, I have to go. Thanks  
219 for your concern.” He closed the front door in her face. She stood standing on the stoop staring  
220 at the door for a minute.

221 Dennis could see her shape through the frosted side paneling.

222 “Snoopy old bat. Go to hell!” It was time to get to the gym.

223

224 Sylvia Gutierrez was not one to be deterred. She already knew Dennis’s schedule pretty well,  
225 since he did the same things all the time. Gym in the am and bingo in the pm. He came home  
226 between those times and made lunch and puttered around the place. If he left to go  
227 somewhere in the early afternoon, she reasoned, that might be the time he went to check on  
228 his mother. She decided to follow him. Since she didn’t drive much, she didn’t think he would  
229 recognize her car. Plus, if he did see her, she could just say she was out shopping.

230 The next day at 2 pm, she saw Dennis putting stuff in his car; running back and forth to the  
231 house. Moving as quickly as her fat old legs could go; she grabbed her car keys and purse. She  
232 pulled on a sweater and at the last minute, an old floppy hat she never wore to help her  
233 ‘disguise’. Hitting the garage opener, the door slowly creaked up. She went into the garage,  
234 started the car and left it running. Peeking around the door, she looked to see which direction  
235 Dennis was going. Pulling out from the curb, he would pass her house. She retreated back in,  
236 got into the car, adjusted her seat and backed out slowly. She would have to try and keep him  
237 in view and he drove fast.

238 Sylvia followed Dennis several miles into the bad side of town. What the heck? This was the  
239 area where she grew up and lived before she got married. It wasn’t so great then and it was  
240 worse now. She saw they were on a main street now and passing a series of small hospitals and  
241 nursing homes. Finally, the brake lights went on Dennis’s sedan and he slowed and pulled into a  
242 parking lot. Sylvia kept going and passed him. Further down the street, she did a left turn into a

243 parking lot and stopped. She got out pen and paper and wrote down the street name and the  
244 cross street. Then, driving slowly, she back-tracked and slowed past the building again. It was  
245 an old, grey place that appeared to be a converted house. The paint looked like it had come off  
246 a military transport ship. Sweet Jesus, she thought to herself. She passed the place, continued  
247 on, did a U-turn, pausing on the way back to get the name. Ah, there it was - Corazon Del Oro.  
248 What a dump! She would come back when he wasn't there.

249

250 Next day, bright and early, Sylvia was sitting next to the bedside of her old friend.

251 "Cynthia, Cynthia," she called several times. Cynthia Rossi opened her bleary eyes once before  
252 closing them tiredly again. Sylvia looked at her watch. It was only 9 am. Too early for Cynthia  
253 to be so tired. Maybe she had had a bad night and didn't sleep well. She asked the girl who  
254 came into to change sheets but she had just come on her shift and didn't know.

255 Over the next couple of visits she had wandered a bit and asked the other girls things, but they  
256 didn't seem to know much either. Actually, no one seemed to know much about anything here.

257

258 Sylvia was becoming increasingly worried. She had visited her friend several times. Cynthia had  
259 been slightly awake only one of those times and hardly knew who she was. Something about  
260 this whole place made Sylvia uneasy, but she couldn't put a finger on what. It was certainly  
261 clean enough, the Hispanic girls were all over the place mopping and cleaning. She would speak  
262 to them in Spanish. Recent immigrants; they were certainly pleasant enough.

263 The nurses and doctors would bustle in and out of the room, check charts and give pills. They  
264 pretty much ignored her. So, she sat and rocked. What was wrong with this place? Every time  
265 she left, she felt like she needed a shower. She tried again to get Cynthia to open her eyes but  
266 no luck.

267

268 “Dios Mio, Dios Mio,” Sylvia Gutierrez sat by the bedside and rocked herself back and forth. She  
269 held rosary beads; working the beads, and mumbled.

270 “This isn’t right, this isn’t right.” She said softly. There wasn’t anyone else to hear; Cynthia  
271 asleep and the woman in the next bed over also sleeping. Sylvia had been in nursing homes  
272 many times with her own parents and then other friends. This place was unusually quiet. None  
273 of the yelling, loud talking, and blaring TV sets that were ordinarily present.

274 Something had to be done. She would call her daughter, the nurse. She’d know what to do.

275 Gratefully back in her own snug home, Sylvia made the phone call.

276 “Donna, is your Mama. You got to listen to dis.”

277

278 Next day Donna was sitting at her mother’s kitchen table. “Oh, Ma,” she wailed, “I don’t want  
279 to get involved in this. It is a bunch of medical stuff and could involve someone’s license and  
280 the license of the hospital. A lot of bad stuff here. You have no idea.” Donna, pretty still in her  
281 late 30’s shook her glossy black hair.

282 Her mother stared back at her. "Listen to me Donna. Who was it got you into nursing school,  
283 huh? Who was helped you out when you didn't know what to do, huh? Was that old lady next  
284 door. You *owe her*." Mrs. Gutierrez sat across the table from her daughter, folded her arms  
285 tightly across her chest and got that stubborn look her daughter knew so well.

286 "Oh, Ma," Donna rolled her eyes. It was no use. Her mom was not budging. She knew her  
287 mother. 'Okay, okay. You're right. Maybe I do owe her a little something. What do you want  
288 me to do?"

289 Her mother outlined the plan.

290 "You get the chart and figure out what it says or make them tell you what it says."

291 "Ma, why can't you do that yourself?"

292 "Me? Like I can read doctor stuff. I don't know anything. You have to do it and tell me what it  
293 says. Then we know what to do."

294 Donna sighed with exasperation. "Okay, Ma. When do we go?"

295 "Tonight."

296

297 Next day the receptionist at the offices of Dr. James Justice held the phone away from her ear.

298 "Mandy, can you come here and talk to this woman? Some old Mexican lady and she is  
299 blabbing at me so fast, I can't tell what she is talking about. Something about Cynthia Rossi."

300 Mandy, the head nurse shrugged her shoulders and came to get the phone.



301 “Okay, slow down m’am. Just slow down a minute. Mrs. Who?”

302 “ Oh, yes, Mrs. Gutierrez, you used to drive Cynthia over for her appointments. I remember.”

303 “Well, we lost contact with her after she went to Braswell’s. She is where, and what....?”

304 Mandy listened intently on the phone, a frown settling on her face.

305 “Yes, m’am that would be bad. I need to take your name and number.”

306 “Well, he’s in with a patient right now.”

307 “We’ll try to call as soon as possible.”

308 Yes, thank you, very important.”

309 “We will call, promise.” She hung up the phone. Writing some hurried notes, and clutching the

310 paper in her hand, she trotted off to grab the doctor.

311

312 Dr. Justice was leaning over Cynthia Rossi with a stethoscope. He pulled open her eyelids and

313 then felt her pulse. Then he opened his cell phone and dialed 911. His nurse stood behind him.

314 “Corazon del Oro Nursing Home. Yes, right, that’s it. Right away.” He snapped his phone shut.

315 A large matronly nurse marched into the room.

316 “I am the charge nurse here. What is you think you are doing?”

317 "I am Dr. James Justice. Cynthia Rossi has been my patient for years. It was reported to me that  
318 she appeared to be in some distress. I show up here and find that she is virtually unresponsive  
319 and appears to have been overly sedated."

320 "Well, she has been doing fine up until now and I will have to inform the doctor about this  
321 immediately."

322 "Good, you do that." Dr. Justice replied. "By the way, she is getting transported immediately to  
323 hospital where we will attempt to save her life."

324 The nurse's color changed to a muddy shade of red.

325 "Also, who is the doctor in charge here nurse?"

326 "Dr. Henley, why?"

327 "I need to know whose name to put down when I file the report with the AMA to get you guys  
328 shut down." With that he stuck the stethoscope in his pocket and stepped out of the way while  
329 the two burley EMT's came in with a stretcher and drip bag.

330

331 A month later, Sylvia and her daughter were visiting Cynthia back at Braswell's nursing home.

332 "Thought we had lost you Mija," Mrs. Gutierrez stoked her friend's hand.

333 "Not me, I'm a tough old bird." A bit of the old twinkle had come back to Cynthia's eyes. She  
334 had told Dr. Justice in the hospital that she really liked Braswell's because 'it's so cheerful.'

335

336 Dennis sat at home scowling at the check book and a new set of bills. All of a sudden, he got up  
337 and went to the kitchen and got a large paper sack. He came back and pushed the whole lot  
338 into the bag and went and got the car keys. An hour later he was at the accountant's office.

339 "I can't handle it anymore. It's too much."

340 "But Mr. Rossi, it's not that much to keep track off. Medicare takes care of most of it." The  
341 accountant was pleading with Rossi. "We will have to charge you for this service, you  
342 understand don't you?"

343 Dennis shook his head. "I don't care. I just don't want to deal with it anymore. You just pay the  
344 bills and send me a statement of how much is left and we'll take it from there.

345 "Well, if you are absolutely sure, Sir, we'll do what you ask."

346 Dennis pushed the bag toward the accountant. Then, he got up abruptly, turned and left the  
347 office.

348 The accountant meandered out to the front office and leaned against the door frame. "Odd  
349 that," he said absently to his secretary. "Wants us to handle all of his mother's bills. Weird.  
350 There isn't that much to do and he's retired."

351 His secretary looked at him. "He is a little strange. But, whatever, more income for us!"

352 "I guess," he replied. I suppose everyone has their little story, he thought to himself as he went  
353 back to do some real work.

354

355