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The High Cost of Medical Care

by

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Therese zipped up the blue, raw silk dress with a practiced yoga-like movement of her toned, tanned arm, examined herself in the three-way mirror, and frowned. Soft music played in the boutique's dressing room, piled high with rejected clothing.

"Do you need any help, ma'm?" asked the clerk from behind the door.

"It seems to—kind of bunch up in the back. There's always something wrong with this label's size four."

"Can I bring you a size six?"

"No." Her answer was curt. "Let's just try a Prada, all right? They always fit me just right. You do carry Prada? Whatever dress, whatever color."

Theresa's cellphone ring—a violin concerto—drowned the clerk's scurrying footsteps. She sighed, and answered it "I already told you no."

"But Mom—"

"The deal was that you could go to Hawaii for Spring Break if—IF—you made all A's and only one B. Am I correct?"

"Yes, but everybody's—"

"Two B's. Not good enough, sweetie. Try harder next time, okay?"

Therese thought she heard her daughter say a particularly nasty curse word under her breath as she hung up, but couldn't be sure.

As if she didn't have enough to do without Heidi whining at her every ten minutes. In an hour, she had to meet with the caterer. She was a little nervous about the caterer; she hadn't used them before, but Nan Armstrong said that she always did, and they were great—“

“Ma'm? Here's a Prada, size 4. It's black.”

“Thank God!” She opened the door. “Unzip me please, will you?”

When Horace Patelle fell off the high ladder and landed hard on the ground, Stan Schaeffer, the man whose house he was painting, wanted to call an ambulance.

“No, thanks,” said Horace. He was a thin, balding man, fifty-eight years old. He accepted Stan's hand; Stan pulled him to his feet. Horace staggered a bit, grabbed the still-standing ladder, and steadied himself. “I can drive myself to the E.R.” He had no intention of going to the hospital. How much would that cost?

“I can drive you,” said Stan. “Come on, get in the car.” He already had the door open.

Howard was just about to refuse, then closed his eyes for just an instant.

“What is it?”

Horace shook his head. “Little bit dizzy, that's all. I'll be better in a sec. Not the first time this has happened. Look, there's no broken bones.”

“Get in.”

As they drove up East Main, Horace listened to Stan scold him about trying to paint when it was getting dark, and they passed the consignment shop with Amber's prom dress in the window.

His daughter, the youngest of four, had looked like a princess in it. And no wonder. It cost \$200.00.

There goes the dress, thought Horace. Sorry, honey. But the job he'd gotten at the Home Depot after the layoff at the tile plant didn't pay much.

“Nineteen and a half years at the factory!” his wife had railed. “So they don’t have to pay you any of your retirement and you lose your insurance! What kind of crap is this? Is it leagal?”

He painted houses on the side, on weekends and evenings. This Friday was the start of a holiday weekend, and he’d hoped to finish it by Monday night. His wife’s cleaning jobs, which used to fill in the rough edges of their budget, had suddenly become essential.

Horace entered the hospital under the big red EMERGENCY sign. He joined a long line of people waiting to talk to a woman sitting at a desk behind thick glass. The waiting room at St. Martin’s was grimy. There was not a single empty seat in the room. It smelled faintly of vomit. A man with a bloodstained head wrap dozed in one corner. A herd of kids ran wild; their exhausted parents slumped in orange plastic chairs. Horace wasn’t exactly sure who was sick, the parents or the kids.

Horace was tired. He just wanted to go home and sleep. He was about to leave when the woman in line in front of him walked away. “You’re next,” the woman behind the glass told him, her voice tinny through the microphone.

She took his information, and Horace was faintly surprised when she buzzed him right through some double doors and led him to a desk. There, a triage nurse asked questions about medical history, medications, and his injury.

“I’m okay,” he said. “Just fell off a ladder. Kind of hurts, on the side here, but what do you expect?”

The nurse took his vital signs, wrote it all down. Pressed the tender spot on his left side, nodded to herself. She printed out a wristband for him. “Okay. Take a seat in the waiting room and we’ll get to you as soon as possible.”

Therese, wearing her new black dress, rested her hands flat on the cool granite counter in her large kitchen. She leaned back, lowered her head

to give her back a nice stretch, and went over her mental checklist, glad that the kids were both spending the night with friends.

Three of the caterer's employees were in the kitchen. Another two were readying the pool bar. One oven was full of hors d'oeuvres and the other oven kept the prime rib warm. A phalanx of lobster tails, each in its own small pool of a subtle tarragon sauce, awaited a quick broil.

"Get out of here," said Willie, her housekeeper. "I got this under control."

"Is the bar ready? How about the bloody marys?"

"I said, get out."

Therese moved into the foyer; checked the flowers on the entrance table: a beautiful tropical mix of anthuriums and bird-of-paradise. Smaller arrangements echoed this one on the long, shining dining room table, set with her finest china and crystal. She wiped a speck of dust from the table with her index finger, checked her hair in the tall mirror. They'd done a good job with the ashy blonde color. Three hundred dollars, but well worth it. In the mirror, she could also see the dining room crystal, scattering light. Outside, through the open French doors, the Spanish fountain from an antique shop in St. Augustine was the perfect accent for the pool area, providing a pleasing, splashy counterpoint to Vivaldi's *Spring*, which played in the background.

A lot was riding on this party.

The doorbell rang, and she opened the door. "Allen! Christa! Come in!"

In the waiting room, Horace found an empty seat beneath a blaring television set. His wife was working late, and he'd talked to Amber on the phone. Amber said she'd try to find a ride to the E.R. and wait with him, but he said, no, that's okay. I'm fine, just finish your homework.

Horace watched the ambulance bay with interest. It was always full, one ambulance pulling in as soon as another had left. Heart attacks, car crashes, Horace surmised. Bad stuff. Patches of dried yellow paint

covered his work pants. He dozed off; woke. He was about to go to the bathroom when his name was called.

He got up and went to the front desk. “Nurse? I’m Horace Patelle.”

“You don’t look so good. Kind of pale.” She looked behind her shoulder. “Raymond? Are you ready? We need to take him in right now.”

The orderly had rushed past, but he turned. “Need something?”

Behind Raymond, Horace glimpsed a disorderly world of movement, heard bellows of pain from behind a blue curtain.

“I’m processing Mr. Patelle. Can you get him on a gurney, please? Come on inside, Mr. Patelle. The doctor will see you soon.”

Horace gratefully lay down on the white-papered gurney and stared at the ceiling as Raymond rolled him down the hall. “Busy night?” he asked.

Raymond laughed. “About average. We’ll see around two hundred more patients before the next shift comes on. That’s not easy with only two docs and hardly any nurses.”

“What happened to the nurses?”

“It’s about eight to one here. One nurse for every eight patients. We’re short staffed tonight, though. Holiday weekend. The temporary nurse didn’t show up.”

In a curtained area next to a woman who yelled, “Holy God! Nurse! I need pain medicine! Now!” as Horace exchanged his clothes for a hospital gown. He carefully folded his clothes and put them in the bag with his shoes and socks. A nurse took his vital signs again.

The doctor came in right away and shook Raymond’s hand. “I’m Dr. Blix.” He read the chart and examined Horace in a careful manner. He nodded to himself.

“What is it, doc?”

“We’re going to get you a cat scan and call a surgeon. Your pulse is up. You could have internal injuries—maybe a ruptured spleen. We’ll get some fluids into you and send you down to surgery right away.”

“How much is this going to cost, doc?”

“Don’t worry about it right now.”

“I don’t have insurance.”

“That doesn’t matter.”

“It matters to me.” But the doctor was gone. A technician came in and laughed nervously about finding a vein, because she couldn’t. Horace looked the other way. “I’m a tough old bird,” he said.

“Got it,” she said.

Raymond came and rolled him down a long hallway. “They’re backed up, but doc says to get you in right away.”

At Therese’s party, about a mile from the hospital, Ellen Baruska said, “Oh, Therese, where in the world did you get this bromeliad? It’s beautiful.” The crowd was out by the pool now, the Health Hospital Corporation executives mingling with hospital board members, all chatting nicely. Ellen was one of Therese’s sorority sisters from college. She was also on the hospital board.

Therese ran her fingers down one of the long, orange-yellow leaves that cascaded from a tall pot, taking care to avoid the rough teeth on the leaf’s edge. “It’s a sun bromeliad.” A gigantic pink inflorescence sprouted from its center, catching the glow of candles in an antique candelabrum. “I got it at an orchid show in Miami.”

“The big show?”

“The one in February.”

“I’ve always wanted to go. I’ll have to keep an eye out for one of these. A sun bromeliad, right?” She stirred her bloody mary with the celery stalk and took a sip. “You know, we think that Ted is doing a tremendous job for St. Martin’s.”

“Thank you.” Therese laughed, and then sighed ruefully. “I don’t see him very much, but I know he’s working hard.”

“He is indeed.” Ellen patted Therese on the shoulder, briefly, looked around. “I probably shouldn’t say anything, but it’s all taken care of, signed, sealed, and delivered. His contract is renewed. And,” she

winked, “he got a *very* handsome bonus. Really, hon, he’s saved the hospital a ton of money in the past year. Our malpractice insurance keeps going up—you know, patients are never satisfied—but Ted is the best cost-cutter we’ve ever had. You wouldn’t believe how much waste there is.” Ted’s bonus was a very tiny percentage of the amount of money he saved the hospital.

“Oh, I know.” Therese smiled. “He runs a tight ship.” She saw Willie gesture through the French doors. “Looks like it’s time to start dinner.”

As the guests moved inside, the amicable chatter went with them. Therese stood alone listened to the fountain’s soothing, unending flow, for a moment, enjoying the glow of relief that spread through her body.

Another three years. And a bonus.

She could relax.

Dr. Blix picked up the phone and called X-ray again. “Are the results for Mr. Patelle in yet?”

“Not yet.”

“It’s been two hours.”

The man’s voice was patient. “We’re backed up tonight. There’s only one x-ray tech, and she’s crushed.”

“Can’t you call in another tech? I need those results now.”

“So does everybody else. We’re doing our best. I’ll call you when they’re ready, Dr. Blix.”

Dr. Blix severed the connection and immediately called surgery. “I need to talk to the surgeon on call.”

“That’s Dr. Matthews. He’s operating.”

“How long will he be?”

“At least another hour.”

“Who’s on call?”

“Well, Dr. Matthews.”

“Besides Dr. Matthews.”

“I don’t think—“

Dr. Blix said, "Call his partner, please. Dr. Able."

"She's out of town."

"Well, who is supposed to be on call?"

"Dr. Matthews. He's operating."

Dr. Blix said, with some force, "We have to get someone soon. I have a patient with a probable ruptured spleen."

"What are the cat scan results?"

"I don't have them yet."

"Have the patient's doctor admit him, and—"

"He doesn't have a doctor."

"I know that Dr. Matthews won't admit a patient without the results."

Dr. Blix hung up. He thought for a moment. Then he called the Lake Green emergency room. They were just across the county line, and they had a trauma unit.

Dr. Blix explained his problem.

"I'm sorry," the doctor said. "We can't accept a transfer."

"Let me talk to your administrator."

"She'll tell you the same thing."

After a few more moments of wasted time, Dr. Blix hung up and went to check on a patient with a bullet wound in the leg, and then a heart attack victim. He was on his way to call Dr. Matthews when he was paged.

When he picked up the phone, Dr. Matthews said, "You think this guy has a ruptured spleen?"

"Pretty sure."

"Okay. I'll admit him. Send him down to surgery and we'll wait for the CAT scan results."

"They're slow tonight. I think you should just—"

"He's my patient now. Send him down."

Therese's guests were gone. The caterers had efficiently cleaned everything and left in an amazingly short time. She walked around the

living room straightening pillows on the long, white leather couch. “Nan was right. The caterers were fantastic.”

Ted was sprawled in his big chair, his shirt unbuttoned, his feet on the hassock. “You did a great job, honey. And that dress—wow.”

“Wait till you see the bill.”

“Don’t worry about it.” He sat up, and took another sip of whiskey. “Belminster told me I’m getting a huge bonus.”

“Ellen told me too.”

“Did she tell you that they gave me the raise I asked for?”

“No!” Therese sat down and carefully removed her shoes, set them upright, next to each other, under the coffee table. “How much?”

“A million a year for the next three years.”

“Plus your bonus?”

“Plus my bonus. Three hundred thousand. Plus stock in Health Hospital Corporation. That’s the *really* big deal.”

“Wow. That’s amazing. I mean, that stock is worth a lot, isn’t it?”

“Definitely. But I put in a lot of time.”

“Sixty hours a week, at least.”

“Sometimes more. It’s hard work. Wearing. The MBA was a long haul. You know, sometimes I wondered if I was doing the right thing. And those ten years administrating little podunk hospitals! But it’s . . . rewarding to make everything efficient. To provide better health care at a lower cost at a major hospital. It really *can* be done.”

“You’re worth every penny.”

“And I have a wonderful family too. Come over here—there’s room in this big old chair for two.”

At the hospital, Horace roused as Raymond kicked off the gurney brakes. They began passing the curtained cubicles, some open, some with curtains drawn. “Guess I fell asleep. Where am I? I don’t feel so good.”

“The doc thinks your spleen is ruptured. I’m taking you down to surgery.”

“What will they do?”

“Probably take it out.” He slowed for a second as he glanced to the right, then sped up. “Hey! Martha!”

Horace, turning his head, saw that Martha was a nurse. She was winding gauze around a patient’s arm. The man was in street clothes, although shirtless, and was sitting up in a chair.

Martha said, testily, “What?”

“The patient in room six just pulled her IV out.”

“I can’t do everything.”

Raymond said, “I’m just telling you, okay? I’ve got to get this patient down to surgery.”

“Hold that, can you?” the nurse asked the man. She placed his hand on his bandage. “Hold it tight now. Lots of pressure. I’ll be right back.”

The room Raymond left Horace in was cold. He called out for a nurse, to ask for a blanket, but no one came. He dozed off. He shivered, his teeth clattering, wondered how long he had slept, and heard people talking.

A man said, “I can’t operate without the cat scan. It should have been here an hour ago. And where’s the blood?”

Must be the doctor, thought Horace, feeling relieved. He finally felt as if he were in capable hands.

A woman answered, “They said it’s on the way. It’s coming from Gainesville by ambulance.”

“Gainesville! That’s seventy miles away? Why don’t we have any here?”

“I think it’s because of the cost cutting drive—“

“Get them on the phone.”

A young man’s voice. “Dr. Matthews? Bullet wound on the chest on the way down, sir. Should I call Dr. Able?”

The doctor replied, sounding harrowed, “She’s out of town.”

“But—“

“The hospital only pays one of us to be on call. Tonight, that’s me. Call Dr. Thompson. Tell him I need him here in ten minutes. He owes me a favor.”

The phone rang. “Hello? Is this the blood bank at Gainesville? Yes, this is Dr. Matthews. I’m the trauma surgeon at St. Martin’s.” He raised his voice. “Then send it by helicopter. Get it to me. Now.”

There was a pause. Horace heard some clinking sounds, heard Dr. Matthews asking the nurse to do this and that. Then Dr. Matthews said, “Where’s the cat scan?”

The woman again. “I called radiology twice. The radiologist is pretty backed up. It’s a busy night. She’s the only radiologist here.”

“Give me the phone. Hello? Radiology? Matthews in the O.R. Release Horace Patelle’s CAT scan to me on the computer. I’ll read it myself.” A pause. “Right. I’ll take the responsibility. Put it in the note and I’ll sign it. I know. I don’t care. It’s been seven hours since he was injured.” Again, a pause, and Dr. Matthews shouted, “Just do it!”

Horace was afraid, now, but it was a distant emotion. I should feel more worried, he thought. Must be some drug they gave me. But the doctor will take care of me. He sounds good.

Someone loomed over Horace. “I’m going to get you ready for surgery, Mr. Patelle.”

Therese slept late the next morning. It was nine o’clock when she went down for coffee. Her daughter Heidi, sitting on a high chair at the counter said, “Gotta go,” when she saw her mother, and touched her phone off.

Therese pushed the button on the espresso machine, which Willie always set up. Dark, fragrant coffee pulsed into a tiny cup. Therese drank it straight in one gulp. “Who was that?”

“Jen.” Heidi sulked back in her chair. Jen was one of the girls going to Hawaii on spring break.

Therese smiled. "Listen, honey," she said. "Your father and I have been thinking—it is your senior year. And about that prom dress you wanted . . ."

A week later, Heidi, Jen, Dana, and Scottie walked down the main hall at school. "It's so cool that we get to sit together on the plane," said Dana.

Jen laughed. "I'm not sure I can get it together. We're leaving, like, the day after the prom? I plan to get really bombed."

"Oh, the limo will take us right to the airport."

Heidi said, "Wait till you see my dress! Mom said I could spend a thousand dollars on it."

Dana said, "Well, it *is* the second most important day of our lives."

They giggled.

At that moment, a petite, pretty girl rounded the corner and almost ran into them. She was wiping tears from her face. "Sorry," she said, and continued down the hall.

"What's wrong with her?" asked Heidi.

Jen said, "She's the girl whose father died last week. He fell off a ladder. It was in the paper."

"Oh." Heidi stopped, then turned and ran after Amber. She fell in beside her. "I'm sorry about your father."

"Yeah," said Amber. Then she said, "Thanks." She continued walking.

Heidi went back to her friends. "She didn't say much."

"Well," said Scottie, "how would you feel if your father died?"

"Right," said Heidi. "I remember the newspaper story now. My dad was talking about it. He said it was the fault of the doctors. They were incompetent--too slow."

"Poor guy," said Dana.

They continued walking. Finally Heidi said, "So, what was the name of that really good snorkeling beach we're going to?"

