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IN THE ABSENCE OF A TRANSLATOR

by Marcia EPPICH-HARRIS

“So did you take that bill over?”

I brought it up because I knew he hadn't. I walked past the dining table that morning, and there, under a small stack of unread advertisements, next to a pile of flipped through magazines, and on top of our own set of neglected bills — there sat the telephone bill of the occupants of 907 Mount Rojo Avenue. We were 909.

“What bill?” Larry asked, not bothering to look up from his computer screen.

“Don't you remember? I asked you to take over that telephone bill that the post office delivered to us by mistake. It's the neighbor's bill, not ours.”

Larry said, “You asked me to do that?”

“Yes, a week ago,” I said. “Larry, can't you even look at me when I'm talking to you?”

His shoulders drooped and his chin fell. If he wasn't going to turn around, at least I had his attention.

“What is it Marianne? I'm busy.”

“I asked you a week ago if you would take the telephone bill over to the neighbor's house, and you still haven't done it.”

“How do you know I haven't done it?”

“Because it's still sitting on the table,” I said. “Well, if you knew it was still on the table, why the hell did you ask me about it?”

“To remind you to do it.”

I slumped down onto the couch that sat opposite his desk.

“Why am I supposed to take this letter over there again?”

“It’s not a letter — it’s a phone bill. And I want you to take it over there so they don’t get their phone disconnected.”

“Why can’t *you* take it over there, Marianne?” Larry asked. “I have to work all day.”

“Well, for one, I don’t speak Spanish,” I said. I gave him the finger. He continued to tap at his keyboard.

He asked, “How do you know they speak Spanish?”

“The phone bill was in Spanish,” I said. “That’s how I knew it wasn’t ours.”

“Besides it not being addressed to us, you mean.”

“I didn’t look at the name or the address. I assumed that any bill I get would be addressed to me. So when I opened it and the bill was in Spanish — *and* it was only thirteen dollars — I knew it wasn’t for us.”

“How much is our phone bill per month?” Larry asked.

“About seventy,” I said.

“Jesus, is it that much cheaper to speak Spanish? How do the phone lines tell the difference?”

“Come on, Larry —”

His fingers hovered over the keys.

“I don’t speak Spanish either, Marianne.”

“—I don’t know how to say ‘I’m sorry I opened your phone bill by accident’ in Spanish.”

“You know what I want to learn how to say in Spanish? ‘My wife is a mail felon.’”

“Larry!”

“I don’t know what *me* going over there is going to do that you couldn’t do yourself. You’re always on damage control. You handle it.”

I stuck my tongue out at his back. The keyboard clicked away again.

“I don’t want to go over there,” I said finally.

Larry sighed.

“You’re the one who’s so concerned that they get their phone bill.”

“Need I remind you that we’ve called the cops on them twice for noise disturbance?”

“They don’t know that was us.”

“Their kids smoke pot behind our garage.”

“It’s California. Everyone smokes pot here.”

“They’ve dumped two TVs on our lawn in the last month —”

“No, no, we only *think* that was them —”

“And I don’t fucking speak Spanish!”

Larry’s cursor pulsed patiently as the tension hung in the air.

“Plus,” I continued, swatting at the cat hair on my jeans. “I don’t want to say that I opened their phone bill by accident.”

“It *was* an accident, right?”

“Of course it was an accident. I just don’t want to admit that I opened their bill.”

“They’re going to know that you did — or that somebody did — regardless of who takes it over there,” Larry said.

“I know. I just don’t want them to know it was me.”

“Oh man,” Larry said, “what if they have *our* phone bill?”

My breath caught in my throat.

“Oh shit. Do you think they have our phone bill?”

“They’re holding our phone bill hostage because of the calls to the cops,” he said.

“Bullshit.” I squinted at the screen. “Wait, do you really think so?”

“Well, if they do,” Larry said, “you’d better go over there and figure it out.”

Me figure it out. That’s the way it always was with Larry. Car’s broken down? Marianne will take it in. Tax time again? That’s Marianne’s territory. Kid’s got a stomach bug? That’s *really* her job. All that bullshit in college — that “you-can-have-it-all” lie. What they don’t tell you is that babysitting costs so much that you’ll only be breaking even with the job you have. Working to pay your sitter and taxes. That’s it. So staying at home until the kid is in school is the *practical* thing to do. And Larry sees it that way. I see it that way, too. But Larry never lets me forget that he’s the one raking in the dough. He’s the one making it possible for me to live in this house in California, where it’s so expensive to buy a house that we’ll probably rent for the rest of our lives.

I scowled at Larry’s back. Why couldn’t the neighbors speak German?

“They don’t have our phone bill,” I said. “If the neighbors had our phone bill, they would have brought it over, probably.”

“Or,” Larry countered, “maybe they’re sitting in their living room right now, having this same conversation in a language that neither of us can speak.”

I saw it immediately in my head:

“But I don’t speak English,” the woman would say to her husband.

“Neither do I,” he’d say. “You can do it. Just make like it was an accident.”

“Goddamn it,” I said, slamming my hand on the arm of the couch. Larry’s shoulders jumped.

“What is it now?”

“What if I called the phone company?” I said. “Tell them about it, and see if they’ll send another phone bill.”

“You know what the phone company would say?”

“What?”

"The phone company would say, 'why don't you just walk it over yourself?'"

"That's not very good customer service."

"To whom? The mail felon or the neighbors?"

"Will you stop calling me a mail felon?"

"You're right, mail 'misdemeanorer' does have a certain ring to it, but can you make a noun out of misdemeanor?"

"Misdemeanor is a noun," I said.

"No, I mean, like a person," Larry said.

"Goddamn it." I thought for a long moment. "No, I don't think you can call someone a 'misdemeanorer.'"

"Are you sure?" he asked.

"I'll look it up." I got off the couch and started toward my bookshelf.

"Wait a minute," I said. "I'm not looking up misdemeanor. You're just trying to get me off the subject, when in all actuality, someone who commits a misdemeanor is just a petty criminal."

"You're so smart. That's why I married you." Larry said.

"Are you going to take the bill over or not?"

He started to turn his chair, sighed, and turned back to the computer.

"Leave it on the table," he said.

"It's still there — where I left it."

"It'll be there tomorrow," he said.

"You know, in the absence of a translator, we're going to have to do something," I said. "We have to be able to talk."

Larry's fingers raked against his scalp.

"We are talking," he said.

Yeah," I said to his back. "Yeah, I guess we are."

The End

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