ORION SAINT

MERCURY OWES ME MONEY



A Comedy of Cosmic Excuses

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Expanded American Edition

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A Note from Someone Who Was Definitely Going to Do It

This book began with an unpaid bill. If it had begun with a paid one, we would have filed it under fantasy.

Our story takes place in Prosperity Springs, Florida, a fictional town with real confidence. Its welcome sign says A GREAT PLACE TO GROW. The weeds have taken this personally. The people are doing their best, except when doing their best requires calling someone back.

You will meet grown adults who can explain every bad decision they have ever made. Some explanations involve distant planets. Others involve childhood, the economy, or a printer that has been out of toner since the last administration. Several explanations are valid. This makes the others easier to sneak in.

The narrator is not above any of this. I postponed writing this note until I understood my resistance to writing it. I understand it now. I did not want to write it.

The moon appears throughout the story and gives no advice. We appreciate its professionalism.

1 Past Due Is Not a Zodiac Sign

Lou Bennett read the power bill twice, in case $186.40 was a typo that could be frightened into backing down. It held its ground. The company had printed PAST DUE in red, a level of emotional involvement Lou found inappropriate for a utility.

He slipped the bill under the sugar bowl. The sugar bowl was his household’s Department of Pending Things. Beneath it lay a warranty for a toaster that had achieved room temperature permanently, a note about the kitchen cabinet hinge, and a postcard from his son Eli that said SEE YOU IN MAY. May had come and gone. The hinge had also gone, though it had traveled only as far as the junk drawer.

At fifty-two, Lou could fix a leaking pipe, hang a door, and identify a questionable renovation from the street. His own kitchen cabinet had been broken for three months. He had explained this to Nora as a scheduling issue, which sounded more respectable than a hinge issue.

Nora ran an alterations business from the front room. That morning a woman had asked her to let out a dress while preserving the appearance of a woman who did not need her dress let out. Nora charged for the fabric work and provided the emotional negotiation free, which was probably why she was tired.

“How much?” she asked without looking up from her sewing machine.

“Depends how you look at it.”

“With eyes, Lou. I’m going with eyes.”

He handed her the bill. She checked the balance in their account, then put the paper on top of the sugar bowl. This was a small domestic revolution. Nobody stormed anything. A piece of paper simply became visible.

“Call the city about your money.”

The city owed Lou $420 for fixing a pump at the preschool. The pump worked beautifully. His invoice was apparently waiting for another invoice to bless it.

“I’ve been meaning to.”

“Are they accepting meaning to now? Because we could be rich.”

He opened his mouth, closed it, and went out for bread. Nora let him go. She had learned that helping someone find his words could become a second job if you weren’t careful.

Outside the grocery store he found Brad Boone and Denny Pike occupying a picnic table with the commitment of men avoiding an appointment.

Brad had sold replacement windows, insurance, and a course about overcoming your limiting beliefs in replacement windows and insurance. He was between ventures, a condition he called building runway. His current runway was a borrowed lawn chair.

Denny had spent twenty-seven years in a shipping warehouse and still liked everything labeled. He carried a pocket notebook containing observations no one had requested. He knew the men’s-room hand dryer at the diner ran for seventeen seconds. He had timed it eleven times. Science, he felt, demanded consistency.

“Rough morning,” Lou said.

“Mercury,” Brad said immediately.

“What about him?”

“Retrograde. Communication, money, relationships. Everything’s messed up.”

“My bill seems to have communicated just fine.”

Brad tapped the table. “That’s how it gets you.”

Denny nodded. He had recorded three late deliveries and a jar falling off a shelf. Until that moment they had been separate incidents. Brad had just supplied a supervisor.

Lou sat down. He didn’t believe much in astrology. He believed in fittings that fit and people who paid when they said they would. But after weeks of being told his money was processing, it felt good to hear that the responsible party was somewhere city payroll couldn’t hide behind lunch.

“Fine,” he said. “Mercury owes me money. Can I send him a payment request?”

Brad took a thoughtful sip of coffee. “We’re not at the infrastructure stage yet.”

“Buddy, you’re talking about a planet. The infrastructure seems pretty established.”

A woman passed them carrying a yoga mat and a cold brew. Brad asked whether she’d had a stressful week. She stopped so suddenly Denny made a note.

“Don’t even get me started. My ex says he’s protecting his peace. He’s protecting his half of the security deposit.”

Brad nodded with professional sympathy. “External factors.”

“Exactly.”

She walked off looking relieved. Lou watched her go. Nothing had changed about the deposit. Nevertheless, something had been delivered.

Inside the store, bread cost thirty cents more than he remembered. He bought it, checked his phone, and finally called the city’s accounts office. A recording assured him his call was important. It had the relaxed confidence of someone who was not going to answer it.

Outside, Brad was already writing on a napkin.

2 Please Allow Thirty Business Days

The next morning Lou took his invoice to city hall. He carried the original, two copies, and a photograph of the preschool pump, which was enjoying a more productive relationship with the city than he was.

At the entrance a touchscreen asked the purpose of his visit. The options were PAY A BILL, APPLY FOR A PERMIT, and OTHER. Being owed money qualified as Other. He suspected the city had not planned for much demand in that direction.

He received ticket C14 and sat beneath a poster that said YOUR TIME MATTERS TO US. The clock above it was seven minutes slow. Lou checked his phone twice before deciding that arguing with a clock would weaken his case.

At the window, a clerk named Marisol examined the invoice.

“Four hundred and twenty dollars,” she said.

Lou felt a brief tenderness toward her. She had named the whole amount without first saying unfortunately.

“Parts and labor. Pump at the preschool.”

“I see the work order. I need the receiving confirmation.”

He passed her the photograph.

“That's the pump.”

“Receiving a lot of water. Successfully.”

Marisol smiled. “Somebody at the preschool has to confirm the work was completed.”

“I gave the invoice to the director.”

“She submitted it. The confirmation goes in a different place.”

Lou looked behind her at the cabinets. There seemed to be plenty of places. That was becoming the trouble.

Marisol turned the screen so he could see it. Two lines appeared under the work order. The parts and most of the labor totaled $360. An extra hour, sixty dollars, sat under a different status. The pump connection had cracked when Lou removed it. The director had asked him to replace that too.

“She approved it,” Lou said.

“I believe you. I can't release it from here until the change is recorded.”

“Can she record it from there?”

“Yes.”

“Excellent. We've narrowed it down to two buildings.”

He wanted Marisol to join him in being furious. She looked tired enough to qualify but remained professionally interested in getting his information right. Lou found this less satisfying than an argument and probably more useful.

She wrote down an email address and the work-order number. The preschool could confirm the original job now. The additional hour needed the director's note. Both payments would still have to pass through accounts payable.

“How long?”

“I don't want to give you a date I can't promise.”

“Everyone's being very responsible about not promising my money.”

She looked up. “I understand.”

He believed she did. Understanding occupied the same inconvenient category as his technical skill: valuable, but his power company didn't accept it directly.

At the preschool, the director was kneeling beside a child who had put both feet into one rain boot. She waved Lou into her office and asked him to give her a minute.

The minute became twelve. A parent needed to discuss a missing sweater. A boy had announced that he was allergic to the letter G. The director handled both developments without requesting a committee, which Lou admired.

When she finally sat down, he showed her Marisol's note.

“I thought I'd done this,” she said.

“So did I. We've been having the same thought in different locations.”

She found the first message in her sent folder. It had gone to facilities. Facilities had replied that the work looked fine. Neither message had reached the receiving section of the payment system.

The director opened another form. Lou watched her type. He had imagined someone refusing to pay him while sitting behind a large desk. This desk contained a wet mitten, a stapler, and a

plastic dinosaur wearing corrective tape. The refusal had no single comfortable chair.

She submitted the confirmation and wrote a separate explanation of the extra hour. She copied Lou on both.

“I'm sorry,” she said. “You came right away when we needed you.”

He nodded. That was the part that had been bothering him most. An emergency had become administrative the moment somebody else's water stopped rising.

Outside, Brad called to ask whether he had a drill with a long bit. Lou described his morning instead.

“Classic institutional resistance,” Brad said. “You're encountering an abundance blockage.”

“It's sixty dollars in one box and three-sixty in another.”

“That's how it manifests.”

Lou looked at the confirmation emails. He still had none of the money, but he had names, a number, and something more specific to ask about next time. Brad's explanation could accommodate all of that without being inconvenienced by any of it.

“What do you need the drill for?” Lou asked.

“Something with potential.”

Lou got into his truck. Potential, at least, usually let him bring tools.

3 The Cabinet Incident

By afternoon, Brad had located a headquarters. It was a storage room upstairs in the community center, between the library's overflow shelves and the chamber of retired marching-band equipment. A trombone lay in an open case like it had been brought in for questioning.

Maya Ortiz gave them the key because they promised to clean the room and because Lou had actually fixed things there before. Maya had worked as a counselor in Tampa before returning to help her father. Now she coordinated the community center and its little library. People came in looking for books and frequently handed her an entire life before she could locate the fiction section.

"Don't throw anything out without asking," she said. "Don't block the stairs. And this room stays a community room. You do not own it because Brad has a logo."

Brad turned his phone slightly away from her. The logo was almost finished.

Inside they found a globe with no stand, a heavy oak cabinet, and a portrait of a mustached man nobody recognized. On the back someone had written PROPERTY OF GARY.

"Who's Gary?" Lou asked.

"An early visionary," Brad said.

"You just made that up."

"Founding stories have to start somewhere."

Denny entered the portrait into the inventory as Gary, presumed visionary. He liked a file that admitted uncertainty.

They decided to move the cabinet toward the window. Lou took the bottom, Denny took one side, and Brad stood in the doorway to provide direction, a service that conveniently required no cabinet.

"Bring it toward me."

They did. Brad became trapped between the cabinet and the doorframe.

"Less toward me."

They reversed. Denny dropped his notebook and bent to retrieve it. Lou was suddenly supporting half the furniture and all the leadership.

“Denny. Your hands. Put them back on the damn cabinet.”

“I’m consulting the plan.”

The plan consisted of a rectangle and an arrow. The rectangle was the cabinet. The arrow was optimism.

They turned it again. A door swung open and hit Brad in the stomach. He called for a reset. Denny asked whether that meant restoring the cabinet to its original orientation. Lou asked whether either of them had considered shutting up.

After twenty minutes the cabinet stood exactly where they had found it, except its doors faced the wall. Brad called this a pilot. Denny wrote PILOT in his notebook. Lou sat on a chair that had not yet been developed into a concept.

Maya came back with iced tea and looked at the marks on the floor.

“Why did you move it?”

“For the light,” Brad said.

“It’s a cabinet.”

“Research needs light.”

“Research also needs you to put the chair down before you stand on it.”

She pointed Lou toward the stain in the ceiling corner. He knew about the stain. The gutter was full of leaves, and the roof membrane over that section needed attention. He had promised to inspect the accessible gutter with Carl, the building’s maintenance man, during a dry afternoon.

“I’ll check it tomorrow,” Lou said.

“You said that last Wednesday.”

“I’m waiting on the weather.”

Maya looked through the window at a bright Florida sky. Lou looked at the same sky. Apparently they subscribed to different forecasts.

While they talked, Denny opened a drawer and discovered a stack of blank certificates left over from a computer-literacy workshop. They had a decorative gold border and a place for a signature.

Brad held one to the light. “Oh, we are in business.”

“Doing what?” Maya asked.

“People want someone to tell them it isn’t their fault. We can document that.”

“What if it is their fault?”

Brad looked at her patiently. “Those people need us the most.”

Lou laughed. He had been holding a cabinet a few minutes earlier and felt entitled to enjoy something. Brad smiled at the sound, which was close enough to agreement to use.

Maya set down the tea. “These are for beginners learning to use a mouse.”

“Exactly,” Brad said. “Foundational transformation.”

She took one of the certificates out of his hand and examined it. Then she gave it back. “Put your promises in writing too. People should know what you’re selling.”

Brad said absolutely. He was very comfortable putting things in writing as long as the writing did not narrow his options.