

— * ORION SAINT * —

MERCURY OWES ME MONEY



— A Comedy of Cosmic Excuses —

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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 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.

3 Now with Science

The sign said INSTITUTE FOR EXTERNAL CAUSES. Underneath, in smaller letters, Brad had added UNDERSTANDING WHAT'S HOLDING YOU BACK. At the bottom was a little planet wearing a tie.

Lou mounted the sign. Denny checked the level. The wall was crooked.

"Leave it," Brad said. "A little disruption is healthy."

“For whom?” Lou asked.

Mayor Brent Whitlock arrived with a photographer and an assistant carrying a reusable water bottle. The assistant had an expression suggesting that reuse was the town’s principal water policy.

Whitlock generally visited the community center when someone had set up a camera. Today he had brought the camera himself. Brad took this as evidence of demand.

“We’re studying the role of external forces in individual and community outcomes,” he told the mayor.

Whitlock nodded carefully. “External to the city?”

“At times, extraterrestrial.”

The mayor’s shoulders relaxed. “I like the scope.”

Denny had drawn a circle on the whiteboard and labeled it YOU. Arrows pointed inward from all directions. None pointed out.

Whitlock studied it. “That is an accurate picture of public service.”

Lou opened his mouth to ask about his \$420. Brad handed him a badge that said TECHNICAL DIRECTOR. Lou looked at it, then at the photographer, then at the badge again. He had spent years explaining estimates to people who called him the guy. Director had a pleasant weight, even on laminated cardstock.

“We’ve got a small civic-engagement grant,” Whitlock said. “An event like this could fit.”

“The roof needs fixing,” Maya said from the door.

“Different funding stream.”

“The water’s using the same stream. It’s in the ceiling.”

The assistant looked at her bottle. The photographer raised his camera.

Brad stepped in front of the stain. Lou moved his badge to the center of his chest. Denny faced the whiteboard as if someone might interrupt an important thought. Whitlock chose the expression he used when a ribbon was about to become two ribbons.

The resulting photograph looked terrific. There was no evidence that the building had a roof.

After the mayor left, Maya walked Brad through the conditions of using the room. The city would support a public event, not endorse his claims. He would have to disclose that his workshops and certificates were private offerings. He could not imply the little gold borders carried official authority.

"Totally," he said. "We want transparency."

"Then make the type big enough to read."

He agreed less cheerfully to that.

Lou asked whether the technical-director position came with actual money.

"We're building credibility first," Brad said.

"My power company already believes in me. That's why they keep mailing."

Brad offered him \$240 from the event's setup budget for building the demonstration tables and a small platform. The work was real, the price was agreed, and Brad said he would pay on completion. Lou accepted. He needed \$186.40 more than he needed a philosophical objection.

Denny would handle research. Brad would handle outreach. Lou would handle anything that required drilling through something.

"What about the gutter?" Maya asked.

"I'm on it," Lou said.

She glanced at the uncut lumber under his arm. "When you say on it, is it on your calendar or just inside your personality?"

He gave her a date. Then Brad called him over to discuss a stage that could fit through the door. Lou followed him, making a mental note to tell Carl about the gutter.

The institute issued its first Certificate of External Responsibility that evening. The recipient was Brad. It explained that the delayed opening had resulted from unfavorable cosmic conditions.

Brad had left the keys at home.

Denny filed the certificate. Filing required moving the cabinet away from the wall, finding the drawer, and moving it back. He documented the inconvenience as an operational constraint.

At home, Lou placed his new badge beside the sugar bowl. Nora looked at it.

"Does Technical Director know Cabinet Hinge?" she asked.

"They're discussing a partnership."

She smiled despite herself. Lou counted that as progress, though the cabinet door continued to lean against a bag of rice.

4 Premium Tap Water

The institute's first formal study took place on Wednesday. Present were the three founders and Stan Weller, who had come to retrieve his ladder. The ladder was still needed, so Brad invited Stan to serve as an independent observer. Stan agreed on the condition that independence included leaving with his ladder.

Denny set out three identical glasses. He filled them from the same pitcher and placed a card in front of each: REGULAR WATER, LUNAR WATER, and WATER THAT HAS ESTABLISHED HEALTHY BOUNDARIES.

The last card was too long. He shortened it to BOUNDARY WATER.

"What's it say no to?" Lou asked.

"Negative energy," Brad said.

"But does it say no to Florida humidity? Because I'd pay for that."

Stan tasted the regular water. Then the lunar water. Then the water with a recent breakthrough.

"Tap," he said. "All three."

Denny entered LOW SENSITIVITY beside Stan's name.

Lou tried the lunar glass. It seemed a little colder. Brad explained that lunar conditioning could reduce tension. He had learned the phrase lunar conditioning eleven seconds earlier and was pleased with its flexibility.

Denny wrote POSITIVE RESPONSE.

"That glass was next to the vent," Stan said.

"We're interested in more than temperature," Brad replied.

"I'm interested in one aluminum ladder. We're all interested in things."

Maya stepped into the room to return a book to the overflow shelf. She read the labels and the notebook. Then she sat down.

"If someone says the glasses are the same, you call him insensitive. If someone says they're different, you call the effect real. What answer would show you you're wrong?"

Denny studied his form. It did not have a box for that. He had spent forty minutes making the form look official and hated how quickly she had found a place for another box.

"We could run the test again," he said.

"Good. But let's agree what you're checking before you find out what happened."

Brad folded his arms. "Denny's putting himself out there. I want this to stay a supportive environment."

"You wrote low sensitivity about Stan."

"That wasn't personal."

"It's under his name."

Lou covered his mouth with his cup. Stan was enjoying the study for the first time.

Maya asked the men to step outside. She changed the labels, moved the glasses away from the vent, and evened out the levels. When they returned, Brad pointed at the new lunar glass.

"You can feel the calm just looking at it."

Denny wrote that down. Lou selected the boundary water, mostly because it seemed rude to reject a glass that was working on itself. Stan selected the pitcher.

Maya showed them what she had changed. Brad laughed a little too loudly.

"The power of branding," he said. "That was actually the larger study."

"Was it?" Denny asked.

"We were exploring multiple layers."

Denny looked at his page. Two neat columns now needed crossing out. The annoyance seemed too big for the situation. He wanted the result to be right partly because he wanted the thing he had made to be worth something. He knew how a warehouse inventory could go wrong and never felt humiliated by a missing pallet. This felt different. Brad had called him research director. There were expectations attached to the word director that he had begun attaching to himself.

"Maybe the way I asked the question made a difference," he said.

Brad patted his shoulder. "Don't blame yourself. The room has a lot going on energetically."

"The room has a vent," Stan said. "And my ladder."

He stood, lifted the ladder, and turned toward the door. Its front end swung across the room. The three directors ducked at the same time. Maya saved the pitcher. Gary's portrait tilted, as if the presumed visionary had begun reconsidering his involvement.

After Stan left, Lou drank the remaining water. He had been thirsty all along. The plainness of that explanation was briefly reassuring.

Denny drew a fresh line across the notebook and wrote SECOND TEST. Under it he added LABELS CHANGED. He still could not make himself erase LOW SENSITIVITY.

Brad photographed the glasses. For the caption he wrote SCIENCE YOU CAN FEEL. Maya made him replace it with A WORKSHOP ABOUT EXPECTATIONS.

"That's less clickable," he said.

"It's more what happened."

He sighed and posted the revised version. Two people immediately asked where to buy the water.

5 Venus Has Your Number

Evelyn Marsh lived on the third floor of Harbor Pines, a condo building with no harbor and a single palm the board classified as a maintenance concern. The board had recently sent a stern email about unsightly door decorations. Evelyn took down the little wooden bird her husband had made, put it on the kitchen windowsill, and apologized to it.

She had two televisions. One talked in the bedroom, the other in the kitchen. When both were on, it sounded as if people had come over and couldn't agree where to sit.

Her husband, Frank, had been dead for four years. While he was alive she sometimes complained that he told the same stories. Now she'd have paid good money to hear the one about the lawn mower again, even the part where he stopped to explain the carburetor.

She brought a printout of the institute's online flyer. Brad had written FIND OUT WHAT'S KEEPING YOU FROM HAPPY. She had underlined what's.

"Somebody told me it's Venus," she said. "Relationships. All that."

Brad offered an exploratory session for \$15, with a written personal summary for \$30. Evelyn asked whether the summary could go in a frame.

"We can absolutely support that journey," he said.

"I already have a frame."

"Even better. You're ahead of the process."

Lou recognized her. He had replaced a shutoff valve in her condo the year before. She had given him a jar of apricot preserves and kept him for coffee while telling him about Frank. Lou had checked his phone several times. He remembered the preserves more clearly than the story, which suddenly seemed like a lousy way to remember a visit.

Denny began the questionnaire. "When do you notice the problem?"

"Evenings. After I've washed my cup."

"Contact with water," Brad said softly.

"After you're done with dinner?" Maya asked from the adjoining room.

Evelyn nodded. "Nobody needs anything after that."

Maya came in and pulled up a chair. Evelyn looked uneasy. Loneliness was one of those things people expected you to manage with a hobby and a good attitude. Venus was nicer to blame. Venus did not ask whether you had tried getting out more.

Maya didn't tell her to get out more. She asked about the jar of preserves Lou had mentioned. Evelyn explained that apricots could be perfectly ripe for about eleven minutes and then become a personal disappointment. Denny put down his pen. Brad remained attentive, though he was unsure which section of the form concerned fruit.

They talked for nearly an hour. Evelyn told them Frank used to repair a radio that wasn't broken because he disliked the news coming out of it. Lou laughed and asked what happened to the radio. She still had it, she said. Sometimes she turned it on just to hear something he would have complained about.

Brad glanced at the clock. He had scheduled forty-minute sessions. This one had become sixty minutes of conversation without passing through the payment stage.

Evelyn asked whether Venus could explain why she woke up feeling fine and got sad after dinner.

"I can't establish that Venus is doing it," Maya said. "But we read stories downstairs on Thursdays. Six o'clock. You can listen, or talk, or leave early. Whatever feels comfortable."

"Will it fix it?"

"I don't know. You'll be with us for an hour."

Evelyn considered that. Television offered to fix almost anything in thirty days, or her money back, except shipping. Maya's offer sounded suspiciously modest. Still, she wrote down the time.

Brad walked her to the stairs and didn't charge her. Once she'd gone, he described the meeting as an investment in community trust.

“You could just have been nice,” Lou said.

“Nice scales,” Brad replied. Then, after a moment, he added, “Maybe. I don’t know.”

On Thursday Evelyn arrived with a small jar of preserves. She sat near the door. A retired bus driver read a story about a terrible vacation, and she laughed at something Frank would have laughed at. The sound surprised her enough that she laughed again.

Halfway through the reading she moved her chair farther into the room. Maya noticed and kept reading. Afterward Evelyn helped wash the cups. When one of the other women asked whether she wanted to come next week, she said yes before checking what might be wrong with the planets.

At home she turned off the kitchen television. She left the bedroom one on. It was a start, and she did not have to make an inspiring announcement about it.

6 Please Like My Breakdown

Brad created the institute’s page and posted the photo with the mayor. Then he uploaded a video about unseen influences on everyday stress. Behind him Lou was building a table. A screw disappeared between the floorboards, and Lou expressed his disappointment in language the institute had not cleared for educational use.

That six-second clip got more attention than Brad’s entire explanation.

Someone added the caption WHEN THE UNIVERSE TESTS YOUR PERSONAL GROWTH. Someone else put

music over it. By Thursday night Lou's left knee was more widely recognized than the institute's logo.

"We should take it down," Denny said.

"Authenticity," Brad replied.

"I said son of a bitch," Lou reminded him.

"Exactly. Relatable."

"Does Relatable get a percentage?"

Brad promised to circle back. Lou had repaired enough circular drains to know that some circles never delivered anything.

The page attracted people who thought it was a joke and people who didn't. Brad replied enthusiastically to both. A man requested a certificate explaining his overdue child support. Brad said that was outside the scope. Another asked why his girlfriend had stopped answering texts after he described every disagreement as a violation of his boundaries.

"Maybe your boundary's working," Lou said, reading over Brad's shoulder.

Brad offered the man a paid session. Maya told him to delete the words GUARANTEED RELIEF from the offer.

"What's your issue with relief?"

"The guaranteed part."

"We mean emotional relief."

"You still have to know what you're promising."

He deleted it after Maya said she would ask him to explain his guarantee in front of the next group. He replaced it with SPACE TO EXPLORE. Space, Lou observed, was the one thing their storage room was short on.

That evening a photo of Lou's neighbor Rick Malone appeared in his feed. Rick stood beside a shiny new pickup truck. He was a cabinetmaker, worked from a garage shop, and seemed to understand an area of adulthood Lou had been trying to enter by appointment.

Lou enlarged the photo and studied the wheels. There was a little boat decal on the rear window. He did not know whether Rick owned a boat. By the time he handed the phone to Nora, he had mentally assigned Rick a boat, a vacation house, and a suspicious accountant.

"Pretty hard to make that kind of money honestly," he said.

"You know how much he makes?"

"I can see the truck."

"I can see your face. I'd put the phone down."

He did, for almost four minutes. Then he picked it up to see whether Rick had posted anything else irritatingly successful.

The next morning Brad showed him the photo again.

"The feed knows what gets you going."

"Great. Could it know what gets my invoice paid?"

"Leave a comment from our page. It's visibility."

Lou typed SOME PEOPLE GET THE GOOD PLANETS. He looked at the sentence. It was funny enough to hide how small he felt, but probably not funny enough to hide it completely.

Brad hit Post before Lou decided.

Rick replied with a thumbs-up.

Lou found this deeply aggressive. It might have meant no offense, offense, or that Rick was holding a piece of

lumber and had only one thumb free. Lou selected the meaning that would ruin his lunch.

By Friday the institute had hundreds of followers. Denny tracked every reaction. Agreement counted as evidence of value. Mockery counted as resistance to innovation. The chart climbed either way. He had discovered a business model in which being laughed at and being taken seriously shared an axis.

Maya found him working on it after the center closed.
“What does this measure?”

“How much people are thinking about us.”

“When did you last think about anything else?”

He reached for an answer and couldn’t locate one. His sister had called twice. He had let both calls go because the chart was doing something important. He went into the hallway and called her back.

“You okay?” she asked. “You disappeared.”

“I’m involved in a pretty significant project.”

He liked the sound of that. Then she told him her oldest dog had died. He sat on the stairs and listened to details he would normally have understood on the day they happened.

Downstairs Evelyn helped put away cups. Nobody was filming her. Through the open window came the sound of two kids arguing about the football one of them had thrown onto the roof.

Lou stepped outside and looked up. He could see the ball wedged among leaves in the gutter. He would get it when he and Carl did the inspection. He took out his phone to call Carl, but Brad rang first.

“Buddy, tell me that big table is ready. We have a launch.”

Lou went upstairs. The ball stayed where it was. The world contained plenty of influences, and Brad had become one of them.

7 The Kid Wanted Coffee

Eli called on Friday evening. He worked in another city and lived with Jules, whom Lou still called your girlfriend because he was afraid of choosing the wrong word and apparently less afraid of never learning her name.

“I’m driving through tomorrow,” Eli said. “I could stop around eleven. You gonna be home?”

Lou checked the launch schedule. The event started in the afternoon, but Brad expected the technical director on-site all morning. Their scientist table had developed a slight wobble. Denny said it was a floor problem. Brad said it would help people interact.

“It’s kind of a big day.”

“Yeah, I saw the page. And your video.”

“I didn’t know he was recording that part.”

“Dad, everybody knows a screw can fall. You’re allowed to be a person.”

Lou smiled. Then he said he had a lot going on. Eli paused. Lou could hear traffic at the other end and pictured his son turning car keys around his finger, something he’d done as a kid whenever he wanted to ask a question that might become a lecture.

“We could just get coffee,” Eli said.

“Come to the launch. See your old man up there.”

"I want to see you, Dad. I can see you up there on my phone."

Lou had no response prepared for that. After a moment Eli said they'd work something out next time. The conversation ended politely. Lou wished they'd fought. A fight would have supplied him with somebody else's tone to concentrate on.

Nora had heard enough to fill in the missing half. She put Lou's ironed shirt on a hanger.

"I'm meeting him at the diner at eleven."

"I didn't say I couldn't come."

"Then come."

She went back to her work. Lou had been willing to defend himself against an argument, but apparently he would have to defend his morning against a clock.

At the center the next day, Brad greeted him with a printing emergency. The new Certificates of External Responsibility looked beautiful, except the printer had left no space for the customer's name.

"There's space on the back," Denny said.

"The back has our mission statement."

"Write over the mission statement," Lou suggested.

Brad put a hand on the stack. "We can't have individual needs getting in the way of the bigger picture."

Lou looked at him. It was an excellent sentence for a man whose bigger picture required somebody else's Saturday.

For ninety minutes Lou worked on the platform and the display table. At ten-fifty he put down the drill.

"I'm heading out for an hour."

"Right now? We need you."

"I know."

"Lou. This is a team."

Lou felt the familiar pull. He liked being needed when people used the word team. At home they needed him too, but usually expressed it through groceries or a cabinet door. Nobody laminated those requests.

"My kid's in town," he said. "Use the team to hold that table until I get back."

Brad opened his mouth. Denny picked up a screwdriver. The world made a small adjustment and kept running.

At the diner there were three mugs on the table. Nora moved her purse off the empty chair. She did not act as though Lou's arrival proved her entire philosophy of marriage. She just asked whether he wanted coffee.

They talked about Eli's car, a weird meeting at work, and Nora's mother, who had mastered voice messages but occasionally sent them to the weather app. Lou told the cabinet story. Eli laughed with one hand over his mouth, the same way he'd laughed at twelve. Lou noticed the hand before he noticed the sound.

His phone lit up three times. He turned it facedown. He still watched for it to vibrate. Eventually he put it in his jacket pocket, where at least his difficulty paying attention had less display space.

Eli showed them a photo of the apartment. There were plants Lou hadn't known about and a kitchen Jules had painted green.

"She does a good job," he said.

"Jules," Eli said gently.

“Jules does a good job.”

Eli nodded. They kept talking.

When his son left, Lou hugged him and held on a fraction longer than usual. Neither of them made a joke about it. This required a kind of bravery Lou had not thought to put on his badge.

On the way home Nora bought tickets for a play the following Saturday. She bought two, for herself and her sister.

“You keep saying you don’t know if you can go,” she explained. “I know if I can go.”

Lou nodded. He was disappointed and couldn’t find a planet anywhere in the purchasing process.

8 The Universe Welcomes Our Sponsors

Seventy-two people came to the launch, if you counted the teenager delivering sandwiches. Denny counted him. The institute needed growth, and the teenager was technically in the building.

Onstage, the globe sat on an old plant stand. Lou had added a rotating base at Brad’s request. It mostly worked, except South America scraped once per revolution. Denny had proposed describing the sound as feedback. Lou had suggested a washer. They had run out of time for both.

Brad called the event Not My Fault Saturday. Maya displayed a separate notice explaining that the city supported the community event and did not certify the

institute's conclusions. Brad had wanted a smaller notice. Maya had a larger printer.

Mayor Whitlock began with a speech about facing the future. The clock behind him had stopped at 10:12. A man in the second row interrupted to ask whether anybody could explain his water bill.

"We're exploring a broader horizon today," Whitlock said.

The man put his bill back in a grocery bag.

"Everybody's broad when they owe you something."

Lou enjoyed that more than he probably should have.

Brad entered with a wireless microphone. Denny had tied a cord to it so it couldn't be lost. The other end of the cord was tied to a folding chair. On Brad's first confident walk across the stage, the chair followed him.

The audience laughed. Brad held his pose. He was good at accepting credit for things he had not intended.

"How many of you feel like something's holding you back?"

Almost every hand went up. One man raised both. His wife lowered one, probably to reduce their exposure.

"Look around," Brad said. "You are not alone."

This part was true. It was also the part that made the rest easier to sell.

He spoke about unfair expectations and the exhausting pressure to be productive all the time. Lou found himself nodding. Several people looked relieved. Then Brad moved almost seamlessly from the ordinary fact that life could be hard to the less established proposition that his certificate could make it easier.

A woman asked whether it would help her son stop feeling useless. He'd lost a job and refused to see his friends.

Brad paused. Maya stepped forward before he could find something reassuring enough to become a promise. "A certificate can't tell us what your son needs," she said. "If you'd like, we can talk afterward about where to find support."

"Absolutely," Brad added. "We take a whole-person approach."

The chair bumped his ankle. It was taking a whole-stage approach.

For the demonstration, three volunteers held ropes attached to a little platform with a ball on top. They were supposed to move it to a marked point without dropping the ball. Denny explained the destination. Nobody explained who was leading.

The first man pulled toward himself. The second decided the first man was being a little controlling and pulled harder. The third looked around to make sure his wife was recording. The platform lurched, the ball fell, and one edge clipped the mayor's shoe.

Whitlock hopped. The globe spun. South America hit the microphone with a sound like a drawer full of utensils being dropped down stairs.

The audience lost it. Even Maya laughed. Brad reached for the microphone while dragging the chair, which caught one rope and delivered the platform halfway to its destination by accident.

"There you go," somebody yelled. "Hire the chair!"

Lou steadied the globe. Denny collected the ball. The volunteers stood holding their ropes and looking at one another with the expressions of men who had been perfectly reasonable until the other two arrived.

When the laughter eased, Brad said the demonstration showed how external pressures could undermine cooperation. Maya suggested they also consider how nobody had agreed on a plan.

“That’s a powerful takeaway,” he said.

“It was a powerful folding chair,” Lou muttered.

During the cleanup Lou noticed a wet spot beneath the stage edge. He looked at the ceiling. Outside, a light rain had begun. He remembered the gutter and the football, then heard the mayor asking for the directors to join him for a photo.

Lou wiped his hand on his pants and stepped into line. In the photograph he looked capable and calm. The wet spot was out of frame.

Brad sold nineteen certificates at \$19.99 each. Denny counted \$379.81 and entered the amount with the sober pleasure of a man who had finally found a measurable result. Lou put a bucket under the leak. The bucket counted its own result, one drop at a time.

Brad paid Lou the agreed \$240 for the completed setup work. On the drive home Lou parked and paid the power bill on his phone. The receipt appeared instantly. He stared at it for a moment. It was comforting to watch money move toward a problem and actually arrive.

Then his badge slid off the dashboard onto the passenger floor. He picked it up at the next stoplight, pleased with himself, and decided he would definitely get to the gutter on Monday.

9 Your Cancellation Is Important to Us

The morning after the launch, Lou opened his account to admire the power payment again. He had fifty-three dollars and sixty cents left from the setup money. It wasn't wealth, but it had the advantage of existing.

EasyLife Plus had taken \$49.97.

Lou stared at the charge. He remembered EasyLife as a box he'd checked while buying a faucet cartridge. Joining had saved him five dollars. Since then, the company had recovered the five dollars, several of its relatives, and an amount Lou preferred not to introduce to Nora before breakfast.

The current charge included a Member Appreciation Fee.

"They appreciate me nine ninety-nine," he said.

Nora looked at the screen. "That's more than some of my customers."

He had tried to cancel twice. One attempt had produced a coupon. The other had produced an email thanking him for his feedback. Neither had produced the absence of EasyLife Plus from his account.

The app welcomed him back. The button for upgrading was large enough to find during a medical emergency. Cancel Membership appeared in pale gray beneath a photograph of a woman enjoying a life Lou was helping finance.

He tapped it.

WE'D LOVE TO TALK ABOUT YOUR OPTIONS.

"I have an option," he told the phone. "Get out."

The app supplied a customer support number. Nora put the charger beside him and went back to a dress whose owner wanted it ready that afternoon.

Lou called at nine-ten.

The recorded voice asked him to describe his issue in a few words.

"Stop taking my money."

"It sounds like you're interested in our membership benefits."

"It's the taking I'm interested in."

He pressed zero. The voice thanked him for his patience before he'd had any, then offered music that sounded like a saxophone being asked to apologize for something.

Brad arrived with leftover flyers from the launch. Denny came to pick up a measuring tape and stayed when he heard the situation. He set a stopwatch on the table.

"For what?" Lou asked.

"Baseline."

"Make sure they don't charge us for that too."

At ten-fifteen Lou was informed that his call was important. At eleven-fifteen its importance had not advanced it noticeably through the queue. He made coffee, washed two mugs, and tightened the handle on Nora's ironing board while the phone accompanied him around the house.

"They could offer a callback," Denny said.

"Then I'd go do something," Lou said. "They seem pretty concerned about preventing that."

Every few minutes the company thanked him for being a valued member. Lou began to suspect a valued member was someone whose bank information remained accessible.

At twelve-ten the music stopped.

Everyone looked at the phone. Nora held her scissors in the air. Denny stopped the stopwatch. Brad put down a flyer, which was a considerable gesture of respect.

"Hi! Thank you for choosing EasyLife Plus. My name is Curtis. How are you doing on this beautiful day?"

"I was doing better when it was morning. I need to cancel my—"

"Absolutely, and I'll be delighted to assist. May I have your first name?"

"Lou."

"And your last name?"

"Bennett."

"Thank you, Mr. Bennett. May I call you Lou?"

Lou closed his eyes. For \$49.97 they could call him the Grand Duke of Plumbing if it would move the conversation toward a verb.

"Sure."

Curtis asked for his address, email, and the last four digits on the account. Lou provided them. Curtis repeated them with the care of a man transporting soup across a white carpet.

"And how can I make your experience a wonderful one today?"

"Cancel the membership."

"I understand. To make sure you receive the best possible care, I'll connect you with our Member Experience team."

"What team is this?"

"Member Support."

"And they don't support leaving?"

Curtis apologized. There was a click. The saxophone returned, having learned nothing during its absence.

At twelve-thirty-seven a woman named Denise answered. She hoped he was having a wonderful day. Lou informed her that the day had developed an EasyLife situation. She asked whether she could call him Lou.

"We're pretty far into calling me Lou," he said.

She needed to verify his address, email, and the last four digits. He asked whether Curtis had sent those.

"He sent a note that you'd like assistance."

"That's quite a scoop for customer support."

Denise explained that the membership and its additional services were handled by separate departments. She began describing the additional services. Lou asked her to describe the department that could stop them.

"I'm happy to find the right person for you."

He looked at Nora. "It's turning into a dating app."

At one-oh-six another representative answered with "Good morning."

"Your company is the only thing still having one," Lou said.

The man asked how Lou was. Lou said fine, then hurried to explain that fine should not be entered as

approval of any product or fee. The representative apologized for the inconvenience and began the verification again.

Brad leaned toward the phone. "Ask for a supervisor."
"Are you authorized on this account, sir?"

Brad moved back. He disliked discovering places where confidence wasn't identification.

At one-forty-two a supervisor named Craig hoped Lou was doing well. Craig understood how valuable Lou's time was. He expressed this understanding slowly enough for Denny to start a separate column.

"Can you cancel it?" Lou asked.

"I'm here to ensure your concerns reach the correct department."

"Would it help if I drove there?"

Craig needed to locate the account. Lou gave the same information a fourth time. Somewhere, he assumed, a computer was being introduced to him as though they'd both just arrived at a cookout.

Nora finished the dress. Its owner collected it, tried it on, discussed a wedding, paid, and left. The people on Lou's phone still hadn't established why Lou had called.

At two-ten a woman named Tessa answered.
"Hi, Lou. How can I help you today?"

Denny held up the stopwatch. Three hours on hold. Two more hours since the first human had answered. They had survived enough introductions to form a community choir.

"I want to cancel EasyLife Plus and all the recurring extras," Lou said. "The charges keep coming. I want them to stop."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"It's a pretty good development from my end."

Tessa asked whether he'd explored the benefits.

"Buddy, I've spent five hours inside the benefits."

She offered a lower rate for three months.

"And then?"

"The regular rate would resume."

"So you're offering me a quieter start to the same problem."

She offered a pause. He asked what happened when the pause ended. The membership resumed automatically.

"Even your goodbye has a comeback scheduled."

Brad whispered that this was called a retention strategy. Nora told him to keep the name to himself.

Tessa began another offer. Her voice caught halfway through the sentence. She stopped, cleared her throat, and said she was required to read the options on her screen.

For the first time Lou could hear a tired person under the company's cheerful voice. She had probably introduced herself to people who hated her before knowing her name all day. His anger stayed where it belonged for once.

"I'm not mad at you," he said. "But I'm done buying things. What do you need me to say so we can finish?"

"That you decline the offers and want to proceed with cancellation."

"I decline the offers and want to proceed with cancellation."

He waited. He felt strangely rude, as though he'd turned down dinner in somebody's home. The company had built a remarkable relationship with him. It could take his money without asking, but he still felt he should apologize for leaving.

Nora wrote something on the back of a flyer and slid it across the table.

"Cancel the membership and every recurring add-on," he read. "Please email me the effective date and confirmation number. I want confirmation that none of them will renew."

There was a silence that contained actual typing. Lou preferred it to every expression of concern he'd heard that afternoon.

Tessa said the membership was canceled.

"And the extras?"

"The priority support package is separate."

Lou looked at Denny's stopwatch.

"That was priority?"

Tessa made a small noise. It might have been a laugh. She canceled the support package and the other recurring service too. Denny wrote each one down and had Lou ask for its confirmation number.

The email arrived. Nora checked it against the charges while Lou stayed on the line. It said canceled, with a date. It did not say paused, under review, or WE'RE EXCITED TO CONTINUE YOUR JOURNEY.

Lou asked about a refund for the unexpected fees and the charges after his earlier attempts to cancel. He had the old email and a screenshot. Tessa opened a review

and gave him another number. She couldn't promise the amount.

He wrote down when to follow up. He would rather have had the money, but a question he could return to was better than an apology he couldn't spend.

"Is there anything else I can help you with?" she asked.

Lou almost laughed. Five hours earlier it would have been a beautiful question.

"No. Thank you for actually doing it."

When the call ended, the phone offered a survey about whether the representative had made him feel valued. He gave Tessa a good score. There was no box large enough for his opinion of EasyLife.

Denny's stopwatch read five hours and seventeen minutes. Brad said the experience demonstrated an external cause of stress. Lou agreed. He didn't need to make every problem his own fault in order to do something about it.

"We could offer a cancellation certificate," Brad said.

"Would it cancel anything?" Nora asked.

"It would acknowledge the intention."

She handed him the completed dress receipt. "Try acknowledging a result."

Lou saved the emails in a folder he could find again and put a reminder beside the next statement date. He wasn't going to count on the company missing him politely. Then he plugged in the phone, which had spent more of its battery leaving a membership than joining it had required.

The next morning EasyLife sent him an email.

WE MISS YOU ALREADY.

Lou believed them. They'd had his card number.

10 Your Neighbor's Truck Is Not About You

Rick Malone brought back Lou's drill Monday morning. He'd borrowed it two weeks earlier, a delay Lou had quietly assembled into a character study.

"Cleaned it up," Rick said. "Replaced the bit too. The old one was chewed."

Lou looked at the shiny new bit. The remark he had prepared suddenly had nowhere decent to land.

"Saw your event," Rick continued. "Looked like quite a turnout."

"Saw my comment too, I guess."

"Yep."

Rick set the case beside the porch. He didn't rush to reassure him. Lou found this difficult. A man who said little could be arrogant, busy, or merely saying little. Lou habitually preferred the explanation that allowed an argument to occur inside his head.

"Nice truck," he said.

"Thanks. I'll be paying for it long enough to develop a meaningful relationship."

"At least you can afford one."

"The payment, maybe. The relationship is a wait-and-see."

Rick rubbed the back of his neck. There was sawdust along his shirt collar and a tiredness Lou had not included in the photograph. Online Rick had been

comfortably successful and far enough away to resent. Up close he was just a man standing on a porch with another man's drill.

Lou wanted to ask about the boat. He decided not to investigate the boat he'd invented.

Rick asked for a favor. His sister Dana had a leak under her sink. He was behind on a cabinet order and couldn't get away that morning. Could Lou take a look? He'd pay for the work.

"Can't you fix it?"

"I can build her a beautiful cabinet to contain the flood. I figure we should start with your part."

Lou felt a little warmer toward him. The feeling wasn't entirely noble. Finding a thing another man couldn't do sometimes soothed him faster than finding a good thing about the man. He noticed that later, when there was enough quiet to notice anything.

Dana greeted him with a bucket and a towel. The connection under the sink needed replacing. Lou changed it, checked the leak, and charged his regular price. She paid without an argument or a story about somebody who could do it cheaper.

Then she asked how Rick seemed. "He's working late again. Keeps saying he'll eat after he's done. I don't think he's ever done."

Lou said he'd seemed okay. He didn't know more than that. On the way out he sent Rick a photo of the repaired connection and wrote ALL SET. DANA PAID.

He added WE SHOULD GRAB COFFEE SOMETIME, then erased it. The sentence looked unexpectedly friendly and thus, to Lou, a little alarming.

He tried COFFEE TOMORROW? Rick replied SURE.

No thumbs-up. Lou was grateful for the consideration Rick almost certainly had not intended.

At the institute Denny was developing a survey on envy. His first question was DOES OTHER PEOPLE'S UNDESERVED SUCCESS BOTHER YOU?

"Who decides it's undeserved?" Lou asked.

"The respondent."

"Then you've put the answer inside the question."

Denny felt a familiar sting. He'd spent ninety minutes arranging the response boxes. He wanted Lou to respect the arrangement, even if the question was bad.

Lou noticed his face. "Could you add a second question? What do you actually know about the person?"

Denny considered it. He drew another box.

It would become the emptiest box in the survey.

Rick brought coffee Tuesday morning. They talked about tools, jobs, and customers who used the phrase real quick while pointing at something structural. Rick told Lou about a client who wanted a rustic finish but no evidence of wood.

"I had one who wanted a toilet moved without moving the plumbing," Lou said.

"How?"

"Emotionally, I guess."

They laughed. The truck sat in the driveway, looking much less like an accusation now that someone had mentioned its payment.

Before he left, Rick asked if Lou needed a hand clearing the gutter at the center. Lou said he and Carl

had it scheduled. They didn't have a time nailed down, but the idea of a schedule felt close enough to mention.

Rick nodded. "Let me know."

Lou said he would. Then he looked at his phone and called Carl. Carl had already left for another maintenance job. They agreed to check the calendar again tomorrow.

11 You Can't Afford These Savings

Tuesday afternoon, Lou went to BigSave Warehouse for milk and tomatoes. Nora had written both on a piece of paper. It was a shopping list, a modest document with no ambition to become a lifestyle.

Denny had the membership card. It said EXECUTIVE, which Lou respected until he learned Denny paid the company for the position. Brad came along because the institute needed paper towels and because he enjoyed helping other people recognize opportunities that involved their money.

The carts were enormous. Lou's list looked lonely in one, as though somebody had booked a convention center for a haircut.

Near the entrance a sign announced BUY THREE AND SAVE.

"There you go," Brad said.

"There I go where?"

One box of snack bars cost \$14.99. Three cost \$39.99. Denny checked the math. Buying three would save \$4.98 compared with buying three separately.

"We don't eat these," Lou said.

"Then you're getting into them at a very favorable point," Brad replied.

Lou put the boxes in the cart. He had not decided he liked the bars. He had decided he disliked missing out on \$4.98.

The produce section offered a three-pound box of salad greens. Per pound it was cheaper than the little bag Nora usually bought. Denny demonstrated this on his phone. The number was correct, which gave the decision an authority neither of them felt qualified to question.

Lou imagined himself eating a large salad every day. In this version of his life he also packed lunches, stretched in the morning, and knew where the lids to his food containers were. The man seemed pleasant. Lou would have liked to meet him.

"Stock up," Brad said. "Future you will thank you."

Future Lou went into the cart with the salad, a tray of berries, and enough hummus to require a conversation about shelving.

They passed an avocado tool set. Lou picked it up. There were four separate pieces and a diagram explaining the responsibilities of each one.

"You like avocados?" Denny asked.

"I might if they were less work."

"You have a knife."

"This is designed for the task."

Lou had used a screwdriver to open a paint can, stir adhesive, and rescue a key from beneath a refrigerator. He nevertheless felt an avocado deserved a specialist.

The next display held a smart cup holder. It would maintain an ideal beverage temperature and connect him

to an app. The box showed a beautiful desk with no invoices on it. A man was smiling at a laptop. Nothing in the picture suggested he'd ever called customer support.

Lou turned the box over. MUG SOLD SEPARATELY.

"It's the holder," Brad explained.

"I got a table that holds cups."

"This maintains the experience."

Lou looked at the man's desk again. He liked the clear surface more than the gadget. The package was careful about letting the two feelings share a price.

He put it in the cart. There was no subscription. After Sunday this felt like a rigorous purchasing standard.

At the aisle's end he added a large pack of air-fryer liners.

"You have an air fryer?" Denny asked.

"Might get one."

"That's prepared," Brad said.

They had paper towels by then. Somewhere on the way to the register, Lou remembered the milk. The tomatoes required going back past another display, where he narrowly avoided acquiring a salad spinner large enough to participate in hurricane preparation.

The total was \$173.42.

The cashier handed him the receipt and said he'd saved \$64.18. The savings were printed in large letters. The amount he'd paid was smaller, as though the company would prefer everybody to concentrate on the good news.

Lou studied the receipt on the way to the car. He'd worked for his money and was reluctant to describe spending it as a mistake before the bags were even in the

trunk. The discount offered a nicer description. He practiced it on Brad, who approved immediately.

“You made out like a bandit.”

At home Nora looked at the groceries. Then she looked at the little piece of paper.

“Did they move the tomatoes?”

“I got them.”

“They seem to have brought quite a few friends.”

Lou showed her the savings.

“Where’s the sixty-four dollars?” she asked.

He pointed to the receipt.

“Try putting that in your wallet.”

They unpacked together. To make room for the new salad, Lou removed a large plastic box from the back of the refrigerator. It contained the remains of the last salad he’d bought on special. Some leaves had become a liquid the container was not designed to advertise.

He held it up. “That was a good price too.”

Nora opened the trash can. Lou emptied the box. The trash can was enjoying a better supply of vegetables than anybody in the house.

Behind it they found four yogurts and part of a tray of berries. Lou remembered the yogurts. Buying the big pack had made each one cheaper. He had eaten two and spent the following days carefully moving the others out of the way.

Denny began calculating the cost of what had actually been eaten. His first result was much less attractive than the one he’d found in the store.

“We’d need a column for waste,” he said.

"They don't have that on the receipt," Lou observed.

"They aren't the ones throwing it away," Nora said.

Lou looked at the fresh greens. He still wanted to be the man who ate them. Wanting wasn't the embarrassing part. He'd just tried to buy the whole man in one afternoon, including equipment for an appliance the man might someday own.

The kitchen had two adults, one refrigerator, and about nine imaginary guests. The imaginary guests contributed nothing to the grocery budget and were very particular about freshness.

Brad suggested keeping the cup holder as a reward for Lou's progress. Nora asked what progress he'd made that required keeping a cup warm through his phone. Brad said he was talking about self-worth.

"I can like him with regular coffee," she said.

Lou put the unopened gadgets beside the receipt. He would take them back. Denny offered to ride along, then reconsidered whether returning to the warehouse should count as a chance to look at storage containers.

"We got containers," Lou said.

"I meant for organizing the containers."

Nobody answered. Denny put the executive card away.

They divided the fresh food into what they'd use and what they could share. Lou called Evelyn, who could use some of the greens for lunch the next day. He told her the box had been too big. She accepted the greens without requiring a story about his generosity.

Brad took the paper towels to the center. Nora wrote two dinners on the calendar. Lou put the older food where he'd see it first. He didn't need a system name. He

needed to remember what he owned before buying another version of it.

An email from BigSave arrived that evening. It suggested completing his collection with the matching smart mug. The offer expired in fifteen minutes. Lou watched the clock reach zero. A new offer appeared with another fifteen minutes.

The mug looked nice. For a moment he pictured himself using it at a clean desk, completely on top of things.

Then he closed the tab and cleared the bills off the actual table.

12 A Cloud with Boundary Issues

The storm arrived Wednesday evening. The clouds over Prosperity Springs did not look interested in anyone's personal journey. They looked like they had come to repossess the sky.

Lou was finally working on the kitchen cabinet hinge. He had removed the door and laid it across the table when Maya called. She did not explain the emotional properties of water. She said water was coming into the community center and they needed help getting books away from the wet areas.

He put down the screwdriver. Nora handed him his jacket. Neither of them could find anything cute to say.

At the center, water ran down the wall by the stairs. Upstairs Denny was chasing drips with a bucket. Whenever he moved the bucket, another drip appeared

where it had been. He was conducting a study whose findings kept landing on his shoe.

Brad had put a plastic bag over the globe. He had protected the Earth and run out of priorities.

“Power off in the wet section?” Lou asked.

Maya nodded. Carl was there and had taken care of it. She’d moved everyone into the dry room near the entrance. They couldn’t work outside on the roof in the storm. For now, they would save what they could safely carry.

Downstairs the lowest library shelves were wet. Maya handed books to Evelyn, who carried them to tables in the lobby and put them down as carefully as she’d once placed dishes in front of guests. Some of the pages had already started curling.

Rick appeared with plastic crates. He’d noticed the lights and the open door while driving past. He asked where the books should go, then started carrying them.

Lou grabbed two boxes. On one shelf he found a cookbook open to a chapter about comforting meals. A stream of water ran down the page. He closed it gently and hoped the comfort wasn’t printed in soluble ink.

Brad raised his phone to show followers what was happening.

Maya handed him a stack of books. He tried to manage the stack with one hand. A hardcover hit his shoe.

“Both hands,” she said.

He put away the phone.

Denny came down holding his notebook inside a plastic sandwich bag. His bucket remained upstairs beneath the smallest leak.

“Should I log the damaged titles?”

“In a minute,” Maya said. “Right now, carry them.”

He slid the notebook into his pocket. Without it, he felt oddly underdressed. Rick passed him a crate. Denny took it, found a clear section of table, and went back for another. His uncertainty stopped occupying quite so much room when his hands had something to do.

Lou and Rick worked the heavier boxes. Evelyn laid out dry towels. Brad wiped covers, discovering that a damaged book responded poorly to reassurance but sometimes benefited from a clean cloth. No one handed out titles. Someone said move that box, and someone moved it.

The mayor arrived half an hour later, still carrying an open umbrella inside the lobby. He asked whether the damage was serious.

Maya showed him the peeling cover of a children’s book. Whitlock glanced at the book, then at Lou.

“Weren’t you going to check the gutter?”

“I was,” Lou said.

He heard the empty space after was. He had lived in that space for days, waiting to become the man who had already done it.

Whitlock folded his umbrella. “Well. We’ll need to establish a timeline.”

“There’s one in my email,” Maya said. “The roof report too.”

Carl called the roofing contractor who’d inspected the building the previous fall. They arranged an assessment for morning. When the rain eased, Carl secured temporary protection where the work could be done

safely. The library would stay closed until the wet areas had been assessed and dried.

An argument began outside between two people who had come to see whether there was an argument. Evelyn called them in to help lift a table. They looked mildly disappointed but did it.

The lobby smelled of wet paper and tea. Evelyn had found the kettle in the dry side room. She brought a mug to Brad. He thanked her without describing the interaction as an asset.

Lou stood near a box of damaged books. One cover showed the ocean. The illustration had faded along the edge, as if the ocean had finally figured out how to leave the book.

For weeks he'd imagined the institute making him feel like a more useful man. Carrying a box had done it for about thirty seconds. Then he looked at the stain above the stairs and remembered what he had not done. The two feelings stayed together. Neither canceled the other.

13 The Emergency Meeting about the Emergency

Whitlock called a meeting Thursday morning. They sat in the dry part of the hall with buckets along the wall. The mayor began by saying they weren't there to point fingers, then asked who had thrown the football into the gutter.

Denny had a list of times, the direction of the wind, and the number of buckets. It was useful until Whitlock asked

him to add UNPRECEDENTED WEATHER EVENT at the top.

“Rain like that doesn’t happen every day,” the mayor said.

“That’s why we bought a roof,” Maya replied.

The contractor explained that the clogged gutter had contributed to the water overflow. There was also old damage in the roof membrane that gutter cleaning alone wouldn’t have fixed. Maya put the previous fall’s report on the table. Whitlock said he remembered seeing it. Lou suspected the mayor mostly remembered the envelope.

Brad suggested framing the incident as a resilience lesson. Another workshop could raise funds.

“Paid certificates again?” Maya asked.

“We can change the offer.”

“Change what you’re promising.”

The contractor looked around the room. “Do you want me to price the repair or attend a seminar?”

Lou liked him immediately.

Denny opened his notebook to the gutter reminder. There were three postponed dates. On the next page he had taped a photo from the launch. The edge of the photo covered the most recent date.

Lou took the notebook, looked at it, and put it down.

“I kept pushing it off. I knew about the leaves. Saw the ball too. I never set a firm time with Carl.”

The mayor sat a little straighter. “That is important to establish.”

“It’s also important to establish the roof was already damaged,” Lou said. “I can’t tell you clearing that gutter

would have fixed all of this. I can tell you I didn't do what I said I would."

Maya moved his note beside the older report. The two documents fit on the table without one erasing the other.

Whitlock studied them. He preferred causes in a line, with somebody conveniently located at the far end. A kid with a football would do. A man with a toolbox would do better. An old roof with years of dated paperwork was harder to turn into one person's unfortunate attitude.

"Resources are limited," he said.

"I know," Maya answered. "That's why I'm asking you to put the available resources and the repair schedule in the minutes."

Nora arrived with clean towels. She put them on the table just as the discussion returned to the kid and the football.

"Are you giving him a roof ladder with his detention?" she asked.

The contractor coughed into his coffee. Nora left for a paid fitting. She did not stay to become the meeting's unpaid mother.

Brad tried to explain that the event had raised community awareness.

"Of you," Maya said.

He looked hurt. For a second, he wanted to tell her that her delivery was making it hard for him to hear her point. He had used that sentence successfully before. Then he looked at the books laid out on towels and kept quiet.

They agreed to close the library's affected rooms for two weeks, create an itemized record of damage, and

seek funds for the roof repair. Maya asked that both the fall report and Lou's postponed inspection appear in the notes. With the contractor present, Whitlock agreed.

When the meeting ended, Lou stayed by the window. Outside, a boy was throwing a different football to a friend. Lou had been ready to give him a lecture. It would have been a solid lecture. He could have covered respect, responsibility, and the decline of practically everything while avoiding one inconvenient adult calendar.

Instead he opened the window.

"Hey. Come back tomorrow. The roof crew will get your old ball down."

The boy nodded. "You guys still have books about space?"

"Yeah. Give us a little time to dry them out."

"Okay. Is the moon really messing up people's bills?"

Lou leaned against the window frame. "Buddy, I think we may have gotten ahead of ourselves on that one."

The boy considered this, accepted it with less difficulty than anyone at the meeting, and ran after the ball.

14 No Certificate for This

Lou got home late. The kitchen cabinet door still lay across the table. Nora had eaten. There was soup for him under an upside-down plate, a system of care more reliable than most of the systems he had been discussing.

He sat down and told her about the meeting. First he told her how hard it had rained. Then how the mayor had

tried to turn a football into an infrastructure policy. Finally he told her what he had admitted about the inspection.

Nora listened. When he finished, she asked what he was going to do.

"Help with the rooms. Shelves, cleanup, painting. What I can actually handle."

"When?"

He almost said tomorrow. He took out his calendar instead. Saturday he would move shelves with Rick. Monday he would work there after a paid plumbing call. To make time he'd have to turn down a fence-painting job. He could use the money, but the week wasn't going to grow another afternoon because he had finally developed insight.

"And I'll call about the preschool pump."

"Out loud? Into a phone?"

He smiled. "Full professional package."

She smiled back, then put away the clean plates. Lou watched her for a moment.

"You pretty mad at me?"

"I'm tired, Lou. It's different."

The difference bothered him. He knew what to do with an argument: counter it, outlast it, make a joke that changed its subject. Another person's tiredness required attention after the conversation ended.

"I know I keep saying I'm on it," he said.

"I don't need you to give that phrase a funeral. Just tell me when you're doing something, and tell me if you can't. I can work with that."

She said she was still going to the play with her sister. She wasn't canceling her evening to coordinate his new relationship with responsibility. He nodded. He wanted her to forgive him on a schedule, preferably before he went to bed. He understood, with some disappointment, that this might be another service she wasn't providing.

After dinner he finished the cabinet hinge. He opened and closed the door three times. It worked. He did not call Nora in to witness the event. Later she reached for a mug, noticed, and said thanks.

That was the entire ceremony. Lou found he could live with it.

Across town, Denny sat in the institute room reading the first water experiment. The page had stayed dry. Every doubt on it was evidence of somebody else's limitation. He found Stan's name and crossed out LOW SENSITIVITY.

He wrote SAID ALL THREE WERE THE SAME.

Below that he left a blank space. He could add another explanation, or he could wait until he had something worth adding. The second option felt dangerously like not being a research director. He stared at it until that feeling grew smaller.

He called his sister and asked whether she wanted him to come over Sunday. She said yes. He put Sunday in the notebook without creating a project code for it.

Brad sat at home with his laptop. Messages had accumulated. Some people were making jokes. Others wanted to know whether their Certificate of External Responsibility was still useful, and if not, whether the money they'd paid for it might become useful again.

He began a statement explaining that the institute's intentions had been misinterpreted. He read it beside his own video. In the video, he was interpreting his intentions clearly enough to offer a price.

He tried MY BAD at the top. It looked casual and honest until he saw how little it covered.

He closed the laptop and called his son Marcus. Their recent conversations had mostly consisted of Brad describing a venture and Marcus asking whether he needed help changing another password.

"I've got kind of an embarrassing story," Brad said.

Marcus listened. Brad told half of it, including the good intentions. Then he told the other half, including the certificates. Without the microphone his voice sounded less certain, and he couldn't use a stage to improve the acoustics.

"Did you know the claims weren't proven?" Marcus asked.

"I knew we hadn't proved them. I figured people would feel better."

"Did they?"

Brad remembered Evelyn's chair moving closer to the reading group. "Some did. I'm not sure we were selling what helped."

He looked at the list of nineteen buyers. The money had partly gone toward frames and advertising. He could refund some of it right away, but not all. He explained that to Marcus without using the word temporary until he had an actual date to attach to it.

Outside, the moon showed between strips of cloud. In three separate homes, men glanced up at it. Then Lou

washed his soup bowl, Denny hung the wet towels to dry, and Brad began writing down names and amounts.

Nobody became a new person that night. Several old people did something they'd been putting off. It was enough work for one evening.

15 Your Refund Is in Retrograde

The next public meeting had no microphone. Maya put a notice on the door that said LIBRARY DAMAGE AND THE INSTITUTE'S NEXT STEPS. Brad asked whether they could add FRESH START. She handed him a pen and said to write the refund dates first.

He brought a list of nineteen names. At \$19.99 each, the full amount was \$379.81. The number didn't look important enough to have caused this much embarrassment. Brad had discovered that shame did not use a minimum order.

He would refund every paid certificate. Some money he had now; the rest would come over the next month. He would contact each buyer directly. He did not ask anybody to appreciate the payment plan.

Twenty-three people attended. Some had bought certificates. Others had come to watch somebody else admit a mistake, an activity for which humanity had never had difficulty selling seats.

A man in a polo shirt asked who had come up with this whole stupid idea. Brad raised his hand. The man nodded, relieved that stupidity had finally agreed to put down a forwarding address.

"Did you believe it?" Lou asked him.

“Come on. I knew it was nonsense from day one.”

Then he took his certificate out of his wallet. He had folded it carefully between two loyalty cards. Brad returned his \$19.99. Maya began explaining the roof assessment before anyone could turn the man’s embarrassment into the meeting’s entertainment.

Lou stood. He said what he had postponed, when he would work on the damaged rooms, and which materials he could supply. He did not say he was a terrible human being. He suspected that might become another large statement everyone would have to reassure him about while the shelves remained on the floor.

Rick confirmed that he would help rebuild the damaged shelving.

Whitlock brought approval for the first phase of the roof repair. There was an amount, a completion date, and a contractor’s name. Maya made a copy and posted it near the entrance.

“Does that have to stay there?” the mayor asked.

“Until the work’s done, it will be helpful.”

He nodded as though this were an idea he had already been exploring internally.

Denny explained the water experiment. He said they hadn’t established the effect they’d announced. He showed how changing the labels had changed what they expected to taste.

“So you were scamming us,” someone said.

“Some things we made up. Some things we talked ourselves into,” Denny answered. “I can’t honestly tell you where one stopped and the other started.”

Brad shifted in his chair. He almost preferred being considered a clever crook. A clever crook at least knew what was going on. Denny had described a less flattering possibility, and Brad let it stand.

Maya said she'd allowed the project to use the room because it might bring new people to the center. She'd hoped the notices and the questions she asked would keep the promises clear.

"I should have required clearer limits before the event," she said. "Wanting this place to get attention made it easier to keep hoping we'd sort them out later."

Lou looked at her. He had been treating her as somebody who simply knew better. It hadn't occurred to him that knowing better could still involve hoping the inconvenient part would take care of itself.

Evelyn raised her hand. "Are we keeping Thursday reading?"

Maya said they could use the dry meeting room while the library work continued.

"That part helped," Evelyn said. "I'd like to keep the actual part."

A woman proposed shutting down the institute immediately. Stan asked who would return his extension cord if they did. The institute had used several of his tools, and closing a spiritual enterprise did not appear to shorten a cable.

They agreed to remove the name and the paid claims. The room would remain part of the community center. Denny wanted to hold small experiments anyone could repeat. Maya agreed, provided he explained what they were testing and did not turn every result into an offer. "What if people want certificates?" Brad asked.

Stan looked at him.

"I'm asking," Brad said. "I'm allowed to ask."

"And we're allowed to answer," Maya said.

Two people left angry. Another said he'd be back if the refund missed its date. The mayor departed before the folding chairs needed stacking. Nobody had a breakthrough on behalf of the entire town.

Lou still felt embarrassed. Brad missed the microphone. Denny liked the new experiments but wished someone had called them a program. They stacked the chairs anyway.

Afterward Denny took down the institute sign. Two blue marks remained where it had rubbed the wall.

"Paint now?" he asked.

"When the wall dries," Lou said. "This time that's a real reason."

16 Mercury Is Still Unavailable

Six weeks later the library was open again. The promised two weeks of work had become four because the first assessment hadn't found all the damage. Good intentions had not straightened the books. Some had been restored, some replaced, and several still lay in a box with an inventory of what was lost. Maya kept the box while she waited for the balance of the repair funds.

The roof over the worst section had been repaired. The remaining work had a date on the sheet beside the front door. Whitlock twice asked whether the sheet might be more appropriate on an interior bulletin board. Maya

twice offered him a chance to explain the move to the Thursday group. The sheet stayed put.

Lou received \$360 of the city's \$420 debt. He continued asking about the other sixty. When the clerk said the system was slow, he asked what day to call again and wrote it down. He had not become less irritated. He had found something to do with the irritation besides bring it home and distribute it among people who didn't owe him anything.

A new power bill arrived. Lou put it on the table and arranged the payment. The sugar bowl continued to shelter the toaster warranty and a coupon from a restaurant that had closed. He was considering the coupon's future. The toaster, he admitted, probably had no future at all.

His next card statement arrived without EasyLife Plus. Lou checked every charge. A refund for one month had come through after he followed up with the reference number and sent the old screenshots. Nobody had returned the five hours.

"Did they finally stop?" Nora asked.

"Yep."

"Did they ask how you were?"

"Not this time."

"Maybe they're getting worried."

Nora went to the play with her sister. For two days she talked about a character who spent the second act arguing in a kitchen. Lou asked why the character didn't fix the kitchen door instead. Nora told him that question was practically the play.

He listened. Occasionally he had to stop himself from offering a repair estimate to an imaginary person, but he listened.

Eli called for Nora's birthday. Lou asked which Saturday he and Jules had free. They arranged lunch. Lou wrote Jules's name on the grocery list and called her to ask what she liked to eat. She said almost anything except mushrooms.

Lou thanked her and circled NO MUSHROOMS. It felt good to know something about a person that wasn't a reason to judge her or a story he could tell without her in it.

Brad returned the certificate money. To cover the last two refunds, he sold the ring light he'd bought for making videos. He drafted the listing as PROFESSIONAL LIGHTING TO ELEVATE YOUR SUCCESS. Then he changed it to RING LIGHT. WORKS. SCRATCH ON STAND.

It sold the next day.

The buyer asked whether Brad had upgraded. Brad said no, he'd downgraded to telling people things with his face in regular daylight. The buyer laughed and paid him.

Brad was still Brad. He occasionally described coffee as a strategic resource. Evelyn told him when he'd become exhausting. He was getting better at surviving this without creating a new offer.

He helped at Thursday reading, mostly arranging chairs and talking with people afterward. Once he caught himself opening a notes app when someone said something interesting. He put the phone away. There was no need to turn the woman into content before she'd finished her tea.

Denny began a curiosity night at the center. At the first meeting they measured the shadow of a stick. A little girl asked what happened if they got the measurement wrong.

"We do it again," he said.

They did it again, because he'd written inches in the column marked feet. He showed them the mistake. Nobody resigned from the evening. The girl asked another question, and Denny said he didn't know the answer yet. She seemed fine with that too.

Stan got his extension cord back. He examined it, wound it properly, and said the whole experience had confirmed his existing beliefs about lending things to Brad. Denny asked whether Stan might help with the next curiosity night. Stan said he'd bring a flashlight but expected to leave with it.

Lou and Rick built a new table for the little meeting room. It was sturdy but had a slight wobble. Rick said the floor was uneven. Lou said one leg was short. Denny wanted to measure both possibilities.

"We could call it interactive," Brad suggested.

They laughed. Lou heard his own old temptation inside the laugh. An explanation could make you feel finished while the thing in front of you continued to wobble.

Evelyn put a jar of apricot preserves on the table. The jar rocked. She caught it and looked at the four of them. "Fellas. Put something under the leg before we start a committee."

There were blank certificates in the cabinet. Brad took one out. Denny folded it. Lou raised the table, and Rick slid the paper underneath. The jar stood still.

Through the window they could see the moon, pale in the early evening sky. Nora brought plates from the kitchen. Maya opened the book for that night's reading and waited for people to sit down.

The certificate finally had an application that worked.

The End

THE UNIVERSE HAS EXCUSES. YOUR LANDLORD HAS A DEADLINE.

Three broke guys in Florida discover the ultimate life hack: blame the planets.

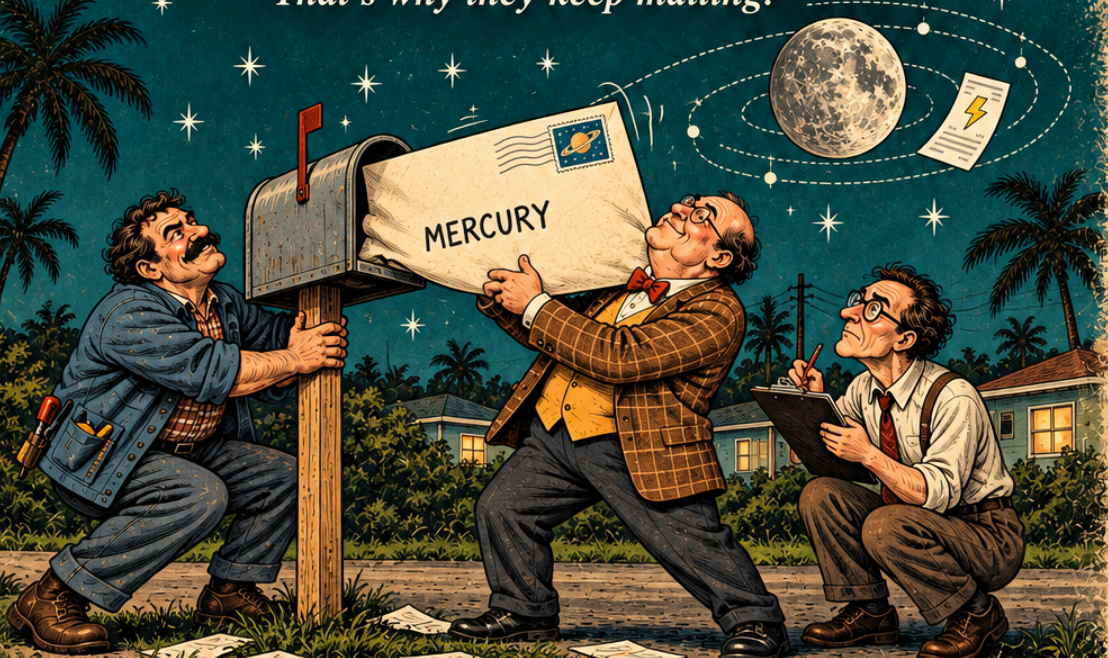
Lou has overdue bills. Brad has a business plan. Denny has a clipboard. Somehow, this counts as a think tank.

Their Institute for External Causes sells \$19.99 certificates proving your problems are officially the universe's fault. Business booms. Tap water gets a spiritual upgrade. A folding chair steals the show.

Then a storm hits, the roof leaks, and Mercury won't pick up.

A warm, sharp satire about hustle culture, magical thinking, and learning to say 'my bad' before the ceiling falls in.

*"My power company already believes in me.
That's why they keep mailing."*



ORION SAINT
