

Mercury in Retrograde
by Brooke Elliott

Mom turned the T.V. up when she was angry.

When I came home from school on Friday afternoon, I could hear the crackling hum of the television through the hole-pocked mesh of the screen door. I tossed my Capri Sun into the silver-blue mound of juice boxes that was once the trash can on the porch.

I opened the door and crossed the bohemian rugs that curled upward at the corners. The TV was an old, hulking box, nestled between the Navajo blankets and silken scarves like a dusk-gray portal of light and static. I dialed the movie's volume down a few notches. Inigo Montoya's voice faded from a decibel-climbing shout to a faint cry of glee. The teal-toned walls stopped quivering, and I could hear Mom in the next room.

"Look, I didn't sign up to lie to everyone. I believe in this stuff!" Her voice was strong, but her words were pleading and thin. The tone she used when her boss, "Madame" Lisa LeVeau, was on the other line.

I padded into the kitchen on silent sneakers. Mom's back was to me, her hair unbound from its braids and in unkempt spirals. She leaned against the counter, a worn stone relic of the 1950's, as the dishwater on her hand dribbled down the blue splinter-wood face of the cabinets and across the yellowed ceramic floor.

A garbled snarl mashed its way through the phone speaker. My mother pressed her lips into a thin line.

"Not everyone wants to hear silly *platitudes*, Lisa," my mother said.

I gripped the doorframe. Mom always called her boss Ms. Leveau.

"My clients are usually *happy* to know when Mercury is in retrograde, so that they can adjust their schedules to avoid negatively affecting their fates--" A whine interrupted Mom. I heard "customer satisfaction" and other words from car commercials.

Mom shook her head, turned to lean back against the counter, and spotted me.

"Stay quiet. This'll be fine." she said. She took my hand and led me back into the living room, where she pointed at a deflated bean bag and handed me our cat, Lotus.

As soon as Mom uncovered the speaker and shuffled back into the other room, I tossed Lotus into the bean bag with a whump and pressed my ear to the cardboard-thin wall.

"I won't be pushed around--" my mother faltered. Ms. Laveau--no, *Lisa*--was shouting at Mom.

"What do you mean?" Mom said.

The only sounds were Princess Buttercup's lamentations from the T.V. and the faint, rasping voice of Lisa on the other line.

"I see," Mom said. "Will you send me my last check in the mail?"

There was a pause. The receiver clattered in the next room.

I gingerly stepped into the kitchen. Mom was leaning against the counter. She rubbed her face and inhaled, the sound wet and raw.

“Hey, Lily,” she said. The corners of her eyes were damp.

“I’m so sorry,” she said. “I’m sorry I can’t just lie to them, Lily.”

I walked to her and wrapped my arms around her. We stood like that until Lotus brushed and licked at our legs, making little cat-murmurs. Her soft orange eyes were wide, her tongue rough against my calf.

“You shouldn’t have to lie,” I said.

“I know,” she said. “Just for now, Lily, I’m going to get a job. I’ll get a job at the corner store.”

“But you don’t want that!” I cried.

She chuckled, and rubbed at the corners of her eyes.

“If I always do what I want, I can’t make a good life for you,” she said. “I want you to grow up to do whatever you like.”

She turned me to the window above the kitchen sink. A royal-blue circle of stained glass sent warped ribbons of light across the countertop. It was engraved with gold, golden stars upon planets and moons, with the twelve zodiac signs blazing like suns along the border.

“Don’t worry, Lil,” she said. “The stars are telling me that we’re going to be okay.”

The ram Aries batted one hoof against the earth, daring any to challenge him. Aquarius danced in a flowing stream of water. Scorpio clicked golden claws while Virgo twirled in a gilded grove, and just beyond her roared Leo, my mother’s sign and mine. The lion stood proud, as unseen wind whipped against its fiery mane, baring its teeth in a ferocious smile against the world ahead.

I believed the stars.