

Retrograde

B. B. Garin

The first time the weatherman called, Tessa didn't recognize his voice. Later, she'd think that was strange. She listened to him every morning, charming viewers with his unabashed enthusiasm for meteorological minutia. His voice informative, buoyant, and a little sly. The kind of voice it'd be nice to hear a secret from.

But on the phone, Skylar Olark sounded overbright and dull, like a bold coat of paint slapped on an unprimed wall. Tessa could've easily mistaken him for a regular caller to Crossing Stars Astrological Hotline.

His call request glowed on her phone screen; all the fields blank except *Name: Mr. O*. Tessa smiled, tapping the green button to connect with coy Mr. O. She hadn't had a client so reticent since her brief stint as a phone-sex operator. Crossing Stars clients tended to run out of characters in the reason-for-call box, leaving Tessa with dangling hopes for an interesting conversation.

*...I have twenty buckets of sand and no idea when—
...want to know what color is best for a groundhog wedding—*

The reality rarely lived up to the potential. It turned out nothing was more repetitive than the future. Still, Tessa preferred the hours at 1-800-STR-XING, people seldom felt the urge to consult astrological guides at 3:00 am. Most of Tessa's callers were older, tucked up in bed by nine.

The phone buzzed against her fingers as the connection went through.

"Will I have to spend the winter on my boat?" The voice wasn't demanding, but it wasn't wasting money on small talk.

Tessa struggled out of her devouring couch cushions and sank onto the cool boards of her living-room floor. It was nearly midnight, last call of her shift. She'd hoped to coast through it. But this voice required concentration.

“Why are you living on your boat?” Tessa asked.

“I thought I told you my birthday and you answered my question,” he said. Something sloshed in the background. Waves or whiskey, Tessa couldn’t tell. “No one said anything about additional data.”

“You didn’t tell me your birthday. And it’s easier to interpret the stars if I understand the full spectrum of the question.” Tessa picked up a mug from the coffee table and let a few bitter drops drizzle onto her tongue. She was usually a quick thinker. On the phone, at least.

“My wife kicked me out. Three weeks, six days, and roughly two hours ago.”

“That’s very specific.”

“I thought the stars needed details.” His laugh was rough.

He was a skeptic. Tessa hated dealing with skeptics. They generally made good points.

“Well?” he said. It was definitely whiskey in the background, clipped now with the addition of fresh ice. “Is that enough information?”

Tessa tilted the phone away to tug on her earlobe. The left side of her face felt red and sweaty after six hours of disembodied voices spraying against it.

“Astrology is a complex art,” she said.

“I just want to know if I should invest in a space heater.”

“Yes.”

“Yes?”

Tessa pictured him sipping his drink with dry amusement.

“How do you know?”

Because guys who call hotlines after a few drinks are unlikely to repair their marriages. And you knew that before you dialed.

“Because Venus is in retrograde,” she said.

“Actually, it’s not.”

“Of course it is.” Tessa had never consulted the position of Venus.

“No. It’s not,” he said, ice rattling.

“How do you know?”

“How do you *not*?!”

Mr. O. hung up.

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Sky felt bad for antagonizing the astrology girl. She was probably some college student trying to earn a little extra book or beer money. She'd sounded young. Young and tired. Sometimes, Sky thought he'd never felt tired until he turned thirty-five. Then he couldn't stop.

The more he drank, the less he noticed the boat creaking against its mooring ropes. The noise never bothered him when he was loading up for a day's sailing or relaxing with the sunset, his nose peeling. But now that whispering ropes formed a constant rhythm in his life, he wanted to drown them. To believe the swaying beneath his feet came from the whiskey in his stomach. A rational illusion.

It worked, until he heard one of the interns raving about some stupid hotline. It worked, until the girl who answered his call made him feel like a short-tempered drunk.

Sky fished an ice cube out of the plastic *Frozen* cup his youngest daughter had abandoned after their last sailing excursion. He rubbed the melting cube over his forehead, not minding when the alcohol-laced drops slid into his eyes.

He doubted the hotline worker knew what retrograde meant. Her callers probably didn't care. But it disappointed Sky just a bit, because for a minute, while the phone was humming louder than the damn ropes, he'd hoped there was a science to it.

Tessa had always been willing to believe. For eleven years she rejected her older sister's supposition that Santa Claus wasn't real. At sleepovers, she refused to repeat anything three times in front of a reflective surface, just in case. She threw salt and knocked on wood. She considered wardrobes, TARDIS, and wrinkles in time equally likely to snatch a person off on adventure.

Tessa had always been willing to believe.

But she never could. Her parents signed their own names to presents. Bad luck came, salt notwithstanding. And Tessa had never encountered anything that was bigger on the inside.

The thick packet explaining planetary positions and zodiac

signs from Star Crossing lay unopened in a kitchen drawer. For three years she hadn't opened it, knowing the vaguely worded charts only boded fresh disappointments. Spinning her phone on the scarred coffee table, Tessa wished she'd given the cheap, ink-smeared pages a chance. If only so Mr. O wouldn't have sounded so disappointed.

She blew out a long breath and rolled to her feet. She'd showered when she came home from the office, before settling on the couch with a bowl of spaghetti, a mug of tea, and a phone full of astrological potential. But she needed another one. Showers were better than sleep. That's what Tessa told herself whenever the insomnia crept back.

Steam filled her nose. Water drummed her scalp and murmured over her eyelids. Tessa's muscles grew slack. Her body seemed to fold together, looser and more solid at the same time. Even if her mind wouldn't let go, at least her limbs felt rested when she silenced the water.

The tiny window in her bathroom let in a draft and the pumpkin glow of streetlights. But no stars. Just a patch of charcoal sky above the neighboring apartment building. Tessa drummed her pruned fingers on the steam-slicked tiles, wondering if the night was clearer by the harbor.

It wasn't until the next morning, fresh from another shower, already sinking into the trance that would lead her from stairwell to bus stop to elevator to office, that Tessa recognized the weatherman's voice. He appeared on her TV, tuned low for company more than information, broad smile promising a sun-filled day with unseasonably warm temperatures.

Tessa stuttered to a stop, tea bag half submerged. Her mug clanked to the counter separating her strip kitchen from her miniaturized living room. Nudging up the volume, she listened to Skylar Olark dissect wind speeds and dewpoints. No mistake. He was the caller buffeted by waves and whiskey.

In his lanky suit and striped tie, confidently predicting the next seven days, Tessa thought he had a better grip on the

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future than she did. She wondered how a man who last night sounded like he hadn't shaved for a week could look so clean and collected this morning. So awake.

She rubbed her eyes, turned off the TV, and gulped her oversteeped tea. The cup was far too bitter. Tessa would be swallowing the taste until lunch, but she needed whatever meager benefit the caffeine could offer. She'd slept two hours.

The insomnia began in high school, the night before a midterm presentation, when she'd stared at the cobweb whispering from her ceiling fan until dawn. Then her nights filled with salt-soaked pillows and twisted sheets. With wondering how she'd ever lay beside someone else, listening to him breathe for hours, and not go insane.

Tessa avoided public speaking as much as possible after that. But the insomnia returned, falling over her like a thick, black curtain. Suffocating, without sweet oblivion. Tessa stopped answering questions in class. She stopped cheering at football games. She blared the car radio to keep from gossiping with friends. College, with its anonymity, was a relief. She did little for four years besides study and sleep.

The phone was different. The phone, even the family phone of her childhood firmly anchored to the wall, felt disembodied. Anyone could be on the other end. The voice tickling her cheek could be a complete invention.

The weatherman's voice, his whiskey-and-water voice, hovered around Tessa's ear all day. While she picked through her tuna sandwich in an empty corner of the breakroom. While her fingers rattled through spreadsheets. While her tongue swelled, nearly gagging her, as she ordered a third espresso.

His voice didn't say anything. It was a tone, filling Tessa's head with sun-speckled waves, teasing her feet with lazy motion. It made Tessa pause, cursor blinking on her screen, email trailing into nothing as she daydreamed of sleep. Of the ocean breathing beneath her body, her mind rubbed blank.

Sky didn't mean to call the astrologer again. He meant to start a serious apartment search. But his internet was spotty on the

boat. And the wind had picked up, slapping the haul with the usually placid harbor water and wringing the creaky ropes.

“Do you know how to winterize a boat?” Sky asked before she started any mystical interrogation.

He heard her take a breath. Then a soft sound pushing against her lips, trying to get out. Laughter or exasperation, he couldn’t tell. He hadn’t made a woman laugh in a while.

“The stars aren’t Google,” she said. “They’re not your best source for practical knowledge.”

“Fine. What do most people want to know?”

“Should I quit my job.”

“Really?” Sky sputtered on his whiskey. “Not winning lotto numbers or how to find true love?”

“People aren’t as naïve as you think.” She paused. Sky imagined her tilting her head, an ironic twist to her lips. “Not even people who call astrology hotlines in the middle of the night.”

“It’s not the middle of the night. It’s nine o’clock.” Sky eyed the line of his whiskey and nudged the glass away, not sure it was helping his cause.

“So, do you want to know?” she asked.

“Know what?” He rubbed his forehead. The whiskey definitely hadn’t helped. Nor the letter from his wife’s lawyer.

“About your job?” she asked.

“Oh. No.” Sky laughed, the sound startling in the small cabin. “I like my job.”

“But not your wife?”

“No. Not my wife.” He cast about for something less depressing. “Do you own a cat?”

“No.”

“You sound like you should own a cat.”

“There’s no need to insult me.” Again, that soft press of air against her lips. Amusement or exasperation. Sky hoped for amusement. This had to be one of her more interesting conversations. Unless she found the other stuff interesting. Or she believed distant balls of burning gas predicted the future.

Sky’s stomach sank. He towed the whiskey glass back

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toward him, leaving a slug's trail of condensation on the drop-down table.

"How about you?" she asked. "Are cats bad luck on boats?"

"No. Only women." Sky winced. He spent too much of his workday planning spiels. When he left the studio, he became careless. Said whatever drifted into his head.

But the woman laughed. "Oh, we're bad luck wherever you put us."

"I shouldn't comment."

"No. I wouldn't recommend it."

"Is that your professional advice?"

"Yes. The stars are in complete agreement."

The boat shifted beneath Sky. A familiar, comforting imbalance. He wondered if she could hear the waves hitting the pier. If, in the unfurling silence, she imagined the murky seaweed smell or the sleepy eye of the suspicious seagull on his neighbor's gunwale.

He watched the bird through the cabin window. He could've described it to her. Made her laugh again. But he didn't.

He didn't ask any more questions. She didn't offer any predictions. The silence was punctuated by waves and the ropes, that for once didn't grate at Sky's nerves.

Tessa almost fell asleep when the weatherman wound down to nothing. She closed her eyes, and the blackness nearly let her go. But she startled back to wakefulness when he said goodbye.

Tessa fidgeted through the next night's calls; mothers mostly, worried about the directionless state of their children's lives. She hung up, after a husband demanding to know when his wife would be home from "book club," tension coursing between her shoulder blades and tracing up her neck. Restless sparks fizzed between her toes. She drummed her heels on the floor. Echoed the beat with her nails on the coffee table. Considering another cup of tea, she picked up the mug and clinked it back down three times. Her phone's screen remained blank.

Tessa didn't sleep that night.

In the morning, after watching the sunlight gather behind her curtains, she turned on the weather, tea scalding her throat. Skylar Olark appeared polished and clear-eyed. The unseasonal stretch of warm weather pleased him. He joked about getting his boat out for one last weekend.

Tessa switched to another station.

She was used to the pounding in the back of her skull. With her jaw locked, she survived another workday without the benefit of sleep. But her voice stiffened on the phone. Customers echoed in her ear as if calling from years away. Tessa struggled to understand their questions. Her predictions stumbled.

She was ready to sign out early, to fall into bed, when the weatherman called. Tessa snatched up her phone, throat suddenly tight.

“Do you like whiskey?” he asked, the rattle of ice cubes punctuating his own preference.

“No. It makes me seasick.” Tessa laughed. “Is that the best you can do?”

He hummed as he thought it over. She imagined him shuffling along the boat’s deck, still in his weatherman’s shirt and loosened tie. Loafers smacking the polished boards. Did boats still have wooden decks? Tessa had never been on anything bigger than an amusement-park paddleboat.

“Do I drink too much?” Sky asked.

“Yes.”

“That’s not fair. You didn’t even consult the stars.”

“You wouldn’t like what they have to say about it. They probably sound like your wife.”

She bit her lip on the last word. The lack of sleep made her light-headed.

“This can’t be your only job?” the weatherman said.

“I process mortgage applications for a bank.”

“Sounds fascinating.”

Tessa had found a job in a high-walled cubicle, where people were just line items. And she didn’t have to explain to their faces why the math of their lives didn’t add up.

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“Why’d you become a weatherman?” she asked without thinking.

“Meteorologist,” he corrected. “Wait. How’d you—”

“Your voice.” She heard him scowl, his breath rough down the phone line.

“What sort of scam is this?”

“It’s not,” Tessa said, gripping her mug. “I recognized your voice from TV. I promise.”

“I think I’ve had enough of whatever you’re selling.”

“Wait. Really, I’m not—”

The dial tone drilled into Tessa’s ear.

If only she’d slept, just for an hour or two, she wouldn’t have been so careless. But she hadn’t slept, and now she’d ruined it. Whatever *it* was. Her wandering, restless, never-sleeping mind had ruined it.

Mint tea didn’t help. A steaming, nearly scorching shower didn’t help. Pacing around her cluttered bedroom until she tripped over yesterday’s pants certainly didn’t help.

She picked up her phone, scrolling through the short list of contacts. She ought to call someone. Someone she knew. Someone who knew her. Someone she could close her eyes and talk to. But the names looked strange. Too heavy to pronounce.

The insomnia battered her. Days in the cubicle blurred. Tessa fumbled coffee orders. She shied away from coworkers. Even the distant voices of her callers were hard to focus on. Answers no longer sat ready on her tongue, sweet and soothing.

Then, one day, like the universe or the stars or a fairy godmother had dropped it into Tessa’s inbox, an email appeared with a list of recent loan applicants—sent by mistake, as Tessa was in mortgages. But she was too tired to read the message closely and scanned the files, grainy eyes snagging on a name—Olark, S.

Her paper cup shook. Milky coffee spotted her keyboard. He must’ve discussed his options with someone before coming to the bank. Probably everyone at the news station had given him some trite piece of advice about marriage or finance. Tessa

had no experience with the first and too much with the second. She wouldn't have offered him anything he hadn't already heard.

Still, she wished he'd called, if he needed advice.

Tessa deleted the email and didn't log into Star Crossing that night. She took three showers, painted her toenails twice, and still found herself staring at the grubby popcorn ceiling by one o'clock.

She imagined the lulling sound of waves. Was the tide going in or out? Did it sound different when receding? Lonelier?

Hazy, restless dreams filled her head. But it was sleep of a sort. Enough to let her forget.

Sky didn't want to sell the boat. As long as he had the boat, he could still sail for parts unknown. But as long as he lived on the boat, custody would be difficult. And all the math he did insisted he couldn't afford the boat, alimony, and an apartment. Sky had always trusted the numbers, and the numbers said he had to sell the boat.

A cold ache filled his temples. He rubbed them, staring at the whiskey bottle and his cell phone, both untouched. The ropes creaked louder, worse than noontime seagulls. He wouldn't be able to sleep with the noise. He reached for his phone.

She was shocked. He heard it in the pause between the call connecting and her first words.

"You're back."

"I didn't go anywhere." He laughed.

"I can't really read the stars," she said.

"I know."

"But it's not a scam."

"I know."

"Don't sell your boat," she said.

Ice spiked in the veins behind his eyes. "How'd you know I was going to ask that?"

"I saw your loan application." She rushed on, "If you don't get it, don't sell the boat."

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“So, I’m not getting it?”

“I can’t tell you that.”

“There’s an ethics violation in here somewhere,” Sky said.

She laughed. His shoulders loosened. He put the unopened whiskey bottle back in the cupboard.

“If I don’t sell the boat, I’m going to need a second job,” he said.

“You’d be terrible at this,” she said.

Sky grinned. “At least I know what retrograde means.”

“But do you know what it *says*?”

She laughed hard now in muffled fits. He saw her pulling her legs to her chest and smothering her nose in her knees.

“I’ll keep the boat,” he said. “I’ll figure it out.”

“Of course.” She paused, maybe fixing a nonwhiskey beverage. Maybe rolling her eyes at a roommate or opening the door for her boyfriend. Sky had almost forgotten he didn’t know her.

“It’s just math,” she said. “Math’s predictable.”

He might’ve asked her if that was why she worked for a bank. If all this was a joke to her. He might’ve told her that he thought it was a joke too. But he didn’t.

He settled on the stern bench, his face toward the darkening horizon, the first stars just beginning to flicker above his head.

“Mercury will be in retrograde next week,” he said. “In case you’re interested.”

Later, Tessa hung up, gathered her mug and spaghetti bowl from the coffee table, and drifted to the sink. She rattled the dishes under a brief faucet blast. She’d watch the weatherman in the morning, skinny and buoyant, tracking a cold front. There wouldn’t be a trace of whiskey or water in his voice. She’d never understand how he managed such a transformation. But tomorrow she might peer over a few cubicle walls and offer a good morning.

Tessa didn’t shower again or even turn on the bedroom light. She lay down, closed her eyes, and didn’t find the thick, black curtain taunting her.

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She closed her eyes and saw massing storm clouds. Sun-
slashed waves. A boat bobbing over the horizon.

Tessa closed her eyes. And she slept.