# THE GOOD MONTH

*Why profitable businesses can still feel like they're drowning*

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| CLASSIFICATION | Owner-Dependent Judgment (Cash Visibility) |
| HABITAT | Main Street Retail |
| PRIMARY SIGNAL | No Shared Forecast |

How can a business be profitable on paper and still feel like it's one bad week away from disaster?

## Why This Matters

Owners often describe this as a cash flow problem, and then reach for a loan, a line of credit, or a stricter budget. Sometimes that's the real issue. Often the business has enough cash. What it lacks is a way to see where that cash actually is, and where it's headed, before the bank balance forces the question.

*Priya, her business, and the specific details below are a composite, not a real company. The pattern is real.*

## I. The Symptom

Priya pulled up the year-end numbers in early January and sat with them for a minute before showing anyone.

Revenue was just over $1.3M, up from $1.1M the year before. Margins were healthy for the industry. Her accountant had used the word "profitable" twice in the same email.

She should have felt relief. Instead she felt something closer to confusion, because November had been terrifying. She'd nearly missed a vendor payment for the first time in the shop's six years, had quietly delayed her own paycheck for two weeks, and had spent most of the month checking the bank balance the way some people check a phone that keeps buzzing.

December had actually been a strong month too, better than average. It just hadn't felt that way while she was living through it.

She ran a bike shop, sales and service both, and the rhythm of the business had always been lumpy. Big inventory orders landed in waves. Payroll was steady, but vendor invoices weren't. Some months brought in more than they cost. Some months did the opposite. She has always just watched the checking account and reacted.

"I need a better handle on cash flow," she told her bookkeeper in January. "I don't know if I need a line of credit, or if I just need to plan better, or what."

Her bookkeeper, fairly, pointed out that the books were clean. Nothing was actually wrong with them. Revenue was real. Expenses were tracked. The profit and loss statement told a genuinely good story.

None of that had made November feel any less like drowning.

## II. The Outside Observer

Marcus reached out after a mutual contact mentioned Priya's shop, this the way most of his conversations with owners started.

He came by on a Tuesday afternoon, a slower day for the shop, and asked if he could just watch how the place ran for an hour. No pitch, no software recommendation waiting in his back pocket.

He watched a large parts order get logged in. He watched a mechanic ask Priya whether they could afford to reorder a certain tire brand this week or if it should wait. He watched her glance at her phone, check the bank app, and make the call on the spot.

"How do you usually decide something like that?" Marcus asked, once the mechanic had walked off.

"Honestly? I look at what's in the account and go with my gut. If it feels tight, I wait. If it feels fine, I order."

"Does the account balance today tell you what's actually coming due this week?"

Priya paused. "Not really. It tells me what's there right now. I know some invoices are coming, I just don't have it written down anywhere exact."

Marcus wrote that down and didn't say much else. He asked if he could come back the following week, ideally near the end of the month, when things usually felt tighter.

Priya agreed, mostly curious what he thought he'd find that her bookkeeper hadn't already covered.

## III. The Wrong Diagnosis

Marcus returned in late January, a week that Priya had already flagged as a rough one.

"I think what I actually need is a line of credit," she said before he'd even sat down. "Something to smooth out the gaps so I'm not white-knuckling it every few months."

"Maybe," Marcus said. "What would the line of credit actually fix?"

"It'd give me a cushion. Something to draw from when things get tight, instead of scrambling."

"Would it tell you when things are about to get tight, before they do?"

Priya thought about that. "No. It'd just give me somewhere to go once I already know they are."

"That's the piece I want to map today," Marcus said. "Not whether a credit line would help. Whether you actually have a way to see this coming, or whether you're finding out at the same time the bank balance tells you."

He asked her to walk him through how money actually moved through the business over a normal month.

Priya talked, and Marcus wrote it as a chain. Sales happen daily, mostly small, some large service jobs less often. Deposits land within a day or two. Vendor invoices arrive on their own separate schedules, some net 15, some net 30, no shared calendar. Payroll runs every other Friday, fixed and predictable. Big inventory orders get placed when stock runs low, timed around what's needed, not around what's in the account. At the end of it all, Priya checks the balance and makes calls in the moment.

Five inputs, moving on five different schedules, reconciled by one person's memory and a bank app.

"You don't have a cash problem," Marcus said, looking at the chain. "You have a forecasting problem. The business generates enough. Nobody's ever laid out when it's coming in against when it's going out."

Priya looked at the five inputs, all landing on her desk with no shared calendar between them.

## IV. The Real Constraint

"Walk me through last November in detail," Marcus said. "What actually happened that made it feel that bad?"

Priya thought back. "We placed a big spring inventory order in early November, that's normal timing. Then two vendor invoices landed the same week, which usually doesn't happen, they're just not synced. Payroll hit in the middle of that. By the time I noticed the account was getting low, I was already close to the edge."

"Was any of that actually unpredictable? The order timing, the invoice terms, the payroll schedule?"

"No," she admitted slowly. "All of it was on a schedule somewhere. I just don't track the schedules against each other. I only look at the balance, which only tells me where things stand today, not where they're headed."

"That's the real constraint," Marcus said. "Not cash. Not credit. The fact that the only forecasting tool in this business is your gut, checking a number that's already backward-looking by the time you see it."

"So even a line of credit would just be a nicer safety net under the same blind spot."

"Exactly. It'd help you survive the surprise. It wouldn't stop the surprise from happening."

## V. The Resistance

Priya wasn't fully sold, and said so on their next call.

"I hear you, but building some kind of forecast sounds like a part-time job on its own. I don't have hours free for a finance project."

"Fair," Marcus said.

"And honestly, some of this is just how the business runs. Orders come when stock runs low, not on a tidy schedule. I'm not sure a forecast can actually capture that."

"Also fair."

"I tried a budgeting app once too, a while back. Too generic. It wanted categories that didn't match how a bike shop actually spends money. I gave up on it in a month."

Marcus let that sit. "Everything you're saying is real. It's also why this has stayed the same for six years."

Priya didn't answer right away.

"You're not wrong that it takes effort to build," he continued. "You're not wrong that the timing is irregular. But right now, a $1.3M business is being run on the same visibility tool as someone's personal checking account. Not because the business is small. Because nobody's ever laid the timing out on paper."

"So what, I build some giant spreadsheet and hope it holds up?"

"No. Start smaller. What if we just mapped one month, the known stuff only, payroll dates, typical invoice timing, and see what it shows before deciding whether it's worth keeping?"

Priya exhaled. "Fine. One month. But I'm not promising I'll keep it going."

"That's exactly the right way to start."

## VI. The Small Experiment

They picked the upcoming month, since most of what would hit it was already knowable: two payroll dates, three vendor invoices with known due dates, one inventory order Priya was already planning.

Marcus didn't ask her to build anything complicated. He asked her to talk through what she already knew, the same way he had with the five inputs.

Priya listed every known date and amount for the month. Marcus turned it into a simple week-by-week view: what's expected in, what's expected out, running balance at the end of each week.

It took under an hour to build.

Halfway through the month, Priya glanced at it before deciding whether to place a smaller supplemental order. The forecast showed a tight week coming, the same kind of week that had blindsided her in November. This time she saw it three weeks out instead of three days out, and pushed the order back by a week without anyone noticing a disruption.

The tight week arrived exactly as the sheet had predicted. It didn't feel like drowning. It felt like a normal, slightly quiet week.

It was one month. A handful of known dates. Nothing complicated.

But for the first time in longer than she could remember, Priya saw a rough patch coming instead of finding out she was already in one.

## VII. The Shift

A few weeks later, Priya caught herself updating the sheet without being asked, adding a vendor's new payment terms the moment they changed instead of only noticing when an invoice landed differently than expected.

Nobody had told her to keep doing it. She'd just started seeing the business differently once she had one place that showed the timing instead of just the balance. The lumpy rhythm she'd always described as unpredictable turned out to be mostly predictable. It just needed to be written down somewhere instead of held loosely in her head.

She hadn't handed the sheet to anyone else yet. But when Marcus checked in, she got to the point early.

"I want to try teaching my bookkeeper to update this instead of me. See if it holds up without being something only I maintain."

"What do you think that would free up?"

"Probably not hours. But definitely the dread. That's worth something on its own."

It wasn't fixed. The business still had lumpy months, and probably always would. But for the first time, Priya wasn't looking for a loan to survive the next one. She was looking three weeks ahead instead of three days behind.

## VIII. The Pattern Named

By the following winter, the shop looked the same from the sidewalk. Same storefront, same mechanics, same seasonal rush before spring.

But the week-by-week sheet had become a permanent fixture, now maintained jointly by Priya and her bookkeeper, updated every Monday in about fifteen minutes. November that year brought the same large order and the same clustered invoices it always had. This time, Priya had moved the order two weeks earlier, before the rest of it landed, because she'd seen it coming a month out.

Revenue crossed $1.5M that year, not because the lumpy rhythm went away, but because it stopped ambushing her.

Near the end of one of their last conversations, Marcus asked what she'd tell another owner staring at a good year that somehow still felt scary.

Priya thought about it. "I'd tell them to stop assuming it's a money problem. Check whether it's actually a visibility problem first. I had enough cash almost the whole time. I just never knew when it was going to be tight until it already was."

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## The Pattern

The shape repeats again, in a new form. In a contracting business, the hidden constraint lived inside a quote. In a restaurant, it lived inside a schedule. Here, it lived inside a forecast that never existed, a business generating enough money with no shared view of when that money actually moved.

**Observe.** Watch how information moves, not just how work moves. **Listen.** Let the owner describe a bad month in detail, not just call it a bad month. **Understand.** Map the timing, not just the totals: what's known, and when it lands. **Find the pattern.** The surprise is rarely a surprise. It's usually just untracked. **Improve.** Test the smallest possible forecast before reaching for a bigger fix.

Every business has a version of November. Most owners have never laid out, on paper, exactly why it kept happening.

Let's take a look.

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### Explorer's Notebook

KEY OBSERVATION

A profitable business can still feel like it's drowning when nobody has mapped the timing of money in against money out.

CORE QUESTION

Do you know what's coming due three weeks from now, or only what's in the account today?

FIELD EXERCISE

List every known, predictable expense and expected income for the next four weeks. Lay it out week by week. See which week looks tightest before it arrives, not after.