

When Stars Align

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***Note:** This was written in early 2014 and won second place in a short story competition. I will try to flesh out the story in the future, since I don't have a word limit here.*

"Let's give a warm welcome to Venus, your new classmate." While everyone else whispered about how beautiful her hair was or how perfect her body was or how fitting her name was, I had some sort of dark cloud forming in my skull. Venus. The Morning Star. The Evening Star. A planet, not a star. The almost movie-like sequence that haunts too many of my dreams started playing in my head.

My grandfather was an astronomer, but not by profession, since he never had the chance to go to a university to study astronomy before he went to war. His passion, however, was barely amateur; and as a result, sometime along the course of his amateur career, probably before I was even born, he became some sort of professional without qualifications. I still remember him going to conferences with local astronomers to discuss matters such as space travel, colonization of other planets, and future space studies to find out more about our vast universe.

When you see someone so immersed in doing what they love, it's hard to not to start loving it yourself. And that could not be more true for our family: Dad, who always sat in silent awe as he watched his father map out his ideas of a human Mars colony when he was a young boy; Mom, who married not only a successful businessman but also a lifetime of appreciation for the heavens; and me, who even after having lost his entire family will still find some way to realize my dreams of becoming a true astronomer.

When I was eight, I was taking a morning walk with my grandfather when I said, "Look, Grandpa! That star is so bright!" He just smiled and said, "That's the Morning Star. It comes out to salute the end of the starry night and the start of a wonderful day."

That very evening, on a hasty car ride to the hospital after my grandfather complained of heart pains, my parents' car was struck from the side by a truck; that very evening, I became an orphan without even a warning or a chance to say goodbye.

That very evening, I lost my greatest inspiration. My best friend. My mentor.

Grandpa.

That evening, before I was told the news and brought to an orphanage, I felt a chill go down my spine while doing homework. In a surreal trance, I sat outside and set my gaze on a very bright star in the early evening sky until the police came.

I learned later that I was looking at the Evening Star. It comes out to salute the end of a wonderful day and the start of a starry night. But for me, the Evening Star was mocking me for the end of my wonderful life and the start of a dark future.

While other children came to learn that Santa and the Tooth Fairy were just their parents sneaking around at night, I eventually learned that the Morning Star was not a star at all; it was Venus, the poisonous, hellish, yet beautiful planet. I also came to know that this very planet was also the Evening Star, the symbol of my irreversible losses.

I hate the Evening Star. I hate the planet Venus. I hate this girl whose name is Venus. In the classroom, while Venus did a short introduction of herself, all of these thoughts came to me.

When I took my eyes off of the back of my hand and lifted my head to face toward front of the room, I took a closer look at this girl named Venus. Her skin was rather fair, and she did indeed have a very good figure, as many of the boys noted. . . although at this moment, hatred is suppressing my lust. She looks to be as tall as me, and her almost golden hair extended much below her shoulders. She had a bright but soothing voice; her confident words captured the attention of everyone in our class, even that of Mr. Florence, who never paid attention to anyone during any presentation or any speech. I don't know when she finished speaking or when class began, but when I felt a tap on my right shoulder, who should be there but the famed woman herself.

"What do you want?" She seemed unfazed by my rude acknowledgment of her, and simply gave a cute smile and extended her hand. "Nice to meet you, Edwin. I hope we can be good friends."

I gave her a weird look. "As far as you know I could be some creepy child abductor." But I shook her outstretched hand anyway. I noticed that she smelled good. I couldn't put my finger on it, but I could make out vanilla and strawberry.

For the rest of class, I tuned out Mr. Florence's analysis of Shylock's "Hath not a Jew eyes" speech while I made conversation with Venus on a sheet of paper.

Is Mr. Florence a good teacher? He's alright, but he's way better at interpreting literature than he is at teaching it. Do you like his class? It's alright, but it's nowhere close to my favorite. What, how can you not like English? ;) I just don't =.= I much prefer science. I knew that, silly; astronomy right?

The sound of me jumping out of my chair was conveniently hidden by Mr. Florence coughing after choking on a sip of coffee. He should really stop drinking while talking.

How did you know that?! I met you at a youth science conference. . . Wait, what, I knew you from before? Do you think anyone here told me your name, Edwin Braun?

Damn. I always miss these trivial details. Chekhov's gun just blew my mind.

I rubbed my temples with my thumbs until class was dismissed. Last period English always gave me headaches, but this was one hell of a migraine.

Since our last period classes are our homerooms and Mr. Florence gives locker arrangements according to seating, the locker next to me was always unoccupied as no one sat next to me in

English until today. It always sucks starting school a day late, because you didn't actually get to do anything fun on your one extra day of summer (unlike those people coming back to school in October from Jamaica), but you still get a seat all alone in classes where there are table arrangements in twos and you have an even number of friends in that class. Now, I get a seat partner, but I lose my second locker.

Bummer.

"Hey, Edwin!" Venus' now-all-too-familiar voice interrupted my train of thought. I closed my locker while looking over. She seemed to have already finished putting her stuff in her locker; the female gender is really too apt at the art of feng shui. My short glimpse in her locker confirmed that everything was perfectly placed.

"What now? The exit is right down the hall, if that's what you need. See you tomorrow."

She pouted. She's one of those cute pouters, but she genuinely looked disappointed. "No, Edwin. I wanted to ask if you had something to do after school." I couldn't speak. Why is it that my first time hanging out with a girl alone is with this woman?

"Well, I don't have much to do after school, so..."

She wrapped her arm around mine and started tugging me a bit. "Let's go to that coffee shop down the street then!" I pulled away a bit, and gave her a small grunt of affirmation. I immediately regretted that action. Not only because I so easily gave in to someone that I have decided to hate, but also because I realized I enjoyed it when she was pushy with me. Also, the way she held my arm, I got to feel her chest.

Walking down the street with Venus, I could almost feel the looks I was getting from some of my quasi-friends. Usually, people who glare at you like that aren't your real friends. Real friends don't look at you funny in front of you; after all, they just talk about you behind your back. I think having cynical thoughts did something weird to my face, because Venus skipped in front of me and poked my cheek in what I assume is her typical upbeat, insolent manner. "Why the sour look, Edwin?"

"It's nothing." I hold the door open for Venus when we get to the coffee shop. Hating her doesn't stop me from being courteous; after all, you treat people with respect not because they are gentlemen, but rather because you yourself are a gentleman. Or however that saying goes.

Window seats in coffee shops are nice. I remember sitting with my grandfather in a coffee shop somewhere, after I did some sort of presentation about the solar system. It was hard to see outside because of the sun's rays reflecting off of the glass, so I pressed my face right against the window and counted the cars that passed by. How blissful it would be to be able to amuse yourself with such trivialities.

With that being said, I am rather jealous of Venus, who seemed to be quite content looking out the window and mouthing numbers as cars passed by. Her iced cappuccino isn't so iced anymore.

"I don't quite understand why you called me out here," I conceded flatly. She took a small sip of her now melted, watery drink. I could swear she was going for some sort of dramatic pause.

"I don't quite understand why you aren't pleased to be on a date with such a beautiful woman."

I knew better than to follow her up on her comment. "Aren't you new to our class? It's almost April. You should really be studying up; doesn't every school have its own test-writing conventions? Eleventh grade marks count for college apps, you know."

This time, no dramatic pause; just a smile and a much-too-confident "I think I am more than ready in terms of my academics."

She came off to me as one of those people who had low standards. First going to a coffee shop with a reclusive bookworm, then thinking that winging it for the upcoming exams was sufficient for her university prospects.

"Are you serious? I'm the top of our class and I still need to refresh for the exams. Don't get cocky."

She is seriously way too amiable, considering she replied with an even wider smile.

"You know I'm a year younger than you."

This time, I couldn't pretend to not notice the comment. I almost spat out an entire sip of water, but in an attempt to salvage the last few shreds of my image I swallowed the entire thing in one gulp. Ouch. My throat felt like it would explode.

"What the hell? You're sixteen?"

"Actually, I'm fifteen. My birthday is in two weeks. Speaking about my birthday, on that day I have an interview with people from Harvard about an early entrance. Technically, by Western age reckoning you're two years older than me. January 17th, right?"

I looked at her with an incredulous expression. "So, you're a hot prodigal stalker?"

"Actually, the word is not 'prodigal'. Prodigal means recklessly wasteful or extravagant. The word you should be using is 'genius', as an adjective."

"Stop it with the stupid digressions! Tell me what I want to know."

Although I am secretly thanking her for helping me dodge a bullet. I used the word "prodigal" to describe children in an essay I wrote about mental development. Although the actual meaning isn't too far from fact, I should probably fix that.

"If you're asking about why I'm so hot, it's not because I drink a ton of milk."

She quite nearly made me take a peek to call her up on her comment; it would be rather easy too, considering she's leaning a bit over the edge of the table and she was dressed like your average exhibitionist girl in springtime. But I am a true gentleman. For now.

"I want to know why you know my name and birthday without anyone having told you."

"You're not gonna ask about how I know your hobby too?" She gave a laugh, but this time it seemed...tighter.

"Just tell me everything. From the start, from most important to least, I don't care."

Venus took a deep breath to calm herself. Her eyes were cast downward, unlike how confident she had always appeared before.

"I met you at a science conference. You did a presentation on solar systems."

"Yeah, I think I might have. I'm not quite sure though, hard to recall."

"I bet it is; amnesia, right?"

She was visibly shaking now, and I too had a very bad feeling in my gut.

"...How did you know?"

Venus' eyes teared up a bit. When I opened my mouth to prompt her again, she stood up, threw a couple of bills on the table, then turned and walked out of the coffee shop.

I went after her. Even though her name was Venus, even though I was reluctant to hang out with her in the first place, even though I had decided to hate her right off the bat.

She knows about my condition. She knows who I was. She knows me enough to care.

I immediately cast her off as the Evening Star, the bright star grinning that a child's life was ruined. What if...

What if she was the Morning Star? The one who would guide me out of darkness and into the light? The one who would cure my blindness and help me see?

What if she was the one who could help me get my true memories back?

What if she was the one?

There was an isolated field beyond the newer housing in the area. I was panting by the time I reached the middle of the field where Venus was. She had her back to me, and by now she was sobbing.

"Venus, don't cry. What's wrong, Venus? Venus, do you hear me?"

I was walking around her to see her face to face when she also turned to me. Before I could take a closer look at her crying face, she pulled me into an embrace. Feeling how soft she was, my arms instinctively wrapped around her. I gave her a light squeeze and whispered in her ear as I felt my shoulder getting wetter and wetter.

"It's okay, Venus. It's okay."

She didn't stop crying, but my shoulder could no longer take any more tears. I pulled away and looked at her face while fishing for a wet wipe. What do you know, the pout cute girl is also the cry cute girl.

I looked up a bit to not stare at her alluring face as she used the wet wipe to clear the tears on her face. Conveniently, it was the right time to see an obvious bright dot in the southwestern sky.

"Venus, turn around."

She looked at with her slightly red eyes. Her expression pressed for details.

"You'll get it when you turn around. Look up, you can't miss it."

She turned around and gasped when she understood.

"It's the Evening Star..."

I nodded before I realized she couldn't see me since she had her back to me. I inched next to her and sat down. She also sat down, but right up next to me with her head resting against me.

"Edwin Braun did a presentation on the solar system for a youth science group when he was eight."

I felt her starting to shake again, but her hand shot up to my mouth when I opened it to speak.

"I need to tell you this, Edwin. Don't stop me."

She took a short pause. "When Edwin did his presentation, Venus Hypatia was in the audience, entranced by the passion that another kid like me had in something so vast and unimaginably..."

"Lonely?"

"Yes, that's the word. Astronomy often talks about systems and groups of celestial bodies, but there isn't really any sort of that when you are actually out there. It's cold, hot, dangerous, and dead. We see stars as part of constellations, but from one star to the next might actually be hundreds or even thousands of light years. It's like that one Chinese folk tale of the cowherd and the weaver girl, Altair and Vega, separated by the Milky Way's Galactic Center.

"As a seven year old girl, I had no interest in astronomy, or even science. My mom had forced me to go to the conference. But when I saw how in love you were with what you were talking about, how enthusiastic you were to spread your love to those around you..."

"You couldn't help to love it too?"

Venus nodded. She moved even closer to me.

"You had everyone follow you into a field. Did you know that where we are sitting right now is exactly where you were standing? There was a lecture hall right over there, beyond the field, but it was torn down a while back when the local university did reconstruction. You stood in the middle of the field and gave a presentation. You showed us how far each planet would be from each other by having us stand around you, the Earth."

I never remembered doing this. It must be the amnesia.

"It must have been pure coincidence that you asked me to represent Venus, because there is no way you could have known my name. But when I stood seven paces away from you, I remember even today what you said. That I was as beautiful as the Morning Star.

"I asked you a question. 'Isn't it ever lonely to look at things that are so far away all the time?' I remember I had to yell a bit, because you were a few feet away from me. And you told me, 'When you truly love something or someone, you do not have to feel them or even be close to them to fall in love every time you see them.' And when you got into that accident that night, I took your words and held them close. Even though you were truly far away from me, in your blank state, I still fell in love with you every time I thought of you."

I was quite alarmed at this sudden confession. But I went immediately to the important matter:

"I was in an accident?"

"Yes, you were."

"But I thought..."

"That you lost your memories after running into a wall after hearing the news? That in your own anger, you tried to forget everything by knocking your memories out of your own naive skull?"

I had nothing to say.

"That's not true. You were in an accident after your father crashed your family's car in his anger."

The bad feeling in my gut is completely chewing away at my insides now.

"You never told your parents about your hobby. They hated scientists, especially ones interested in something as far out as astronomy. When they came to pick you up from what they thought was a sports day, we were sitting in that very coffee shop we were in today. Your parents had to pick you up late because they had to manage your father's failing business. We were sitting in the coffee shop and talking when your parents arrived.

"The accident was all my fault. As you were leaving with your parents, I mentioned that you did a very good presentation. I didn't know, Edwin. I didn't know. Your parents flew into a rage and marched you into the car. And the very next day, I saw your name on a list of patients when I was in my aunt's office at the hospital.

"It was my fault. And I wanted to hide it from you. During your therapy, I had my aunt find a hypnotist to shape your memories of the past."

I raised an eyebrow. "That was your idea? My uncle never told me this.

Venus nodded. "She made it so that the memories that were put into your head were happier ones. I didn't want you in the car during the accident. I wanted you to hate Venus, the Evening Star, and forget about Venus, the Morning Star. I made you live a life of lies, Edwin. I was selfish and didn't want you to know. I wanted you to hate me, because I hated myself since that day."

I put my arm around Venus and consoled her as she started to cry.

"It's okay, Venus. You meant well. I understand. Thank you for letting me love my parents as people who supported my dreams. If you hadn't, I might have stopped pursuing astronomy. And that would be worse than living any lie."

I don't know when, but during this time the sky had turned dark. Stars shined down upon us, as the only witnesses of our exchange.

"Your parents must have meant well, Edwin. They didn't want you to choose a hard career. But adults don't always understand that doing something that you're passionate for will cast away any sort of regret of having a hard career or a bad salary.

"From that day, my passion was to follow you in your path and be next to you when you need someone to support you. I pushed myself to be beautiful, smart, and worthy of being seen by the person who inspired me."

I have watched enough romantic comedy anime to know where this is going. But first, the important questions.

"Can you tell me something, Venus?"

"Sure."

"Did my grandfather really support my career?"

Venus froze. "I forgot to tell you. Your grandfather died ten years before you were born. After he got a heart attack."

My gut felt like it had exploded.

"People are strongest when they feel that they are working hard for someone else's sake. In your case, your love for your grandfather kept you going when times were rough. Your grandfather would be proud, Edwin; he spent every living day dreaming of being an astronomer. Your parents saw how his health slowly waned as he gazed at the heavens, and that's why they slowly came to loathe science."

I fell back against the grass. Venus, who was leaning on me, just barely caught herself before she broke her fall with her hand.

"Why, Venus, why. Why."

She lay down next to me. It was an extremely erotic situation, but my mind was much too clouded with the new information it was processing.

"Your uncle knew about the whole process. He helped us craft the image of the past we wanted you to have. Did he really not say anything about what happened, even so many years after the accident?"

I shook my head. "He and I barely speak. We only ever make the sparsest of small talk at the dinner table."

"I felt sorry for taking away your parents, Edwin. I felt sorry for taking away your past. So I wanted you to have a brighter future. I wanted you to preserve your love for astronomy. And I did, in the form of love for your grandfather. Your grandfather was never there, but your love for astronomy always was."

I pulled myself off of the grass and stood up. The moon was high in the sky now.

"I have a memory in my head," I said. "I don't know if it's true. Help me fix it."

"I'll try my best."

"My grandfather told me about the Morning Star the day of my solar system presentation. On a walk together."

Venus too stood up and looked me in the eye. She had a puzzled expression.

She started slowly. "That morning, my mom dropped me off at the lecture hall early. I didn't know you would be presenting at the conference, but you were walking alone. You pointed up and yelled to me, 'That star is so bright!'. I was the one who told you that it was the Morning Star, Edwin. Not your grandfather."

But she smiled. "We were alone that day. I never told anyone about our conversation. That memory couldn't have been one that the hypnotist gave you."

The Morning and Evening Stars are really planets. The image of my grandfather that day was really of this girl in front of me named Venus. In the end, nothing is guaranteed to be what it appears to be at first sight. But in the end, when you feel the same, when the love and hate all comes together to make the same everlasting feelings...why does it matter?

Seriously, if I keep thinking these disgusting thoughts I might fall in love before I know it.

I took a step forward and pulled her into a hug. She gasped a bit at the sudden contact, but then she put her own arms around my shoulders.

"That will be our first memory, Venus. That Morning Star we saw was the start of my bright life. With you."

I pulled away after a while. Venus took a step back and looked down. She seemed...embarrassed.

"I can't say that I love you. And you can't truly say that you love me. I'm not the same Edwin Braun that you knew. But from this day forth, I will know Venus Hypatia, and you will know the Edwin Braun that you wished to love."

Venus' skin must have been very fair, because I could see her blush in the moonlight.

Suddenly, she pulled me into a kiss. Not a long, wet, lusty one, but one that said a thousand more words than lips could utter in a fleeting second.

I touched my lips after the kiss. My no-longer virgin lips tingled with the latent feeling of lip balm.

"You know, when you were saying all those things to me, you sounded a lot smarter than you look."

Venus gave a laugh, not a dainty one, but a full, heartfelt one. I joined in, not even skipping a single "ha" as Venus gave me a playful push.

"It's pretty late." Venus was still giggling after we finally stopped laughing. "I feel like such a bad girl, being out with a boy this late."

"You better go on home. I don't want your parents to think I'm some creepy child abductor."

She gave an ironic sort of smile. "Well, as far as I know you could be one. Remember?" She gave a wink and turned to leave.

Damn. Chekhov's gun just blew my mind.

When she walked almost beyond how far I could see in the moon's pale light, I suddenly yelled out. "Venus!"

She turned around. "What is it?"

"Come here tomorrow morning. I want to see the Morning Star. I want to see you."

Venus beamed a radiant smile. "I'll be expecting you."