Words: 1,471

EVENING STAR

"Being right can lead to lonely nights. I guess you know that by now." Addie Capshaw Blaylock was a wiry, sun-browned woman. She planted one fist on hip and jabbed the other at Zela. The slight, ginger-colored woman sighed and slumped.

Addie leaned toward her daughter, jutting her jaw. "And you love Marston, right?"

Zela pictured the pale brown, freckled man with wavy hair, polished teeth, manicured hands and a preference for Prince Nez spectacles. Zela recalled the first time she met the man wearing pin-stripe suit with vest and French cuffs. Marston offered his seat on the crowded train then discussed her book, Twenty Years After. When he invited her to his book club, she'd thought: *What an intelligent and thoughtful gentleman.* Zela also thought of the Sunday Sonata brunches he liked, their tours of museums and flower gardens, the trips to festivals, fairs and antique shops. Zela recalled their last meal, of

swordfish over tomato-saffron infused basmati rice followed by fresh strawberries in sherry vinaigrette. No man had ever offered such eclectic and elegant experiences. Zela mumbled, "I like Marston. I love the things we did together."

"Like or love, what's the difference? He's got a good-paying job, right?" Addie plucked a long-handled spoon from the utensils drawer. "He'll move you out of Big Cat." She nodded to the back door and beyond, at the hollow crammed with old clapboard houses and warehouses. "You won't have to worry about bills getting paid."

Zela nodded. Marston did have a nice apartment in Snowberry. He did fuss about keeping his credit scores high.

"So, what are you sitting around here for? Put on makeup. Wear what he likes. Drive yourself to his family picnic. Show that man what he needs to see."

An hour later, Zela parked on a cobblestone lane shaded by maple and oak trees. She wore a dress that Marston bought for her. He called blue color 'cerulean' and the magnolia print 'persimmon pink.' Zela sat still, watching children ride swings, climb monkey bars and zoom down slides in the park across the street. Over there, adults bounced shuttlecocks and volleyballs while others sat on folding chairs eating chicken and ribs, potato salad and ice box cake. Persimmon pink bordered the cerulean sky, creating a scene so peaceful that Zela decided, *This is a night for forgiving and forgetting.* She

refreshed her lipstick, sank back in her seat and thought of the first time Marston walked her to the old reservoir above the park.

On that Fourth of July evening, dusk lit the dark water dotted with lily pads and algae. Sitting on the stone wall, Zela admired the distant skyscrapers silhouetted against the orange and indigo. She'd sighed, "Twilight is so peaceful."

Marston straightened and pronounced, "You know, of course, twilight simply means that the sun is below the horizon. Most people think that nightfall is the only twilight time. But daybreak is the same situation."

Zela looked up at him, smiling, and Marston continued, "Twilight is a 'between worlds' time. As the brilliant Rod Serling said, twilight, 'is the middle ground before light and shadow.'"

Zela said, "Before? Before light and shadow?"

Marston blinked. He cleared his throat and continued, "In our present situation, we are 'before' the darkness." Marston shook a finger. "Perhaps you, as many others, have the erroneous thought that Serling meant between light and shadow. But Serling was right. Twilight is before light and before shadow. Do you understand the phrasing now?"

"Yes. Of course."

"Good! I like agreeable people." Marston tapped his temple. "I can see that you're a keeper. Yes, indeed."

One year later, Zela's reverie ended when sharp raps on the window startled her. Marston called through the glass, "What are you doing here?"

Zela offered the bespectacled man a frail smile, then lowered her window and said, "You invited me."

"That was two weeks ago." Marston glanced at his parents' porch then the people in the park. "Glad I saw you before anyone else. I think you ought to leave."

"I just got here. And Marston, I'm sorry about our little disagreement."

"It wasn't little. What do you know about astronomy? Pluto is too small to be a planet. It's more like an asteroid. Anyway, you're not supposed to – . Couples should always agree on things. You and I don't. Therefore, we're not compatible."

Visions of her mother jabbing her forefinger danced before Zela's eyes.

Marston continued, "My family's Fourth of July picnic isn't the place to try and make up for what you did, or to force yourself on me."

"Force myself?" Zela shrank back, wondering, *How could you be the same man who called me your turtle dove, your one and only? You said that nothing could break us apart.* Ice cream truck bells jingled. Zela looked from the children racing from the park and up into Marston's scowl, allowing, *Okay, maybe I should have agreed that Pluto is not a planet, even if it has a moon. Everyone needs people to value what they say, which is why you replaced your assistant and stopped speaking to some co-workers. But Marston, you couldn't hold a grudge this long. Not against me.*

A robust woman with baby on one hip nudged Marston then leaned into the car. "Hey, Zela! Glad you finally got here. I thought you'd dumped my stick-in-the-mud brother."

Marston stiffened. His cheeks puffed as she continued, "Come on, Zela. Mom and Dad have been asking about you."

"Not just now." Marston stepped between them. "Zela and I need to talk."

Zela stared at Marston's sister, her eyes pleading, *No, Edetta! Keep us here!*

Instead, Edetta opened Zela's door and grinned, "Don't be long."

Marston harrumphed and crossed the street before looking back at Zela who flared the skirt so that he'd notice the cerulean and persimmon pink magnolias. Instead, Marston frowned through the gathering dusk and huffed, "Come on."

When they reached the reservoir's old, stone wall, Zela watched a jetliner approach the evening's first star. She asked, "Do you know what that star is?"

Marston said, "It's not a star. It's the planet Venus." He stood just beyond arm's length.

Zela said, "Venus, of course."

Marston crossed his arms. "What we call morning and evening stars are always planets. They could be Mercury or Venus, Jupiter or Mars."

"Really?" Zela shoved awe into her voice, thinking, *If I can keep him talking, he'll get past his pride.*

Marston said, "You know, this is a great chance for you to experience solar distance and scale."

"What do you mean?"

"The Sun just set. Rather, the Earth's horizon just rose and covered it."

"Tell me more." Zela offered the words like a garden path.

"You recall, don't you, that the Sun was the size of a silver dollar … ."

Zela thought, *The Sun. Big and round. The light of our lives. It sets every night and comes back in the morning. Just like we can get back to where we were, Marston. We can. And, oops, you were right, Marston. The sun doesn't set. Our horizon rises.*

Marston continued, "And out there now is our Sun's second planet at its greatest eastern elongation. Relative to a silver dollar, Venus is a pencil dot."

Venus. So far away and so bright. Like hope. Do you see that, Marston? And Venus is the goddess of love.

Gazing at the planet, Marston asked, "Did you know that Venus is, on average, over sixty-seven million miles from the Sun?"

Zela said, "I can't grasp one million miles, or even a thousand."

Marston nodded, "I know. But you can imagine millions of miles by remembering where the Sun was a moment ago and the space to Venus, as she circles in adoring orbit … forever."

"I never thought of that."

Marston nodded. "Few would." He stepped away, as though seeking better perspective. "She's a hot planet. Broiling. Can't get close to that."

Zela thought, The sun is pretty hot, too. She said, "Marston, I'm sorry that you're upset with me."

Marston crossed his arms. "As I said in the beginning, Zela, 'Couples should be compatible and agree.' Otherwise, they may seem close," he nodded at the sun and planet, "but they'll be millions of miles apart."

Zela said, "Yes, millions of miles apart." She looked down the grassy slope, past the trees and the food, the children playing and lights glowing inside the houses along the lane. She heard her mother. "Like or love, what's the difference?" "Being right can lead to lonely nights." "Show him what he needs to see."

Zela gazed at Venus. Far, far away, the first fireworks erupted. She bowed her head and murmured, "You were right as always, Marston."

"Of course, I was. What was I right about this time?"

Zela swallowed. Soft, she said, "I ought to go."

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