

READING CHALLENGE

The Girl Who Named Pluto

How an eleven-year-old girl gave a planet its name over breakfast

Level	A2 (Elementary)
Age Group	Teens (11-16)
Topic	Everyday Stories
Duration	~15 minutes
Skill	Reading

In March 1930, an eleven-year-old girl was eating breakfast with her grandfather in Oxford, England. Her grandfather was reading the newspaper. He found an exciting story: astronomers in America had found a new **planet** in our **solar system**. But they did not have a name for it yet. The little girl thought for a moment. Then she said: “Why not call it Pluto?” That simple idea, spoken over toast and tea, changed history.

A New Light in the Sky

The story begins at the Lowell Observatory in Flagstaff, Arizona, in the United States. For many years, astronomers there had been looking for a ninth **planet**. They believed that a large, unknown object was hiding somewhere beyond Neptune, the eighth **planet**. Many scientists had searched for it, but nobody could find it.

Then, on 18 February 1930, a young **astronomer** named Clyde Tombaugh made an incredible discovery. Tombaugh was only 24 years old. He did not have a university degree. He had grown up on a farm in Kansas and had built his own telescopes from old car parts and farm equipment. The Lowell Observatory had hired him because he was very good at studying photographs of the night sky.

Tombaugh spent months comparing thousands of photographs. He was looking for a tiny dot that moved — because planets move against the background of fixed stars. Finally, after almost a year of careful work, he found it. A small, faint point of light had moved between two photographs taken on different nights. It was a new object, far beyond Neptune. The observatory announced the discovery on 13 March 1930, and newspapers around the world carried the exciting news.

What Should We Call It?

There was one big question: what should the new **planet** be called? Thousands of letters and telegrams arrived at the Lowell Observatory with name ideas. People from all over the world sent their suggestions. Some people wanted to call it “Atlas.” Others suggested “Prometheus” or “Minerva.” One woman even wanted to name it after herself! The observatory received more than a thousand different suggestions.

The tradition in astronomy was to name planets after **ancient** Roman gods. Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Neptune, and Uranus were all named after gods from Roman mythology. So the new **planet** also needed a name from Roman mythology. But which god?

Breakfast in Oxford

On the morning of 14 March 1930, a girl named Venetia Burney was sitting at the breakfast table in her family home in Oxford, England. She lived with her mother and her grandfather, Falconer Madan. Her grandfather was a retired librarian from the famous Bodleian Library at Oxford University. He was a very educated man who loved books and learning.

That morning, Falconer Madan was reading The Times newspaper. He read the story about the new **planet** out loud. “They have found a new **planet**,” he said, “and they do not know what to call it.” Venetia was **curious**. She loved school, and she was especially interested in two subjects: astronomy and classical mythology — the old stories about Greek and Roman gods.

Venetia thought about it. The new **planet** was very far from the Sun. It was in the darkest, coldest part of the **solar system**. What Roman god lived in a dark place? Suddenly, the answer was clear. “Why not call it Pluto?” she said. Pluto was the Roman god of the underworld — the dark kingdom below the earth where the dead lived. It was the perfect name for a dark, cold, faraway world.

From the Breakfast Table to America

Falconer Madan thought his granddaughter’s idea was brilliant. But how could an old librarian and a young girl get their idea to the scientists in America? Luckily, Madan had a friend — Herbert Hall Turner, a professor of astronomy at Oxford University. That same day, Madan went to see Professor Turner and told him about Venetia’s suggestion.

Professor Turner loved the name too. He immediately sent a message to the Lowell Observatory in Arizona. His telegram said: “Naming new **planet**, please consider PLUTO, suggested by small girl Venetia Burney for dark gloomy **planet**.” The astronomers in America received the telegram and added “Pluto” to their list of possible names.

The Vote

At the Lowell Observatory, the astronomers discussed many names. The final choice came down to three options: Minerva, Cronus, and Pluto. On 1 May 1930, the staff at the observatory held a **vote**. Every single person voted for Pluto. The decision was unanimous — everyone agreed. The name was announced to the world on that same day.

There were several reasons why “Pluto” won. First, it was a name from Roman mythology, which followed the tradition. Second, it was perfect for a cold, dark **planet** far from the Sun. Third, the first two letters — P and L — were the initials of Percival Lowell, the rich American **astronomer** who had started the search for the ninth **planet** many years before. This was a nice way to **honour** his work.

Venetia’s Reward

When Venetia heard the news that her name had been chosen, she was very happy. Her grandfather gave her five pounds as a reward — which was a lot of money for a child in 1930. Venetia later said that she spent some of it on books.

The story of the girl who named a **planet** appeared in some newspapers at the time, but Venetia did not become very famous. She was a quiet, modest person. She grew up, became a teacher, got married (her married name was Venetia Phair), and lived a normal life in England. She taught economics and mathematics at a school for girls. Most of her students had no idea that their teacher had named a **planet** when she was their age.

Pluto: Planet or Not?

For 76 years, Pluto was the ninth **planet** in our **solar system**. Every schoolchild learned its name. But as telescopes got better, astronomers began to learn more about Pluto, and some of them started to ask difficult questions.

Pluto was very, very small — much smaller than any other **planet**. It was even smaller than Earth's Moon. Its **surface** was covered in ice and frozen gases. Its **orbit** was unusual — it was not a nice, round circle like the other planets. Sometimes Pluto was even closer to the Sun than Neptune!

In the 1990s and 2000s, astronomers found many other small, icy objects in the same part of space. Some of them were almost as big as Pluto. Were they all planets too? If Pluto was a **planet**, then maybe there were hundreds of planets in our **solar system**. Scientists needed a clear rule.

The Big Decision

In August 2006, the International Astronomical Union (IAU) — the organisation that makes rules about naming things in space — held a big meeting in Prague. After much discussion, the astronomers voted to create a new category: the **dwarf planet**. Pluto was moved from “**planet**” to “**dwarf planet**.” It was no longer the ninth **planet**. It was now just a very small, icy world in the outer **solar system**.

Many people were upset. “Pluto is a **planet**!” they said. Children wrote angry letters to scientists. There were T-shirts and bumper stickers that said “Save Pluto!” The **nickname** “plutoed” even became a popular word in 2006 — it meant “to be unfairly removed from a group.” The American Dialect Society voted it the Word of the Year.

What Did Venetia Think?

By 2006, Venetia Burney Phair was 87 years old. When reporters asked her what she thought about Pluto losing its **planet** status, she was calm and practical. She said it did not really bother her. “It's interesting, isn't it?” she said in an interview. “At my age, I've been through a lot more important things than whether Pluto is a **planet** or not.”

Venetia died on 30 April 2009 at the age of 90. She never forgot that breakfast morning in 1930. In interviews later in her life, she always said the same thing: she was just a **curious**

girl who liked mythology and happened to say the right word at the right time.

Pluto Today

In July 2015, NASA's New Horizons spacecraft flew past Pluto after a journey of nine and a half years. It was the first time humans had seen Pluto up close. The photographs were amazing. Pluto had mountains made of ice, flat plains, and a large, heart-shaped area on its **surface**. Scientists were surprised by how interesting and beautiful the little world was.

One of the instruments on the New Horizons spacecraft was named "Venetia" — in **honour** of the girl who gave Pluto its name. Sadly, Venetia had died six years before the spacecraft arrived. But her name, like Pluto's, will travel through space forever.

Why This Story Matters

Venetia's story is special because it shows that great ideas can come from anyone — even an eleven-year-old girl eating breakfast. She was not a scientist. She was not famous. She was just a child who was **curious** about the world and who knew her mythology. When her grandfather read the news, she had the right answer ready.

The story also reminds us that science is always changing. What we call a "**planet**" today might be different tomorrow. Pluto was a **planet** for 76 years, then it was not. Maybe one day, scientists will change their minds again. But whatever Pluto is called — **planet, dwarf planet, or something else** — it will always be the world that an eleven-year-old girl named over breakfast in Oxford, on a spring morning in 1930.

Vocabulary

Term	Definition
planet	a large, round object in space that moves around a star, like Earth or Mars
discover	to find something for the first time
telescope	a tool that makes faraway things look bigger and closer, used to look at stars
suggest	to give an idea or a plan for someone to think about
astronomer	a scientist who studies stars, planets, and space
ancient	very, very old, from thousands of years ago
dwarf	something that is much smaller than the normal size
vote	to choose something by saying yes or no, or by raising your hand
honour	to show great respect for someone or something
solar system	the Sun and all the planets, moons, and other objects that move around it
nickname	an informal or funny name that people use instead of the real name
surface	the outside or top part of something
orbit	to move around something in space, like a planet moves around the Sun
curious	wanting to know or learn about something
myth	an old traditional story about gods, heroes, or magical events

Comprehension Quiz

1. Who discovered the new planet in 1930?

- A) Venetia Burney
- B) Falconer Madan
- C) Clyde Tombaugh
- D) Herbert Turner

2. How old was Venetia when she suggested the name Pluto?

- A) She was seven years old
- B) She was nine years old
- C) She was eleven years old
- D) She was fourteen years old

3. Why did Venetia think 'Pluto' was a good name?

- A) It was the name of her favourite cartoon character
- B) Pluto was the Roman god of the dark underworld, and the planet was very far and dark
- C) Her teacher told her to choose that name
- D) It was her grandfather's middle name

4. How did the name travel from Venetia to the astronomers in America?

- A) Venetia wrote a letter directly to the observatory
- B) Venetia's grandfather told his friend, a professor of astronomy, who sent it to America
- C) Venetia called the observatory on the telephone
- D) Venetia's school entered it in a competition

5. What happened to Pluto in 2006?

- A) Scientists discovered it was actually a star
- B) It exploded and disappeared
- C) Scientists changed it from a planet to a dwarf planet
- D) A new, bigger planet was found behind it

Answer Key

#	Answer	Question
1	C	1. Who discovered the new planet in 1930?
2	C	2. How old was Venetia when she suggested the name Pluto?
3	B	3. Why did Venetia think 'Pluto' was a good name?
4	B	4. How did the name travel from Venetia to the astronomers in America?
5	C	5. What happened to Pluto in 2006?