

Sidewalk Constellations

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[fiction]

The Set, Yasya Schleifer, digital imaging



I stumbled off the steps of the school bus and did not look back as I adjusted my backpack on my shoulders carefully, hoping my laptop wasn't too hurt by the emphatic jostling of the unsecure vehicle.

The bus pulled away from behind me with an ear pinching scream and the oily scent of exhaust. The road ahead was empty, I knew this even with my eyes on the ground. There were no people on the sidewalk, no one splashing in the chlorinated pool, there were just cars on driveways and shut windows lining the neighborhood. But today it seemed even emptier. Her footsteps were not echoing at a quick pace down the sidewalk while I paused with each step, making sure not to step on a crack. Today, there was just silence. Not even a slight breeze to break the horrendous reverie.

I stood there at the beginning of the sidewalk, alone. She would be ten paces ahead of me by now. That's how we had always walked, not acknowledging each other as similar carbon life forms in the universe, but two separate constellations of thoughts and lives.

Many years ago our patterns had been one, but she had started middle school, and then high school, and being a year behind caused my constellation to simply drift apart from hers.

My eyes raised to the sky. There were no stars out, but the sky was an eye aching blue that mocked the silence of my little street with a parallel beauty. She always walked with her eyes on the sky, whereas I kept mine down on the cement, counting and recounting sidewalk cracks.

When I started middle school and we rode the same bus again she laughed when she saw me carefully stepping over the lines, her

red lipstick smile plastered on her face like graffiti on the back of a bathroom stall door.

“Are you actually still doing that?” She laughed, a new laugh I hadn’t heard before. Not the one that reminded me of the summer wind at night, but something mean.

I had nodded in concentration.

“That’s so stupid.” She rolled her eyes and walked on ahead, her black and green shoulder bag with the cute buttons banging on her hip as she left me. That was the first day I realized how greatly our little sections of the sky in a large universe had simply orbited apart.

Now I searched the neighborhood for some other shift. She wasn’t here anymore. If anyone had told me that she would . . . go away, then I would have expected myself to react. But when the principal’s voice came over the intercom at the end French class, telling us all exactly why she hadn’t been on the bus that morning, two girls burst out crying and I just sat there, feeling nothing.

No one knew I even had any relation with her at all, my friends didn’t bring her up except to ask if I knew who she was and I shrugged. I supposed I didn’t know her anymore.

Elizabeth. Her name had been Elizabeth. Does that stay in present tense? Her name is Elizabeth. She was Elizabeth. I don’t know anymore.

idea of being connected?

I could feel time slipping away from me. I should walk home, go inside and tell my mom.

The principal said they called home, maybe she already knew. Would she go over to Elizabeth’s house and try to comfort a fellow mother as if their daughters had been best friends all along?

Or would she shake off the news of her suicide, no longer knowing the girl at all?

Yesterday had been different. I should have known something was wrong, but it had seemed so small.

Elizabeth had helped me.

We were getting off the bus, her in front, me second, and like always I half fell, half stepped from the contraption.

The lace of my converse shoe had caught and I had splayed across the sidewalk, my notebook and pencils scattered across the walkway and into the dark pavement of the street. She stopped, only a couple feet ahead and looked over her shoulder at me, crouched down on my knees, fingers hustling to pick up everything and shove it quickly into a manageable pile. My knees were on one sidewalk square, hands on the next.

She shook her head at me, curly red hair wiggling all the way down her back before she stepped into the road and picked up the stray pencils. She said nothing and gave me no opportunity to thank her.

For four years we had skipped the sidewalk cracks together.

“Slowpoke!” She had jumped ahead on one foot.

Had the neighborhood always been so quiet? Had Elizabeth’s personality really been large enough to fill it up with a false

She just set them down on top of my pile, then turned, and quickly walked away, the heels of her boots tapping out a quick rhythmic pace. The echoes bounced off the silent walls.

“Thank you,” I had whispered to myself, lost in the shadow of her fading presence.

Eventually I gathered my things and

walked home myself. One foot after the next. Line over line. The wrinkling dashes connected the stars. The creases were separated in space by startlingly unequal amounts of concrete. My interval was still growing, but hers had come to a halt.

I realized suddenly that I was still standing in that one spot. A whole procession of little lines waiting for me, forcing me to step over them every morning and every afternoon. Now they stood there as a reminder of losing her.

They mocked me, “did you even know her at all?”

Why was I so scared of little dents in which grass sprung up? Why didn't I just hurry up and walk with her?

If I had gotten over it maybe she would have found a friend in me. Maybe she would have liked me. Maybe she wouldn't have killed herself.

What was so scary?

The lines only laughed in a contempt grin, like Elizabeth did after she told me that it was stupid.

I lifted my shoe to take a step across the line but my foot wouldn't budge. It was suspended in air, trying to breach an invisible wall. My fingers began to tremble, remembering scattered pencils and laughing with Elizabeth as we scampered home. Remembering her eyes and her smile. The way her shoulders

force I could not control until suddenly time began again and... it... fell right smack on top of the sidewalk crack.

“Elizabeth. Her name had been Elizabeth. Does that stay in present tense?”

I stepped on a crack.

I suddenly was breathing again.

I was free. The stars no longer held me in their patterns, I was myself. I was my own cosmic entity in a universe, and maybe somehow Elizabeth would see me and beam like she used to at me, because I was stepping on a crack. ☺

sagged as she walked home each day staring at the sky. The way we would lay at night in the summer when we were little and stare at the stars and name our own constellations.

That moment felt like a line in itself. An endless cluster of points moving in the same direction. My foot was held in the air by a

