



September on the Same Street

Ages 15-18



Chapter 1: The Suitcase Measurement

"How wide is too wide for a suitcase?"

Shprintza puts her ruler across the kitchen table as if a suitcase might appear between the sugar bowl and the bread.

"For the journey or the room?" Shulamis asks.

"Both. The room has four girls. Apparently we have four beds, four cupboards, and no spare inch for being unreasonable."

Shulamis laughs. She can picture Shprintza wedging a trunk under a bed and arguing with it.

Then Shprintza opens the folder.

There is a packing list, a travel sheet, and a drawing of the building where she will study next year. The windows have stone frames. A courtyard lies behind a gate.

Shulamis knows that courtyard. She has studied the picture so often that she can imagine turning left after the gate.

She will not be turning left.

She has accepted a place at the local school. Its building stands opposite the bakery where her father buys rolls. She passes it when she buys eggs.

"I wish you were coming," Shprintza says.

"Me too."

At least that part is easy to say.



Shprintza moves the ruler. "Can I still ask you about things? Or is that awful?"

"You can ask."

Shulamis means it. At that moment, with her friend sitting in her kitchen, she does.

Later, alone, she finds a scrap of paper under the table. On it Shprintza has written: shelves? blanket? laundry bag?

Shulamis puts it with the folder Shprintza leaves behind.

She wants to write something of her own underneath.

A new street, perhaps.

Chapter 2: The Choice Already Made

The decision happens in July, at the dining-room table with both parents.

Shulamis is eighteen. She knows the difference between not getting a choice and not liking the available choices. It does not make the second one easy.

The distant program costs more than her family can manage this year. The financial assistance offered is smaller than they hope. The local school offers the subjects she wants and a place they can afford. Her parents do not pretend the two experiences are identical.

They compare the actual schedules. They speak with both schools. Shulamis asks her questions herself. After several evenings, she accepts the local place.



She signs the form with a steady hand.

Now, in August, she wants the hand to have been less steady. Then perhaps she can say the choice does not count.

Mama finds her looking at the local timetable. Mama's brown tichel is tucked neatly around her hair, and flour dusts the wrists of her long sleeves.

"Do you need help with anything on there?"

"No. I already understand it. That's the problem."

Mama sits down.

"It's the same street," Shulamis says. "The same bakery. I'll come home and be the same person in the same kitchen."

Mama does not point out that many people would like a familiar kitchen.

"You wanted a year away," she says.

Shulamis nods.

"We can talk about what you hoped would be different. We don't have to call the whole thing wonderful first."

Shulamis looks at the timetable again.

"I don't want another conversation that ends with me being grateful."

"Then it won't."

"I wanted to find out what I'm like when nobody already knows."

Mama brushes flour off one cuff. "That's something worth talking about."



Chapter 3: The Girl Who Is Fine

At their final class gathering, the girls sit around two long tables. Someone brings lemon cake. Someone brings a notebook for addresses.

The conversation turns to next year.

One girl will study in another town. Another is staying nearby. Two are nervous about living with strangers. Nobody is as certain as she sounds during the first five minutes.

"You're so sensible," Henny tells Shulamis. "At least you won't waste time being homesick."

"That's me," Shulamis says. "Extremely sensible."

Shprintza hears her tone.

Shulamis cuts her cake into thin strips and leaves them on the plate. Sensible is beginning to sound like a certificate for wanting less.

On the walk home, Shprintza asks, "Are you angry at me?"

"No."

"You stopped asking about the room."

"I don't have a room to ask about."

The sentence is sharper than she intends. Shprintza looks away.

Shulamis almost explains that she is joking. She is not joking.



"I'm sorry," she says. "I want you to have a good year. I'm also having a hard time hearing about every detail right now."

"I asked if I could talk about it."

"And I said yes. I thought I could."

They stop beside the bakery's closed side door.

"What am I supposed to do?" Shprintza asks. "Pretend I'm not going?"

"No. That would be worse."

Shulamis does not have an answer ready. She looks down at the uneven pavement.

"Could we still talk about it, but not spend every visit on packing? I'd like some ordinary time with you before you leave."

Shprintza folds the address notebook under her arm.

"I want that too. You could have told me without the room sentence."

"I know."

They start walking again. For half a block, neither speaks.

Then Shprintza says, "Do you still have the pattern for the bag we never finish?"

"We do finish yours. Mine is the one with one handle."

"That seems like something we should settle before I leave the town."



Chapter 4: An Old Kitchen, a New Arrangement

Shulamis makes a list of what she means by getting away.

Some entries are about distance. She wants a journey. She wants to wake in a room that does not contain her childhood bookcase. Those wishes do not become possible because she writes them neatly.

Other entries surprise her.

Choosing her own study hours. Being responsible for getting herself to class. Meeting people who do not know that she once cries during a school presentation. Having a place where she can work without being asked where the clean towels are.

At supper, she asks for a household conversation.

Her younger brother immediately looks guilty.

"I haven't done anything."

"This isn't about you."

"That doesn't usually help."

Tatty puts down his fork. "Go on."

Shulamis has regular jobs at home. She wants to keep a fair share. She also wants her new school hours to count, even though she will still sleep upstairs.

Mama brings the weekly page they use for household tasks. They spread it beside the bowls.



Some jobs stay with Shulamis. Some move. Supper on Tuesdays becomes Tatty's responsibility because that is her late study afternoon. The younger children will not bring every missing sock to her closed door.

"They can knock if it's urgent," Mama says.

"Missing socks are urgent to their owners," Shulamis says.

They agree on what can wait. Mama keeps responsibility for the younger children. Shulamis is a sister, not the person automatically in charge because she is nearby.

The upstairs desk belongs to two sisters, so they cannot declare it hers all afternoon. They arrange time there and time in the school's study room.

"Will this make it feel like the other program?" Tatty asks.

"No."

He nods. "Then we'll make this arrangement work for the program you're actually doing."

That is the first plan in weeks that does not ask her to imagine a different building.

Chapter 5: A Seat She Has to Choose

The local school's opening morning smells of fresh paint.

Shulamis knows the street. She does not know which staircase leads to her classroom.



A girl beside the noticeboard is trying to work out the same thing. She has a dark skirt, a high-necked blouse, and a folder so full it will not close.

"Are we upstairs?" the girl asks.

"I think so. But I wouldn't trust me yet."

They find the room together.

The girl's name is Nissel. Her family moves to town that summer. She looks at the desks with the expression Shulamis keeps hidden for most of August.

"Do you know everyone?" Nissel asks.

"Some. Not everyone."

"That's still more than none."

Shulamis takes a seat beside her.

The first teacher does not know Shulamis's name. She does not know that Shulamis is sensible, quiet, helpful, or good at keeping a table orderly. She asks what subjects interest each girl.

Shulamis says she likes writing but has not decided what she wants to do with it.

The teacher writes that down. She does not complete the answer for her.

At lunch, a familiar girl calls Shulamis across the room. Nissel is still unpacking her food.

Shulamis can join the old group. She can also ask whether there is room for both of them. Neither choice determines the entire year.



She asks. They move two chairs.

After lunch, Shulamis finds the study room. It has a long shelf of dictionaries and one window that opens only halfway.

Nothing about it resembles the stone courtyard.

She puts her folder on the table anyway.

Chapter 6: The Empty Space on Tuesday

Shprintza leaves on a Monday.

They finish Shulamis's bag the afternoon before. One handle is a little shorter than the other. Shprintza offers to take it off and redo it.

"Leave it," Shulamis says. "It works."

Shprintza slips a note inside. Shulamis does not read it until she gets home.

It says: Write about actual things. Even if they are boring. I will too.

On Tuesday, Shulamis goes to the study room after class. She has the afternoon she asks for, with no one waiting for her to make supper.

For twenty minutes, she does not study.

She thinks of Shprintza finding a bed in a room with three other girls. She thinks of meals she cannot picture and of the journey she does not take.

Then she gets angry at herself. She has obtained her own quiet hours. Must she ruin those too?



She closes the folder and takes a short walk in the school courtyard. It is mostly paving stones and two planters. A member of staff waters them at the far end.

She comes back, drinks some water, and opens the page again. She does not need to finish the day's sadness before beginning the work.

After forty minutes, she has one paragraph and several crossed-out starts.

The paragraph is hers.

At home, Tatty's supper is ready later than usual. The younger children discuss whether his rice is supposed to look like that.

"It is rice," he says. "That is my strongest claim."

Shulamis laughs and takes a spoonful.

Nobody asks her to make a second supper.

Chapter 7: The Letter Without a Tour

Shprintza's first letter arrives ten days later. She likes one teacher, finds another difficult, and is learning which cupboard door strikes the bed if she opens it too far. She misses home at inconvenient moments.

Shulamis is relieved, then ashamed of being relieved.

She does not wish for Shprintza to be unhappy. She is glad the distant place contains ordinary problems, because her imagination has given it none.

She takes a blank sheet for the reply.



Her first sentence is, Nothing much happens here.

She crosses it out. Not because every day must be remarkable, but because it is not true.

She writes about the opening lesson, about Nissel, and about the study-room window. She tells Shprintza that Tuesday feels strange and that the household arrangement works most days. She includes Tatty's claim about the rice.

Then she pauses.

There is a sentence she does not want to write because it seems disloyal to her August self.

I think I like my writing teacher.

She writes it.

Below it, she adds: I still wish we could go through that gate together.

Both sentences remain.

Chapter 8: Opposite the Bakery

By the end of October, Shulamis knows which stair squeaks outside her classroom. She has a regular study partner. She has also learned that Nissel dislikes being introduced as the new girl after she has already met someone twice.

On Thursdays, Shulamis and Nissel sometimes work at the same study-room table without speaking. Shulamis likes having company that does not need a performance.



One afternoon, she passes the bakery with a page of writing in her bag. Her teacher has returned it with a question in the margin. Shulamis thinks she can answer it, but not with the ending she currently has.

Inside the bakery, a woman tells Mama, "How lovely to have your big girl still at home. All that help."

Shulamis hears it as she enters.

Mama smiles. "It's good to have her here. She's doing a full school year. We work around her studies."

It is a short answer. Shulamis likes that Mama does not turn her into either a sacrifice or a treasure kept in the kitchen.

On the walk home, Mama asks about her day.

"I have to rewrite an ending."

"Do you know how?"

"Not yet."

At the corner, they pass Shulamis's school. She looks at the gate. There is a bicycle beside it and a leaf caught in the latch.

She still wants a journey. She may choose one in another year, when different choices are possible. She does not have to promise that now, or give up wanting it to defend the year she has.

"I might use the desk after supper," she says.

"Check with your sister."



At home, she checks. Her sister needs twenty minutes first.

Shulamis puts her bag on a chair and helps set the table. After supper, she takes her page upstairs.

The house makes its usual sounds below her. Her brother argues about a missing sock, and someone directs him to the laundry basket.

Shulamis reads the ending again.

On the next clean line, she tries something different.