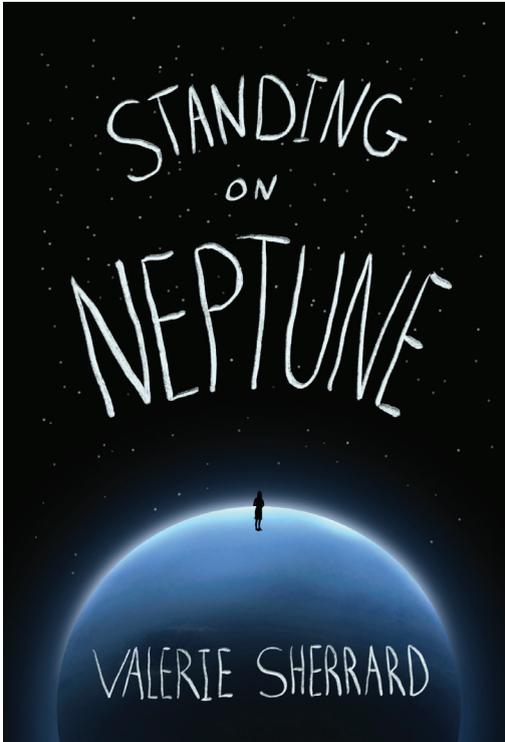


Excerpt from *Standing on Neptune*  
by Valerie Sherrard



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... this is about what happened ...

Except

I've been thinking about the word *happened* —  
the way it speaks of events and moments that  
have been left in the past, as though,  
having taken place, they are  
trapped in time gone by.

Which is a peculiar notion when you  
think about it. Because the truth is:  
everything that *was*  
becomes part of  
what *is*.

So.

This is my story, but it is not  
the story of me — only of  
a moment and moments that  
took place in my life  
and crept into who I am.

... skipping the intros ...

Every story has a main character. In this one, I have claimed that part as my own. It is a role you are unlikely to envy.

There are others, of course. The cast of supporting characters. Or, actually, and after a moment's pause, I will call them the cast of surrounding characters. But there is no need for introductions at the moment. You will only have forgotten them by the time they make an appearance.

Although, there is one person you really should meet before I begin, because after all, this happening would not have happened without him.

... Ryan ...

If you're hoping for a magical beginning to the Brooke and Ryan love story, a saccharine, "Our eyes met across a crowded room and we just *knew*," type of thing, you might as well turn the page now.

It was a decidedly unromantic beginning.

I'd been vaguely aware of Ryan for years.

He was in one of my classes in grade nine, but I can't say he registered as more than another face in the daily surge of students hurrying through our school.

Then he happened to sit next to me on the bleachers at a volleyball game about six months ago. (Okay, it was April 6, but I only remember the date because it was my cat Erpo's birthday.) We exchanged bits of conversation, plus a smile or two if memory serves, and when the game was over, he made an awkwardly casual remark that it had been nice talking to me.

And I remember thinking: *Hmmmm*.

After that, there were three or four “chance meetings” at the cafeteria or lockers where he’d chirp a surprised, “Oh! Hi!” as if these encounters were organizing themselves.

By the time he made a move, which was to blurt, “Um, you wanna exchange numbers?” I knew I was interested. There was something weirdly appealing about his lack of finesse.

Our first date was a disaster. Agonizing stretches of dead air, which somehow weren't nearly as painful as the sudden bursts of conversation.

I wished myself anywhere else, with anyone else.

When it finally ended I could feel his relief as powerfully as my own. And then — he kissed me. To this day I’m convinced it was his joy over the horrid evening *ending* that moved him to grab my hand and lean in, eyes oddly frantic as he pressed his lips to mine. But something happened in those seconds, something —

Well, what do you know.

Apparently there was a bit of magic there after all.

**MONDAY**

... minus five ...

It happened in a single second in time —  
the second when I was  
on one knee, tying shoelaces,  
through the Monday morning haze of not  
one hundred percent alert.

The next moment, I would have headed to school  
exactly like any other day  
any other beautiful, unremarkable, everyday day.

Except, the radio was on and the announcer's cheery voice  
snuck a number past my still-somewhat-sleepy brain  
which is when  
a minor bit of math nudged its way into  
the Ordinary Moment  
and time suspended itself.

A simple calculation  
that  
sucked the air  
from my lungs

and turned my feet  
to roots.

$$x + y = -5$$