

# Yellow Roses

As promised in his unexpected call this morning, Dani had procured Adina's favorite table at Hindy's: the small, round one tucked into the corner by the window, overlooking the garden. They'd sat there on their third date, then later on their last date, the closer.

"I knew at Hindy's," Dani always tells Shabbos guests. Then Adina smiles, and Daniel smiles back. And someone passes the gefilte fish.

Now, along with seven years, a plate of avocado eggrolls rested between them, a small dish of peanut sauce wedged in

the center, fashioning a flower.

"Avocado eggrolls? Don't you remember the double-*chai* diet for my double-*chai* birthday?" Adina leaned forward over the table and glared at Dani. Then she reached for an eggroll.

Dani blushed as he set the plate out of her reach. "So silly of me, Adi. I—I just thought, well, that you liked them. I forgot. So, you started the diet, that's great!"

"No sugar or white flour, low carbs, fruits and vegetables..."

"Listen, I'm... I'm with you. I'll do it, too." He swept up the basket of garlic rolls and olive dip, plunking it down on the

adjacent table.

"You?" Adina raised her eyebrows. "Mr. chocolate Danish for breakfast? Lox and cream cheese for lunch? Dani, get real. I can do this on my own. And anyway, you'll lose your ten pounds in the first two weeks, and I'll still be here, fifty to go."

"It's time I got healthier." Dani opened the menu. "It'll be good for me. We can have, uh, what? Pasta? Steak?"

"Dani. We need low-fat protein, like grilled chicken or fish. Red meat is out."

"Ah, I got it. OK. How about... the Chicken Caesar?"

The rolls stared Adina down from the adjacent table. "Maybe we should start tomorrow." She pushed back her chair and looked over at the washing station.

"Wait." Dani lifted his water glass. "Let's make a toast."

Adina indulged him with a smile as she picked up her glass.

"Warmest happy birthday wishes to a terrific person."

Adina patted herself on the shoulder and gave a melodramatic nod. Their marriage counselor Eitan had said they should use the next six months to see if it might work. If it wasn't going by Rosh Chodesh Cheshvan, he'd said, then call it quits.

*How can you give a timeline for such a decision?* Dani had asked.

*Sometimes it puts the pressure on, in a good way,* Eitan had said.

Dani smiled at her, then glanced around and waved.

"Yes?" The waiter took out his tablet.

"Two Chicken Caesars, dressing on the side, no croutons." He winked at Adina. "Anything else?"

She shook her head. "I'm good."

When the waiter was out of earshot, Dani said, "Adina, let's talk about *you*. What did you do today so far?"

Dani leaned forward, elbows on the table. She remembered when they were dating — he really *had* listened to everything she'd said. She'd laughed at his jokes. After that third date, she'd called her sister Leora at midnight and said: *This is it.*

"Shaindy and Sari were running late, since they were jumping on the trampoline, but it was fine, it took me longer to make my spinach-egg white omelet than the usual pour-the-Frosted-Flakes-into-the-bowl deal."

**How can you give a timeline for such a decision? Dani had asked. Sometimes it puts the pressure on, in a good way, Eitan had said.**

She heard herself speaking too fast, watching his eyes and waiting for them to flick away. But they didn't.

"Oh, and your mother called. The transition down to Boca was easier than they'd thought. They want to come this summer."

"Right, she'd mentioned that." Dani strummed the table. "But did she tell you why?"

"No. Why?"

The waiter set the salads down and smiled. "Freshly ground pepper?"

"Please." Adina looked at Dani. "Why, Dani?"

"Sir?" He poised his pepper grinder over Dani's bowl.

"Huh?"

"Freshly ground pepper, sir?"

Dani stared at Adina. "Uh, no, thanks." When the waiter left, he sighed. "They want to see all of us. It's been a -while. But, well, they want to watch Shaindy and Sara while we... go on vacation." He took a bite, chewed carefully.

Adina picked up her fork, moved the pieces of lettuce around.

"What... what do you think?" Dani said.

Adina gave him the slightest of shrugs. "We've never left them."

"They'll be in good hands. My mother thinks we should go up north, up the coast. The air, the ocean..." He put his fork down neatly on the side of his plate and raised his eyebrows at Adina.

They knew. Her mother-in-law, with her perfect *sheitel* and hands that still shaped cinnamon rugelach every Thursday night.

Her father-in-law, with his booming laugh and puff of white hair, like a cloud on the back of his head.

*They are so good,* Adina thought, *so normal.* His parents had been thrilled that at 33, Dani was finally getting married. Both of them, Dani and Adina, had dated for ten years. Both were accountants. Both dreamed of moving to Eretz Yisrael one day.

But Adina's father had his reservations. *You can't really schmooze with the man,* he'd said. But Adina was the one marrying him. And the one who thought it didn't matter.

She pictured them driving up the coast, alone, without the girls' voices filling the space between them. Just the two of them, as it was seven years ago, and as it would be — *perhaps* — when the girls married. What would they talk about for all

those hours?

"It could be good for us," Dani said.

Adina felt the surge of anxiety, deep in her stomach, as she motioned for him to pass the avocado egg-rolls. He frowned.  
"Just one?"

\*\*\*

"He's doing the double-*chai* with you? How cute is that?" Penina Bracha tugged at her blond pony *sheitel* in delight, then rushed up the ten cement steps that bordered the soccer field.

Adina paused at the fourth step, caught her breath as Penina Bracha went up the next flight, then turned and waved Adina to her. "Come! We want that heart rate up!"

Adina huffed up the remainder of the first set of stairs and stopped at the top. She caught her breath and climbed the next set. Penina Bracha stood at the top, tapping her watch. "Three minutes. Not bad. Let's do a lap."

Sweat dripped down Adina's temples as the pair circled the quarter-mile track. The park was gratefully quiet at midday, the morning joggers already at work, the babies and preschoolers napping.

Penina Bracha looped her arm through Adina's. "Are things better?" she said softly.

Adina shrugged. "So-so. He took the girls to Bounce Breakers on Sunday so I could work. And..."

"And?"

"We're leaving next week to go up north. You know, San Luis Obispo, Morro Bay, Monterey..."

"Nice." Penina Bracha smiled. "He's really trying."

Adina exhaled, watched her breath in the air in front of her. "Still. He doesn't get me."

Penina Bracha punched her arm lightly. "He's a *man*, Adina."

"PB, take you and Lazer. You're like two peas in a pod. You both love being around people, having tons of guests..."

"And you and Dani, you're both such nice people, you both care about others more than yourselves..."

They reached the end of the first loop. Penina Bracha stretched out one leg on the bench, bent over and pulled her-

self close to her leg. She breathed in and out deeply. "Life's short, Adina. We think we have all this time..."

"But we have some time, PB. Why should I be miserable during the time I do have?"

Penina Bracha gave her a long look.

Adina tried to read her eyes. PB opened her mouth, closed it. She cleared her throat. "Try your hardest. Do things you never have done before. Give it all you've got..." Penina Bracha raised both arms over her head, inhaled, then lowered them in perfect synchronicity.

"Let *him* try. Let *him* do things he's never done before." Adina lifted her arms, dropped them down at her sides, feeling ridiculous beside such grace.

"Isn't he?" She held Adina's arms up by her head, tried to stretch them straight.

Adina thought of the double-*chai*, Bounce Breakers, the trip. And the yellow roses.

**"I want you to be happy," he hissed. "That's what I wanted. I'm sorry you find that so objectionable."**

Last night, Dani had appeared in the kitchen, brown bag in one hand, bouquet of yellow roses in the other one.

She dipped her nose to inhale the heady fragrance, then stopped herself. Shaking her head at the flowers, she asked, "Why?"

He looked at her from over the tops of his glasses. "Do I need a why? They're your favorite. And I got us diet raspberry sorbet, only 40 calories a cup."

She wanted to smile and say a simple *thank you*. But something stopped her. Her heart pounded as the knot in her stomach tightened. "You need a why because people don't just do things like this. People do things because they *want* something."

Dani gave an almost imperceptible shake of his head. "People do things because they want something. Right. You are right, Adina. I do want something."

*I knew it.*

"I want you to be happy," he hissed. "That's what I wanted. I'm sorry you find that so objectionable."

Her cheeks burned. She wanted to rewind the night, go back to when he'd come in. She'd wanted to smile at the roses. She wanted to make Penina Bracha proud.

Softly, he said, "What is it, Adi? What is so *bad* about being happy?"

Adina laughed. "I'm all for it. I even voted for it in the last election."

"Cut the sarcasm, for once." He crossed his arms over his chest. "I really want to know."

"No, you don't."

Adina released her breath in a rush, then shut her eyes. She rubbed her temples, hard on both sides.

"Adina?"

She wanted chocolate eclairs. Ten of them. A hundred of them. A box of cranberry scones. Seven iced mocha cappuccinos with whipped cream. "Think Prime Pizza's still open?"

Dani let out a forced laugh. "What's wrong with happiness? With accepting a gesture graciously, appreciating it just for what it is?"

She raised an eyebrow at him, gave a shrug. "It won't last," she said, without thinking.

"Huh?"

She tried not to sigh too loudly. "Nothing."

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# *Beneath* the **SURFACE**

SARA WIEDERBLANK



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## Before they were married, she'd imagined long walks on an endless beach. The confessions of their dreams and fears. But it had not materialized.

"How do you know?"

She wrapped her arms around herself and squeezed. She looked at his face, his half-smile and those gray eyes with a little dance to them. Before they were married, she'd imagined long walks on an endless beach. The confessions of their dreams and fears. But it had not materialized.

"It'll last if you make it last, if you work on it. But you're afraid."

Adina laughed. "Afraid?"

Now, Penina Bracha stared at her with big, serious eyes. "Adina. We're talking about a marriage here. The rest of your life. And the girls. *The girls*, Adina."

"You really know how to hit where it hurts, PB."

"I was *there*, Adina. It was atrocious when my parents split."

As they started walking again, Adina thought of carting Shaindy and Sara back and forth to Dani's place. What would it look like? Likely he'd buy a nice condo on the other side of town. He'd eat a lot of take-out. The girls would have a room with a bunk bed, and they'd go to his brother Gershon's house for Shabbos when they came with their pink overnight bags.

"Sometimes," Penina Bracha said quietly, "things don't happen as we'd hoped. Hashem has His plans, though."

"Oh, goodness, PB, you are getting all spiritual on me."

"Just a little." Penina Bracha lifted her head and fixed her gaze far away. "All I'm saying is Hashem knows better than we do. We have to trust... and work, of course, to make it the best we can."

Adina stopped walking, wiped her forehead and tried to steady her breathing. Dani didn't know what she worried about at two in the morning, the dreams she had for the girls, the memory of her ninth-grade math teacher accusing her of cheating

in front of the whole class.

Eyes on her sneakers tracking over the muddy path, Penina Bracha was quiet. Then she squeezed her hand. "What about opening up a little bit yourself, Adina?"

"Me! I'm an open book! I'm always *kvetching* about something."

They reached the parking lot, and Penina Bracha unlocked her car door and gave Adina a quick hug. "You know what I mean, Adina. And enjoy your trip."

\* \* \*

Adina cracked open her eyes and watched the road hug the mountain as it wound up, the white car a safe distance ahead of them. She didn't let her eyes slip to the side, where the drop below was too far to consider.

"I have it all planned out. We'll stop in San Luis Obispo for lunch. Then it's not even twenty minutes to the sea lions at Morro Bay. Then it's a couple of hours, plus, to Monterey. We should get to the hotel by seven. Dinner's ordered from the one kosher restaurant. Grilled chicken, vegetables and salad."

Adina gave him a thumbs-up. "I haven't worn this skirt in two years."

She turned back to watching the road.

"Rest, Adi. It wasn't easy getting the girls ready. We have at least an hour until SLO." He grinned. "That's what the locals call it."

But she felt compelled to stay awake and keep him company, just as she had when her father drove them cross-country. Without a word, he'd driven across the plains, cities, farms and roads, stopping only for two- or three-hour naps. Adina pushed the memory away as Dani lumbered up the mountain.

"The diet isn't so hard, really. It's just a mindset." He patted his stomach.

Adina looked over at him. She'd been in sixth grade. Decades ago. Eons ago. It wasn't even relevant.

"Did I ever tell you how we got out to California?" She heard herself say.

"How you got out here? I guess I assumed you flew?"

"We drove."

"Wow, and I thought this was a long drive. How long did it take?" Dani squinted at the windshield. "A week? It depends which route you took."

"A few days. We barely stopped." She kept watching his face, but he was the same uncomplicated Dani, even here, hours from home.

"And we moved because, well, my father got a new job."

Dani nodded. "A new job. That's great. I mean, I guess if it was a good job."

"The construction industry was booming in southern California. And it wasn't hard to find work practically all year round. There was another survivor, from Warsaw as well, who wrote my father and told him to come out."

The road wound higher, and Adina ventured to peek below. She saw the edge of the Pacific, white and foamy, swirling into the shiny sand. One- or maybe two hundred feet down. She leaned back against the seat, held her stomach.

"Don't look," Dani said.

"But it was... well, sort of hard. I was in seventh grade." *Tell him something that you've never told anyone*, she heard Penina Bracha's voice. "He told us on a Thursday. We left on Sunday."

Dani raised his eyebrows and glanced at Adina. "That's an adventure, huh?"

"That's one word for it." Adina sank back into her seat and rubbed her forehead. "But I had to leave all of my friends, in a heartbeat." Adina remembered going from house to house on Shabbos to tell them. And the impromptu goodbye *shalosh seudos* at her best friend Surie's house. All the girls had promised to keep in touch with Adina and they had, for a few months.

Adina pictured walking into her seventh-grade class. The stares, the questions, and her attempt to elbow into preformed cliques that felt as unforgiving as her wooden desk.

Dani's face softened a bit, his shoulders dropped.

Adina peeked down again at the white foamy waves. Minute by minute, the waves did their dance, a perfect, predictable rhythm. Just like their marriage. Adina took a deep breath, shut her eyes. Was she able to change her steps? If she changed hers, by definition, wouldn't he have to change his?

\* \* \*

That night, after dinner, Adina and Dani ventured down to the sand. The beach was brighter than she'd imagined it would be, with the full moon and gallery of stars shining down.

"They sounded good, right? They weren't sad,

were they?" Adina asked.

Dani shook his head. "Candy-Kids last night, pizza the night before. What could they be sad about?"

Adina refrained from rolling her eyes. Instead, she said, "They're little. Four- and 6-year-olds miss their parents, even if they are in good hands. And being spoiled."

"Oh." He nodded vigorously as he bent down and picked up a stick. "Sure."

She watched as Dani began tracing in the soft sand. Eitan was right. Dani did need things explained, especially emotions.

"So, Adi, that trip across country, when you had to leave like that." Dani's voice was so quiet that Adina hardly recognized it. "What was it like?" He kept his head bent, the end of the stick carving a deep circular gash into the soft sand.

Adina swallowed. "What?"

"What was it like?"

She pushed down the urge to stick anything edible in her mouth, chew and swallow, until she was numb. "Horrific."

"Yeah?"

"Yes." Adina dropped onto the sand, watched as Dani kept making deep lines, over and over again, so the picture he was forming seemed that it could never be erased.

"I'd had tons of good friends. They were all so sincere. Didn't care about silly things, or at least that's what I remember now. And I was just plucked up and plopped down in California... the girls, they weren't so nice."

He stopped, looked at Adina. She saw on his face something new. Yes, it was there, it was compassion. His eyes were soft, his cheeks sunken. He shook his head slowly.

"That's when I started to eat." Adina let out her breath in a rush and lowered her eyes.

Dani walked toward her. "That's rough, Adina. I had no idea. I knew your Dad — well, he worked a lot."

"From sunup to sundown, and then some. Every nail he hammered was for the three of us, and Mommy."

Dani threw the stick to the ground and sat beside her. She was too close to see what he had drawn, the circles and lines just haphazard bits of sand by

## Minute by minute, the waves did their dance, a perfect, predictable rhythm. Just like their marriage.

their feet.

Adina couldn't look at him. She wanted to race into the ocean. It didn't matter what he said. She'd said too much.

"You know, it's funny you're saying this. You never felt a part of things, like you were, for some reason, an outcast. Well, I was, too. Always 'in my own world,' like Eitan says, right? But when I was younger, I focused on my math. That was my whole world."

"But you were never social, right?" Adina ventured.

"You could say that." He looked out to the sea, his eyes faraway. "Adina?"

"What?"

"Until Eitan explained it, I didn't know it bothered you."

Adina felt a deep pang of guilt as she tried to figure out what to say. She let out her breath. "But maybe, well, if we both try to be more open?"

Dani nodded. "I might need some reminders."

"You got it. I might, as well." Adina smiled.

They stood up, and Adina backed away from the design in the sand, far enough so she could see it. Framed inside a perfectly shaped heart were two words and one punctuation mark: *Fresh start?*

\*\*\*

Adina poured two glasses of diet soda, passed one to Dani and wrapped her hand around her cool cup. The quiet *sukkah*, lit by one bulb over the entrance, felt suddenly smaller than it had when the guests had been there. Watching the golden foil stars spin in the breeze, Adina could still hear the echoes of kids' laughter, Lazer's baritone *V'somachta B'chagecha*, and Penina Bracha's whisper of, *You two seem happier.*

Dani took off his glasses and opened his *gemara*.

She closed her eyes, brought the glass to her cheek. She pressed down the rise of discomfort. "It was nice,

right, with the Jaffes?

Lazer and Penina Bracha and the kids had a good time?"

"Sure, it was great." He didn't look up from the page.

Adina's eyes scanned the table, and there, at the end, was the container of chocolate chip cookies Penina Bracha had brought. The perfectly soft kind that demand attention. A lot of it.

Adina went to the end of the table, carefully opened the container and took out four cookies. She sat with her back to Dani and ate them, so fast she didn't even taste them. She reached back for her soda and caught Dani's eyes on her.

"Cookies?"

"Penina Bracha is an excellent baker; you know that. You must try them." She handed him the container.

Dani said a *brachah* and took a small bite. He shrugged. "Not so good. When you stop having sugar, you don't crave it." He winked. Then went back to the page.

She ate three more cookies, then sighed and said to herself, "Why'd I do that?"

"You're worried." He closed the *gemara*. He shaped the stack of napkins into a tight pile, put them back into the ceramic holder. "Or... something? What's bothering you?"

"I don't know. Nothing. I was hungry."

"Really?"

Adina shook her head.

"I don't want to sound, well, annoying or anything, so..."

"So don't." The moment she heard the tone of her voice, she regretted it. "I mean, well, what do you mean?"

Dani took a sip of soda, shook his head. "Nothing."

"I'm sorry, Dani. You can sound annoying. I mean, I won't be annoyed by what you say."

She took in a big breath and promised herself she'd stay quiet. *Be open to what he has to give*, Eitan had said.

Dani tapped the salt and pepper shakers together, *clink, clink, clink*. "Next time, maybe you'll talk. To me.



Or cry, if you need to."

Adina swallowed. She tried to imagine telling him how she felt, resisting the urge to push the food in so tightly that nothing could get out. It was almost impossible. But she thought of the thirty-seven pounds she'd lost, how she could move easier, breathe easier, run after the girls and even jump on the trampoline.

And how somehow, in the process of taking in less and making more space, there was another tiny space opening inside of her.

"Did you see how Shaindy kept to herself the whole night? She stayed inside and played with her dolls. All the kids were out here."

"I didn't even notice." His brows came together. "Have you seen that before?"

"Once or twice. I don't want to be an alarmist or anything, but I'm worried."

"You're allowed."

She sat still. She felt almost afraid to move,

to do anything. An unfamiliar feeling of relief washed over her. She allowed herself to taste it. And then it was gone.

"We'll deal with it. Together. OK?"

She sighed. "I ate too much." Her stomach ached in a way it hadn't for a long time.

"Tomorrow's another day," he said.

"Yes," Adina said.

"And next week is Rosh Chodesh Cheshvan." Dani's face grew serious, and he searched her eyes. "Adi? What do you think?"

"It's not obvious?" she whispered.

"Yes. But I want to hear you say it."

Her eyes floated to the vase of yellow roses, just starting to open. Their petals squeezed together, the color of margarine, each rose layered and layered, around and around they went. Endless possibilities, endless potential.

Yesterday, she'd smiled. She'd said, *Thank you, they're beautiful.*

"Yes, Dani. I want us to continue. Together." ●

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