

The Middle of the Table



Illustration coming soon

For ages 15-18



Chapter 1: The Wrong Flower

The napkin holders are shaped like daisies.

Avishag's younger sister makes twelve, although the family needs eight. Every flower has one petal that points in a different direction from the others.

"We can choose the best ones," the sister says.

Avishag looks at the yellow paper centers.

"Maybe not for this week."

Her sister puts down the last flower.

"Why?"

"They don't match."

"Daisies don't all match."

At seventeen, Avishag knows that is a sensible answer. She does not want a sensible answer. She wants the table in her imagination: matching holders, a white cloth with no old stain near the edge, and dishes that look as if the family buys them all on the same day.

Her friend from school is coming for Shabbos lunch, with the arrangements agreed by their families. Avishag likes the friend. She





also knows the friend's home has quiet rooms, a generous dining table, and chairs nobody needs to borrow from upstairs.

Avishag wants her own house to look less like itself before the friend arrives.

The flowers are stubbornly themselves.





Chapter 2: A Menu for Somebody Else

Mama checks the family's established food-safety and Shabbos preparation arrangements herself.

Avishag brings a list.

"Could we do these instead?"

Mama reads it.

It contains food the family does not usually make. Several things require supplies they do not have.

"We already agreed on the menu," Mama says. "Is there a dietary need we missed?"

"No."

"Then why change it?"

Avishag looks at the list. She nearly says variety.

"It seems nicer."

"We can make a guest welcome with the meal we planned. I'm not changing the shopping and preparation now."





Avishag puts the list beside the cutting board, well away from the food. Mama moves it to the table.

The paper does not gain authority by being near the cooking.

Tatty brings down two chairs. One is the repaired dining chair. The other is the wooden chair from the upstairs desk.

"That one?" Avishag asks.

"It's sound and it fits the table."

She wants to explain that sound and fits are not the qualities she is trying to display. She cannot say it without hearing the problem herself.





Chapter 3: The Sister at the Door

In the afternoon, Avishag carries a basket of family things upstairs.

A small stack of library books. The puzzle Tatty starts with her sister. A cloth bag Mama uses for shopping.

She is supposed to clear the dining area, not erase evidence that people live there. Some of the basket's contents are already on shelves and hooks where they belong.

Her sister follows her.

"Are my flowers going in there?"

"They can stay in your room."

"Mama said they're for the table."

"Mama doesn't understand the style I'm doing."

The sentence is rude enough to surprise both girls.

Avishag's sister folds one paper petal down.

"They're childish?"

"I didn't say that."

She has not said the word. She has supplied its outline.





The sister takes the flower from the basket and goes into their room.

Avishag stands on the landing with a shopping bag that has no reason to be upstairs.

She wants to follow and argue about what she literally said. She also wants to keep carrying things until the house looks calm.

Neither option changes her sister's face.





Chapter 4: A House With People in It

Mama notices the shopping bag is missing while looking for it downstairs.

Avishag brings it back.

"What else is in that basket?"

"I was clearing."

Mama looks at the empty hook.

"Clearing for the table or hiding things?"

Avishag sits.

She says her friend's home looks polished. She says she wants lunch to feel special. She does not immediately say she is embarrassed by the family puzzle and the desk chair.

Mama waits until she does.

Then Mama looks at the table, not at Avishag's face.

"It's our home. We can clean it and set it carefully. We aren't making another family for your friend to visit."





Avishag wants to answer that she knows. She obviously does not know it in a way that helps the flowers.

"What if she thinks it's cheap?"

"She hasn't said that. If a guest treats you unkindly, we can help with it. Removing your sister's work doesn't prevent someone else's possible opinion."

Mama asks what happened at the stairs.

Avishag describes the remark without making the sister's hurt into an overreaction.

"That part needs repairing," Mama says. "Not with your friend. With your sister."

The lunch is tomorrow. The apology is now.





Chapter 5: A Petal Put Back

Her sister sits on the bed with the flowers arranged beside her.

Avishag knocks on the open door.

"Can I come in?"

Her sister nods.

"I was unfair about the holders. I made them sound wrong because I wanted the house to impress someone."

"They don't all match."

"I know. That isn't what I meant when I complained."

She does not ask her sister to forget the remark because a guest is coming. She does not explain that being older makes table worries more complicated.

"I'm sorry. Mama agreed they can go on the table. Do you still want to use them?"

Her sister looks at the folded petal.

"Not if you tell your friend I made them because I'm little."

"I won't."





"And I want to choose the eight."

"All right."

They choose. Avishag's sister keeps one flower with a crooked center because it makes her laugh. Avishag lets her choose it without praising its imperfection as a life lesson.

A flower is allowed to be funny.

Downstairs, they restore the objects that belong on hooks and shelves. The table stays clear enough for the meal. The house does not become a showroom.





Chapter 6: Before the First Compliment

When the friend arrives, Mama and Tatty welcome her according to the family's plan. Avishag shows her where to put her things.

The friend does not inspect the chairs.

Avishag does, on her behalf.

At the table, Avishag sees the cloth's old pale mark near the edge. She nearly puts a dish over it, then notices that moving the dish would make it awkward for Mama to serve.

She leaves it.

The friend asks about the paper daisies.

Avishag's sister sits very still.

"My sister made them," Avishag says. "She chose which ones fit the table."

The friend lifts hers by its base.

"This petal looks as if it's listening."

The sister laughs.

"That's the one I like."





Avishag feels relief so strong she almost turns the compliment into proof that the whole plan is good.

It is one pleased comment about one paper flower.

Avishag turns to her sister. Her sister is still laughing at the petal.





Chapter 7: The Chair Makes a Sound

The desk chair gives a small squeak when Tatty moves it back.

Avishag hates the sound. There is no graceful way to tell a chair not to reveal its origins.

Tatty checks the chair as needed. It remains suitable, and the meal continues. He asks the guest about a book the girls discuss at school.

The friend disagrees with Avishag about the ending. Avishag forgets the squeak long enough to argue about whether the sister in the book should open the envelope.

Her own sister asks what is in the envelope. They explain the invented mystery without spoiling every page.

Nobody says the meal is luxurious. Nobody says a perfect household is unnecessary. There is food, a conversation, and a table that sometimes requires passing a bowl twice.

Afterward, Avishag wants to ask the friend whether her home is nicer.

She hears the question before she says it. It would turn a visit into a ranking the friend never agreed to make.





Instead, she asks whether the friend wants to sit with the family for the planned afternoon or take the quiet time already offered.

The friend chooses company for a while.

Avishag joins her.





Chapter 8: The Twelfth Flower

After Shabbos, the adults handle the usual clearing and storing arrangements. Avishag and her sister put the reusable paper holders in a dry box after Mama checks what can be saved.

The four unused flowers are already in the box. Her sister counts all twelve.

"Can we use them next week?" the sister asks.

"Ask Mama about the table plan," Avishag says. "I'd like to."

Mama agrees they can consider them for the next meal they suit.

Avishag remembers the old stain and the chair. She knows the urge to hide them may return with another guest. She can tell Mama about it before it turns into a criticism of somebody else's work.

Her sister presses the bent petal back into place.

"It still looks like it's listening."

"It does."

Avishag puts it near the top of the box.

Her sister closes the lid, and Avishag puts the box on the shelf.

