



The Morning After the Balloons

Ages 9-12



Chapter 1: The Last String

On Sunday morning, Devorah unties the string from a balloon that no longer has enough air to rise.

Yesterday, it floated over Bubby's chair. Yesterday, the room held twenty relatives, a cake with little icing flowers, and the surprise Devorah kept secret for six weeks.

Today, the room holds three empty serving dishes waiting to go home.

"Wasn't it lovely?" Mama asks. Her green tichel covers all her hair.

Devorah nods.

The party was lovely. Everyone says so. Bubby cried happy tears over the family picture booklet.

There is nothing to complain about.

That seems to make the heaviness in Devorah's chest worse.

Chapter 2: Six Weeks of Almost

For six weeks, she had something to think about while tying her shoes.

Would Bubby recognize the house in Uncle Yitzchok's drawing? Would the cousins arrive before she did? Would anyone forget and say surprise at the wrong time?



Devorah collected the drawings. Mama handled the arrangements. Tatty made the large copies. Devorah wrote the captions and kept the booklet flat under a heavy atlas.

Every few days, she lifted the atlas just enough to check.

Yesterday, Bubby opened the booklet. Her silver tichel covered all her hair. She recognized the house immediately.

The surprise worked.

Devorah spent the rest of the afternoon happy.

Now she has no atlas to lift.

Chapter 3: Do It Again

"We should make another party," Devorah says.

Mama looks up from the dishes.

"For whom?"

Devorah searches the family for a birthday close enough to be useful.

"Maybe an ordinary supper. With a booklet."

"We can think about family plans another day. Today we need to put things away."

Devorah takes the last balloon to the kitchen. Mama will dispose of it safely before the little children come in.



Without the balloon, the sitting room looks even more ordinary.

Devorah tries arranging the cushions exactly as they sat yesterday. That doesn't bring back the guests.

She takes out the spare copy of the booklet.

The pictures are still funny. She doesn't laugh.

Maybe she didn't like the party as much as she thought.

Chapter 4: Not a Review

Mama finds her on the rug with the booklet.

"Are you disappointed with how it went?"

"No. That's what's wrong."

Mama sits down. Devorah tells her about six weeks of almost, and how today feels like she walks past the last step on a staircase that should have another one.

"I wanted it to happen. Now I want it not to be finished."

Mama understands that answer more quickly than Devorah expects.

"There was a lot of excitement before it. Today is a different kind of day."

"Does that mean it wasn't worth all the work?"

"Did you enjoy making it?"

"Yes."



"Did Bubby enjoy it?"

"Yes."

Mama doesn't keep repeating the questions to make Devorah cheerful. She asks them once, and leaves the answers beside today's feeling.

The booklet can be worth making. Sunday can still feel empty.

Chapter 5: Something Ordinary

After lunch, Devorah wants to start planning something enormous.

Instead, she asks Mama to walk with her to return a dish downstairs.

Mrs. Stern opens the door in her brown sheitel, all her hair covered.

"How was the celebration?"

"It went well," Devorah says. "Bubby loved the pictures."

Mrs. Stern asks about one drawing. Devorah tells her the cousin drew five chimneys because he believes an old house deserves extra ones.

Mrs. Stern laughs.

On the stairs, Devorah tells Mama that saying the funny part feels pleasant.

"I'm still sad it's over."

"You can tell me that too."

At home, her little sister is looking for a missing slipper. Devorah helps search. They find it inside a toy wagon, apparently on its way somewhere.



It isn't as exciting as Bubby's surprise.

It is the afternoon that is here.

Chapter 6: The Place for After

On Monday, Devorah decides where to keep the spare booklet.

She doesn't want to put it under the atlas again. That makes it look as if it is waiting for a party that cannot happen a second time in exactly the same way.

She places it on the shelf beside their family album.

Tatty asks which picture Bubby liked most.

"The house with all the chimneys."

He studies it. "We should have hired your cousin to draw our winter heating plan."

Devorah laughs this time.

She still misses having a secret plan to carry to school. She tells Mama when the missing feeling comes back, and they agree to pay attention if it keeps making ordinary days hard.

They don't schedule another huge surprise to chase it away.

After homework, Devorah begins a small drawing just because she wants to draw. There is no guest list. No countdown. No one needs to be surprised.

She draws the toy wagon with the slipper riding in it.



The booklet stays on the shelf, finished.

Today's page lies on her desk, beginning.