

Yellow Roses

My mother's eyes desperately comb the fortuneteller's tent. "He will never leave her, your husband. She will die in his arms. Past the year I am today." The gypsy's gnarled fingers circle a weathered, wrinkled face; golden hoops clang down her bony, crepe paper-like forearm. Instinctively, I shift and kick inside my mother's belly; she is asked to come back *mañana* with more money. *Más pesos*. A request which proves impossible.

Two months later in early spring, within the adobe walls of my grandparents' modest ranch home in stark and sprawling Michoacán, Mexico, I take my first breath – and let out my first cry of distress. Sensing – if such a sense is possible – that I have disappointed both my parents. Specifically, by not being a boy. The following day I am given the name Lourdes María, the second born in a family of what was to be four girls: Lupita, Lourdes, Elena and Regina. Three months after my birth, our family moves to a cramped apartment in crowded, noisy and bustling Guadalajara; roughly three hundred kilometers from my grandparents' ranch.

And seven months after our move, my father's mistress gives birth to a son.

Following Elena's birth, a third daughter, my father abandons his wife and family and moves to a different section of Guadalajara, choosing to reside with his mistress and, by this

time, two young sons. Three years later my mother agrees to a divorce, freeing her husband to marry his mistress and to take his second family, his chosen family, to the United States.

* * *

Ever since I was small, I loved school. When Lupita was old enough for first grade and Mama and I would take her to school, I would cry and cry, begging Mama to let me stay. Sympathetic to her tearful *hija*, my mother pleaded my case: “*Ella no sera problema.*” The teacher suggested they permit me to stay two days – enough time for me to become bored.

¿Yo aburrirme en la escuela? ¡No! It never happened.

During bad times my mother, my sisters and I lived on the cramped patio of a *vecindad*: an adobe building with single rooms, community toilets, and community *lavaderos* – rocky concrete basins used to scrub and rinse clothing. Eventually my mother found work cleaning other people’s homes, and held down a steady job pressing clothes at a nearby dry cleaners. A hard and determined worker, she was soon able to open her own dry-cleaning business and provide me and my sisters with modest belongings and a small place of our own. With the four of us to feed and clothe, she purchased life’s necessities – like shoes – one daughter at a time. On the day it was my turn to accompany Mama to the crowded marketplace, upon returning home I saw friends playing *bebeleche* [hopscotch] in front of our apartment building. Wanting to keep my shiny buckle shoes in perfect condition, I took them off and placed them under a nearby tree.

Sadly... in two minute’s time they were gone. Stolen.

I recall being a loner and a dreamer; spending endless hours stretched out on my back beneath the pressing table at our dry cleaners, my surroundings thick with the hectic clamor of Guadalajara traffic and the scents and sounds of a hot, steaming iron making contact with fabric.

Clad in a simple dress (most likely sewn from calico) my sisters off playing, I was content to listen to my mother's conversations with customers, and to the lively music – *merengue y rancheras* – playing on radio station QRTZ. I'd read and reread the busy, colorful signs tacked to the walls of our converted apartment garage; signs that made it feel more like a business. Fab Detergent. Brill Cream Hair Tonic. Bayer Aspirin. And my favorite Rose Pills – a sure cure for constipation, small but effective. *Chiquitas pero cumplidoras*.

I continued to thrive in an academic environment, performing well on business and math aptitude tests. At age fourteen, I qualified to enter a business degree program at the University of Guadalajara. As it happened, I dropped out of the program at the end of my fourth year, two years shy of earning a degree. Although my mother objected, I believed that reaching age twenty, I needed to support myself and to help my family financially. Thus, I accepted a full-time job as a legal secretary. Although I enjoyed working in a legal office, I missed school. Something I'd known since persuasively joining big sister Lupita's first-grade class. To rectify this problem, I enrolled in nursing school; I'd work during the day, go to school at night, and do volunteer hospital work on Saturdays.

* * *

Eduardo told me over dinner, steaming tamales and rice. He had a four-year-old daughter.

“Her mother is angry and uncooperative and won't let me see her,” he insisted. “Only when my daughter is sick, or it's her birthday.”

“But *why*, Eduardo. Why didn't you tell me before?”

“I've been waiting until the time that our relationship becomes serious.”

“But our relationship *is* serious,” I said, feeling my stomach tighten, my appetite vanish.
“Do you support her? What is her name?”

“Yes, of course I support my daughter,” said Eduardo. “And her name is Araceli.”

It was *not* love at first sight.

Eduardo initially approached me at a graduation celebration. A friend of mine was graduating from the university and had given me a ticket to attend the ceremony and festivities that followed. Unfortunately, due to massive crowds and a lack of communication, after over an hour of searching I still couldn't locate my friend. I sat alone, feeling disappointed and bored, when an unfamiliar man appeared from out of nowhere and offered his hand.

“*No, gracias,*” I said, not wanting to be rude.

“*¿Porque, no?* You don't like to dance?”

“*No, gracias,*” I repeated, wishing he would go away and leave me alone.

“Well, if you don't like to dance, then perhaps you like to talk. Can we talk?” With daring confidence, he pulled up a nearby chair.

I didn't object to Eduardo's looks; he wasn't unattractive. Slender, he stood about five-foot ten with black wavy hair, a nice smile and had a small but distinctive wine-colored birthmark on his left jaw. He was sharply dressed in a dark suit and white shirt and tie. But there was something about him I wasn't sure of. Comfortable with his looks, I wondered about his words. Could they be trusted? I've always had a sixth sense, and my sixth sense ever-so-faintly whispered...

“Be cautious.”

“I’m going to talk to you until I get you to laugh,” Eduardo informed me, conviction directing his tone. “And when you laugh,” he nodded slowly, “*that’s* when we dance.”

“Good luck,” I said, followed by a hearty sigh. Shifting my body and chair away from his own, intent on facing and enjoying the music.

It didn’t happen quickly, or without concerted effort, but in time Eduardo won my attention (he possessed an arsenal of corny jokes) and for one fleeting moment I forgot the music and myself and, yes...I confess, I laughed.

His open invitation to, once again, offer his hand.

As our bodies moved with ease on the crowded, starlit dance floor, I allowed this stranger, this Eduardo – with his masculine scent, stalwart touch and enamored way – to wash away the evening’s previous disappointment. Gaining ground, he began to quiz me on what I liked to do for fun. “Do you like to watch movies? Visit the opera? ¿*Corrida de toros?*”

Responding to the enthusiasm in his voice when he mentioned *corrida de toros*, I once again sighed. But this time smiled wryly, agreeing to meet Eduardo at the bullfights the following afternoon.

I discounted the subtle head-to-toe glow I felt as I dressed. I’m just excited about watching *corrida de toros* I told myself, and the handsome *matadores* I’ve seen on posters since I was little. I checked my image in the mirror, pleased with how I looked in my favorite casual dress (large colorful flowers on a black background), nylon stockings and black flats.

I took the bus downtown and found Eduardo as we'd agreed, in front of the *Plaza de Toros el Progreso*. He was dressed in a loosely-fitted white short-sleeved shirt, brown slacks and polished brown shoes. "Ahh, you look as beautiful in daylight as you do in starlight," he said smiling broadly, shaking my hand with both of his own. He purchased medium-priced seats, 60 *pesos* apiece, and we took our time finding the numbers that matched our tickets on the circular, concrete bleachers. "Do you attend the bullfights often?" Eduardo asked, after we'd settled in our seats. "Do you have a favorite *matador*?"

"Not often." I answered, distracted, adjusting to the environment. "And no, no favorite *matador*." In truth, I loved it all: the alive, electric feel of the arena, the chatter and anticipation of the growing crowd, the warm soothing sun on my skin, and the strong musty scent of dampened sand and dirt.

In step with the massive circle of fans, Eduardo held my elbow and we rose to our feet, cheering and waving as a brass band played the familiar music intended to announce and accompany *el cortejo*, or the opening parade. Central to the parade were three proud, broad-shouldered, brightly- and characteristically-costumed *matadores*. Also on display were the *matadores*' crew of *los banderilleros* and *los picadors* (to anger and tease the bulls); three yoked mules (to remove the bulls once they've been killed); and arena workers (needed to smooth out the sand between individual bullfights). All of the above resulted in a recipe of players creating a color-splashed, crowd-pleasing spectacle.

Upon the parade's conclusion, a lone bull ran through *el toril* (the gate from which the bull enters the arena) towards a single *matador*...

And the first bullfight had begun.

Over the course of two and a half hours, a total of six fierce bulls were skillfully, creatively, artistically faced – and ultimately killed – by the practiced moves of the parading *matadores* and their assistants; never failing to entertain the crowd and judges.

Or myself and Eduardo.

When the winning *matador* ceremoniously removed his hat, bowing to the judges and the crowd, having been awarded one ear and the tail of a bull he'd courageously conquered, Eduardo turned to me and said, "Let's come back to the bullfights again. *¿Te parece?*"

My response as I spontaneously squeezed his hand, "*Sí, siempre y cuando me hagas reír.*" [Yes, if you make me laugh.]

Naturally, the news that Eduardo had a daughter, told to me eight months after the two of us had met, was cause for concern. Feeling hurt and betrayed, lied to by omission, I refused to continue as before. I refused to dine, take walks, dance, attend the opera, or be intimate with Eduardo. Unwilling to take no for an answer, he repeatedly, persistently, showed up at my job or apartment, professing his love. Often with a bouquet of yellow roses. Understandably, I ached for his company. And, of course, for his laughter and the now-familiar feel of his body gently nestled next to mine. "Give me the address of Araceli's mother," I eventually demanded, weakening. "I need to find out if what you are telling me is true."

Cars, taxis and busses zoomed by as my shaky legs walked along the cracked uneven Guadalajara sidewalk, searching for the address Eduardo had written on a small scrap of paper. Arriving at my destination, I hesitated before willing myself to knock soundly on the door. A woman in her mid-twenties, a water-spotted apron covering a loose dress and what appeared to

Yellow Roses/7

be a seven-or-eight months pregnant belly, opened the door half way. “Does Araceli’s mother live here?” I asked, allowing her no time to speak. “Are you her mother?”

“Yes...yes, I am,” the woman answered. “What do you want?”

“I am here to ask you if you are still in a relationship with Eduardo.” And – *BAM* – the door slammed shut and – *click, click* – was securely locked from the inside.

Eduardo’s relentless insistence that he and Araceli’s mother had no romantic contact, that they had each begun anew, proved difficult to ignore. Having long ago surrendered my all to him, and factoring in the door-slamming incident, I concluded that the soon-to-arrive baby *had* to belong to someone else. Trusting Eduardo, believing his version of the story I reluctantly, yet happily, accepted him back into my life.

Soon afterwards we were married by a priest with only my mother, my sisters and Eduardo’s sister, Carmen, in attendance. Our plan was to hold a huge wedding celebration – *una gran fiesta* – the following summer. Eduardo moved a few modest belongings from his parents’ home into my three-room apartment and the two of us began married life together. Successful in banishing the fact that Eduardo had a four-year-old daughter to the deepest recesses of my mind, I was truly, truly happy. Thus, it wasn’t surprising that I was shocked by an out-of-the-blue thorn I experienced one rainy evening several months into our marriage.

Returning home from nursing school at my usual time, I found our apartment empty. No Eduardo. At a loss for what to think or do, I called *la carniceria* – the meat market where he worked – but there was no answer. Trying to study for impending nursing exams, distracted by a worrisome heart and intermittent spurts of pelting rain, I spent the night awake and curled up in an overstuffed chair next to the front door, the sole entrance to our love nest.

Come morning, I telephoned my boss to tell him I wasn't feeling well and wouldn't be coming into work. I walked into the bedroom fully dressed and lay down on the bed, hoping to get some sleep. And I did sleep. But within minutes someone was shaking me awake. And the unbearable worry and pain, the 'thorn,' that had proven so persistent and overpowering the night before, gradually began to feel superficial. Like a tiny poke. My Eduardo was home safe and sound, soaking wet, offering what (in my naïve, denying mind) added up to a convincing explanation: Araceli had become sick with a high fever and he and her mother had taken her to the clinic for treatment.

Eduardo held me close that morning, lulling me long after my body and clothes deemed as wet as his own. He held me, endeared me, hugged me, until... well, until all was forgiven.

Two weeks later he disappeared for nearly seventy-two hours.

Twenty-four hours into his disappearance, I went to Eduardo's parents' home. Only his mother and his sister, Carmen, were there. They both appeared worried, but adamantly insisted they knew nothing. I had telephoned *la carniceria* three times and gotten nowhere. His co-workers insisted that he hadn't shown up for work. I called friends who also knew nothing. I even thought about going back to where Araceli's mother lived but decided against the idea – fearful of what I might find. After forty-eight hours, I confided in my own mother who suggested that together we check the police station, the hospitals and the morgue.

All of which we did.

“Then go back and talk to his family, *mija*,” my mother said. “I suspect they are hiding something. You don't have any other choice. You have to go back and talk to his family.”

This time Carmen was not there when I arrived at Eduardo's parents' home. Instead, I found Eduardo's mother alone. I was forced to speak to her, to ask her for the addresses and phone numbers of friends and relatives who might know where Eduardo was. My mother-in-law's facial lines, movements and stature proved sturdy and hard; a cold demeanor mirrored her appearance. "Follow me," she ordered, without hesitation. Minding, I stepped gingerly from the living room into Eduardo's parents' bedroom, a small crowded room with a dresser, a bed and a bedside table. "This is where my son is," Eduardo's mother said, removing a framed black-and-white picture from a dresser drawer. "He is with his wife and his daughter and new-born son."

Feeling a stabbing pain beneath my heart, my entire body began to shake. "Why did you wait so long to tell me?" I asked, fighting tears, hysteria, staring at the picture of the woman standing next to Eduardo. My Eduardo.

"Because I was afraid," Eduardo's mother answered.

"*Of what?!*" I screamed, losing control, trying to take my eyes off of Araceli's mother – off of her long white gown, shoulder-length veil, and bride's smile. "*Afraid of what?! Answer me now!*"

"Of his anger," my mother-in-law's words faded to a near whisper, her head lowered in shame. "I was afraid of my son's anger."

At a loss for anything more to say or do, shocked and brokenhearted, I stormed out of Eduardo's parents' home, somehow finding my way back to my own apartment.

Where my thoughts raced...

Eduardo has never shown anger since I've known him.-And I've known him for well over a year.-But I have to accept the truth that I saw with my own two eyes.-I do.

Unable to erase the picture of Eduardo and his bride from my mind, I fittingly decided I must take some kind of action; I must speak to a priest. Too humiliated and ashamed to confide in a priest in my own neighborhood, I decided to take a bus to a distant section of Guadalajara. Exiting the bus, I walked several blocks until I came to a church, climbed its wide, concrete steps and entered its welcoming, open doors.

In a kindly, thoughtful manner, Father Luis introduced himself and listened intently as I explained my situation. We both remained silent for what seemed like a lifetime before he reached over to gently cover my folded hands with his own. "Wait here, my child, Father Luis said, rising, the grating sound of his bulky chair vibrating throughout the room. "I will return in time with a solution for you."

It wasn't until I found myself alone in this small, dank, musty space – with its carved wooden furniture, looming Virgin Mary statue, and loitering aftermath of Father Luis's desperately sought-after compassion – that I inhaled deeply and unleashed a torrent of tears.

Gone for over thirty minutes upon his return Father Luis explained, with visible regret, that at this time he was unable to guide me. He indicated that he had spoken with a resident priest and consulted religious text. "I need to consult priests with higher authority which will take at least one week," he explained. "We will find a solution for you, *hija*. We will. Go home and try to forget about what you know. When you are with your husband remain strong and calm. I will contact you soon."

I returned home to our apartment, praying Father Luis was correct; that he and his fellow priests would offer a solution. I was determined to follow his instructions and welcomed Eduardo home after his seventy-two-hour absence, asking few questions. On a Saturday afternoon, five days after my conversation with Father Luis, I was home alone washing dishes when I heard someone enter the apartment. I turned towards the door expecting to see Eduardo, but instead I saw his sister Carmen.

And next to Carmen stood Araceli's mother.

"*You!*" I screamed, hurling a soggy, wadded-up dish rag in her direction. "*You* are the one who slammed the door in my face that day! *Why? Why* didn't you talk to me when I came to your house?! You could have prevented this horrible, impossible situation. *Only you!*"

At this point in time, Araceli's mother took a bold step towards me and proceeded to blurt out her side of the story...

"I knew about you from the start. But Eduardo, *mi marido*," she paused to stare, assert a smug, vicious look, "forbid me to talk to you. He told me he was seeing you because you have a good job. He wants your money. He wants your money to buy his own *carniceria*. He wants his own *carniceria*. Can you blame him?"

Absorbing as best I could all of what Araceli's mother was saying, I immediately slapped her hard across the face. Twice. This escalated into scratching, screeching, more slapping, hair-pulling, slugging, a lamp falling, furniture moving and, of course, incessant and ugly name-calling. "*¡Bruja tonta! ¡Sin verguenza!*"

Finally, out of breath, I backed away, pointed to the door and screamed, “*Leave! Leave this apartment now!*” And Carmen, who had made only scant attempts to break up our brawl, and Araceli’s mother exited through the still-open door.

In the end Eduardo chose me, begging and pleading, professing his undying love. He promised a life together in another city and state far away from Guadalajara. My forever-altered mind, body and soul felt tempted; but I couldn’t forgive his betrayal; nor could I do to his children – to Araceli – what had so willingly, painfully, been done to me.

My older sister, Lupita, rode with me in the taxi. We exited the back seat, paid the driver, and slowly climbed each tall, uneven step that ended at the door of a seemingly run-down medical clinic. Lupita knocked on the door and a woman I recognized from the nursing school answered.

* * *

While I will always hold a fondness in my heart for Eduardo, I no longer ache for his strong, lean body and gentle ways. I do, to this day though, miss his corny jokes, the laughter we shared, and his signature bouquets of yellow roses.

Always yellow roses, my favorite.

I was with my younger sister, Elena, the day we sighted Eduardo from afar at the Guadalajara marketplace decades later. He appeared shorter, heavier, his black hair streaked with grey. And yes, indeed, he was the proprietor of his own *carniceria*.

“I know it’s him,” I told Elena. “Because of the wine-colored birthmark on his jaw.”

