



Eli and the Empty Seat

A story about checking what your mind tells you

Eli walks into the lunchroom with his tray and his heart already thumping. Yesterday three boys from his class laughed, and Eli was sure they were laughing at him. Today the long table by the window has one empty seat. He decides it is the seat nobody wants him to take.

Eli sits at the end of a different table, alone. He eats his sandwich in small, fast bites. Inside his head a voice keeps talking. "They think you are strange. They are talking about you right now. You will always be the boy nobody picks."

By the time the bell rings, Eli's stomach is tight and his shoulders are up by his ears. He feels like he has been running, though he only sat still. His body is giving him a clue. Something feels dangerous, even though nothing dangerous happened.

On the walk home, his older cousin Gavi falls into step with him. Gavi has a way of noticing things without making a big deal of them. "Rough day?" he asks. Eli tells him about the table, the laughing, and the empty seat. Gavi listens all the way to the corner.

"Can I ask you something?" says Gavi. "When the voice in your head says they think you are strange, how do you know it is right?" Eli opens his mouth and closes it. He does not know. The voice just sounds so sure.

Gavi pulls a folded paper from his pocket. It has three lines. "My rebbi taught me this," he says. "One: what is the thought? Two: what do I actually know, and what am I guessing? Three: what else could be true?" Eli reads it twice.

They sit on a low wall. Eli says the thought out loud: "They were laughing at me." Then he sorts it. What he knows: three boys laughed, and he was near them. What he is guessing: that it was about him. What else could be true? A joke from recess. Something one of them read. A funny thing one of them said that morning.



The guess still hurts a little, but it feels smaller now, like a shout turned into a talk. Gavi adds one more step. "Then pick one small thing you can do, even if the voice says no." Eli thinks. He could sit at the long table tomorrow. Or he could just say hello.

The next day the seat by the window is empty again. Eli's hands are cold. The voice says, "Don't." He breathes out slowly, the way he does before a hard test, and walks over. "Is this seat taken?" he asks. Dovid looks up. "Nope. We were saving it for the one who knows how to do the voices from the video."

Eli does not know the voices from the video. He sits anyway. Nobody minds. It turns out the laughing the day before was about a boy named Pinchas who sneezed into his soup. Eli laughs too, a real laugh, surprised at himself.

That night Eli folds Gavi's paper and tapes it inside his notebook. The voice in his head will probably come back. Minds do that. But now Eli knows he can stop, sort out what is known from what is guessed, and choose what to do next. A thought can be loud and still be wrong.

Eli's Thought Check

Notice the thought. Say it out loud or write it down. A thought can feel very sure and still be only a guess.

Sort it. What do I actually know? What am I guessing? What else could be true?

Choose one small step. Pick something you can do even while the thought is still there, like saying hello or asking a question.

Tell someone you trust. A cousin, a parent or a teacher can help you see more than your worried mind can.

A loud thought is not always a true thought.