

The Underside of the Table

Chapter 1: Six Flat Boxes

The caretaker finds them on the shul steps one Thursday afternoon, which is where the caretaker finds everyone.

"Barbecue's in three weeks," he says. "Six picnic tables, still boxed, in the basement. The men's section of the volunteers list is, as usual, theoretical. You two know which end of a screwdriver is up?"

Elimelech knows more than that. Tatty builds bookcases - real ones, with dados and glue, in the garage that smells like pine - and Elimelech has handed him tools since he was six. Shragi knows slightly less, but he is strong and cheerful and free on Sunday, which covers most of it.

The boxes are exactly as flat-pack boxes always are: six tabletops, six pairs of benches, a forest of legs and braces, and a hardware bag with a thousand bolts in three sizes. The instruction sheet shows a smiling family on the finished table and devotes half a page at the back to the underside: the seat supports, the diagonal braces, the bolts that go up from below, where no one will ever see them.

Shragi holds the sheet at arm's length and delivers the verdict of every person who has ever opened a flat-pack box: "How hard can it be? The family's already smiling." The caretaker leaves them the key, the big wrench, and one instruction of his own - sweep up after, the sisterhood meets down here Tuesday - and goes back to his forty things.

Chapter 2: The First Table

The first table teaches them the shape of the afternoon.

The visible part is fast and satisfying. The top goes together in twenty minutes - planks, frame, the big carriage bolts with their nice round heads - and looks, in the middle of the basement, like a table in a catalog. The benches the same. Shragi is already doing the arithmetic: two hours, maybe three, all six, home by lunch.

Then they flip the first table, and the underside undoes the arithmetic. The seat supports have to be held while you reach up blind to start the bolts. The diagonals meet the frame at awkward angles. Every bolt is started by fingertip and finished lying on your back with dust up your sleeves, sixteen per table, and they are what keeps the bench from folding sideways under a person.

"Okay," Shragi says, flat on his back. "Honest question. Who is ever going to look under a picnic table?"

Chapter 3: The Permission

They take the question to the caretaker, because it is his shul and his barbecue, and the caretaker - who is a decent man and has forty things waiting - gives them the honest answer of a man with forty things waiting.

"Boys. Every bolt in the sheet, and tighten them the way the sheet says - that is the table holding people up, and we do not negotiate that. But don't kill yourselves over the underside finishing. The sanding, the wiping - skip it if you like. It's a picnic table, not a piano."

It is permission, real permission, from the person with the standing to give it. Shragi hears it as the answer to the afternoon: bolts by the sheet, finishing skipped, done. Elimelech hears it, and hears Tatty's voice at the same time, the way it comes whenever a job offers an invisible shortcut: a thing ages from the side you didn't do. Not today. Today every bolt is in, both of them, by the sheet. It ages in a year, on the little hands, on the day someone reaches under the bench and meets the part you decided didn't count.

He says none of this out loud, because it would sound like a speech, and the caretaker has forty things waiting.

There is a second reason he says none of it, and it is the one that matters: the caretaker has not asked the six tables to be judged. He has asked them to stand at a barbecue. If Elimelech gives Tatty's lecture now, he is not raising the standard - he is performing it, and performing a standard is just another way of making the visible part the important part. The underside does not care what he says about it. It only cares what he does.

Chapter 4: The Split

They work it out the way friends do, without making anyone wrong.

Shragi is not lazy - that needs saying, and Elimelech says it to himself first. Shragi took the caretaker's permission the way you take any honest answer: the man whose tables they are set the standard, and the standard is skip-the-finishing. There is nothing dishonest in it. It is just not Elimelech's standard, and Elimelech is the one who will walk past these tables every Shabbos.

So they split the work the way the work splits. Together, they build all six tops, all twelve benches, and every underside bolt in the sheet - sixteen a table, ninety-six, each one tightened the way the sheet says, because the sheet, not the wrist, knows the bolt. That part runs past lunch, and neither boy begrudges it: safety is not the part you split. Then Shragi goes home with thanks, and Elimelech stays, and flips the tables one at a time, and finishes the undersides alone: every edge sanded smooth, every surface wiped, the way Tatty finishes wood - the side nobody sees gets the same hand as the side everybody sees.

The caretaker comes down once, around four, and finds him under the fourth table.

"You know you didn't have to," the caretaker says.

"I know," Elimelech says, from underneath, and reaches for the sanding block.

The caretaker watches a moment, then does something Elimelech does not expect: he holds the far end of the fifth table steady while Elimelech works a rough corner smooth, the way you hold something for a person whose mind is made up. Then he dusts off his knees and goes back upstairs, and the basement is quiet except for the sandpaper, which is its own kind of company.

Chapter 5: What the Underside Is For

Lying under the fifth table, with dust in his eyebrows, Elimelech thinks about why he is down here, and the answer has three parts.

The first part is the hands. A picnic table's underside works on quiet Tuesdays. It is where little kids grip when they climb, where a hand reaches to steady a tray, where the spilled soda runs down. A rough underside is a splinter in a six-year-old's palm and a sticky patch under somebody's fingers - small things, except to the hand that finds them.

The second part is the time. Wood drinks weather from the unfinished side first. The skip-the-finishing table is fine for a season and tired by the second summer - gray stains, rough grain, a table that feels old underneath the people using it - and nobody will open it up to check, because nobody ever looks at the underside. Which is exactly the point: the hidden part has to be done right the first time, because it will never get a second look.

The third part he admits only to himself. Tatty would know. Not because anyone would tell him - because Tatty is the kind of man who, sitting down at a picnic table, puts his hand underneath it without thinking, the way some people test a railing.

Chapter 6: The Barbecue

The barbecue comes, and the tables are boring, which is the whole review.

Six tables on the lawn, full of trays and families. A ten-year-old - there is always one - stands up on a bench to reach the watermelon at the far end, and the bench does not so much as creak, and nobody notices, and that is the design working. People lean on the tables to talk. Two men move one to make room for the grill line, dragging it sideways - exactly the diagonal load the braces are for - and the table takes it like a table. And a little girl runs her hand along the bench's underside the way little girls do, and her hand comes back clean and splinter-free, and nobody notices that either, and that is the finishing working.

Elimelech eats his hot dog at table four and says nothing about bolts - there is nothing more boring than a person explaining why nothing went wrong. Once, getting up for a drink, he lets his hand brush the underside of the table edge and keeps walking, and the whole check takes half a second. Shragi says, "Good tables," with his mouth full, and means the afternoon they built them, and Elimelech says, "Good tables," and means the underside, and both of them are right, which is how the friendship survives the difference.

Chapter 7: The Fall

The shul stores the tables in the fall, and the caretaker drafts Elimelech without asking, the way you draft the person who cared the first time.

They flip each table on the lawn before carrying it in, and the caretaker goes down the row the way he goes down everything, quick and thorough, and stops at the first one and looks at the underside for a long moment. Sixteen bolts, each one where the diagram put it - and the underside sanded and wiped like a second tabletop, still smooth after a summer of weather and families.

"Huh," the caretaker says, which from him is a paragraph. He runs a thumb under the bench edge, and it comes back clean. "You know what's funny? I told you the finishing didn't matter. I was even right - for the barbecue." He puts one hand flat on the tabletop. "But the barbecue isn't the job. The job is every summer after this one, and I don't get under here to check, and nobody does. Tables don't know which side faces up. They just hold, or they don't."

He says it to the table, not to Elimelech, which is the caretaker's way of saying it to Elimelech.

Chapter 8: The Stool

In the garage that smells like pine, that winter, Elimelech builds a stool with his little brother, who is nine and has held a level since he was six and considers himself, therefore, a builder.

The stool is simple - top, legs, braces - and his brother does the visible part beautifully, then stands up and announces it done.

"Flip it," Elimelech says.

"Why? It's done. You sit on the top."

"Because the underside is the job," Elimelech says, and hears Tatty's voice come out of his own mouth, and does not mind at all. "The top is where it looks like a stool. The underside is where it IS a stool. In two years -" he catches himself - his brother is nine - and shortens the lecture. "Anything you build fails from the side you didn't do. So we do the side nobody sees first, and we do it right, because nobody's ever going to check it - which means it has to be right the first time."

His brother flips the stool. They do the braces together, tightened the way the stool's own sheet says, and the boy does the last one himself and says, with the satisfaction of a person who has discovered a secret door, "Nobody will ever know these are good."

"The stool knows," Elimelech says.

His brother puts the stool on the floor and stands on it, and it holds, boring, exactly as designed. Elimelech watches the boy's small serious face in the garage light and thinks to himself: this is how it travels. Not a rule. A hand underneath the table, checking.

Eight activities

Activity 1: The job and the event

The caretaker says, "the barbecue isn't the job. The job is every summer after this one." In your own words, what is the difference between doing the event and doing the job? Why does hidden work belong to the job? Two or three sentences.

Activity 2: The three parts

List the three parts of Elimelech's under-the-table reasoning (hands, time, and the third), and explain each in one line. Which one does he admit only to himself, and why? Short answers.

Activity 3: Order the repair

Put these in the story's order, and say why the order matters: (a) the caretaker's fall inspection; (b) the split - tops together, undersides alone; (c) the caretaker's permission; (d) the barbecue; (e) the stool. One sentence on why the order matters.

Activity 4: The bolt math - a made-up set of numbers

The numbers in this activity are made up for practice. A picnic table takes 25 minutes to assemble with every bolt in the sheet - not optional, so it sits in both columns. Underside finishing (sand and wipe) adds 10 minutes a table. Skipped finishing means refinishing later: each table needs a one-hour refinish at the end of seasons 2 and 4 to stay decent. (a) For 6 tables over 6 seasons, which path costs fewer total work-hours? (b) The story's arithmetic is not only hours - what does the visible math leave out? Show your steps.

Activity 5: "Tables don't know which side faces up."

What does the caretaker mean? Why is the hidden part the one that has to be right the FIRST time? Two or three sentences.

Activity 6: Draw the underside

Draw the underside of the first table as Chapters 2 and 4 give it: the seat supports, the diagonal braces, and the bolts - where they go and how many. Only what the story tells you. Caption it with one line from the story.

Activity 7: Emuna's scenery - a fictional case

A girl named Emuna paints scenery for her school's production, and the stage manager tells her the back of the flats doesn't need the second coat - "the audience only sees the front." Write the reason the back might still be the job, the sentence Emuna says that holds her standard without making the stage manager wrong, and what she actually does. One sentence each, with names.



Activity 8: Word grid

Find the eight words in the grid. They all go left to right, one per row.

T A B L E V W F G H
B E N C H W F G H U
B O L T S F G H U P
H I D D E N H U P M
U N D E R S I D E N
T I G H T E N M N O
S T E A D Y M N O R
S U M M E R N O R S
G H U P M N O R S T
H U P M N O R S T D

The eight words: TABLE, BENCH, BOLTS, HIDDEN, UNDERSIDE, TIGHTEN, STEADY, SUMMER.
Which word names the part nobody sees, and which word names how the tables held at the barbecue - the best review hidden work ever gets?