



The Boy at Two Tables

Ages 9-12



Chapter 1: A Very Loud Duck

Yechiel makes the duck voice just as his classmate steps into the room.

It is an excellent duck voice. His little brother rolls onto the rug laughing. His older brother asks the duck whether it plans to pay for supper.

Then Yechiel sees Bentzy beside Tatty at the door.

The duck disappears.

Bentzy has come with his father to return a book. Yechiel knows him from school, where Yechiel mostly listens and Bentzy mostly speaks.

"That was you?" Bentzy asks.

Yechiel wishes it wasn't.

Chapter 2: The Other Yechiel

At school, Yechiel has a quiet place at the table.

He answers when Rebbi calls on him. He talks with two friends at break. He doesn't usually begin a joke in a group that includes boys he doesn't know well.

At home, he knows when his brothers want the duck. He knows which joke Mama will laugh at and which one will get a request to finish washing his hands first.

Both places feel ordinary until Bentzy walks from one into the other.



Now Yechiel wonders which boy is the real one.

Bentzy stays for ten minutes while the fathers talk. He asks for the duck again.

"I don't do that anymore," Yechiel says.

His little brother stares at him.

He did it two minutes ago.

Chapter 3: Keeping the Duck Shut

After Bentzy leaves, Yechiel is cross with his little brother for asking why he doesn't do the voice anymore.

"You shouldn't have said anything."

"I didn't know it was a secret."

It wasn't a secret until the door opened. Yechiel doesn't know how to explain that.

At supper, his older brother starts the joke about the duck paying.

Yechiel doesn't join in.

Mama notices. Her plum tichel covers all her hair.

"Are you tired?"

"No."



He doesn't want to become the quiet boy at home too. He also doesn't want his family discovering that he keeps one Yechiel for each table.

He eats without looking up.

Chapter 4: Two Rooms, One Boy

After supper, he tells Tatty what bothers him.

"At school, I'm not like that."

"Like what?"

"Funny. Loud. Bentzy thinks I'm quiet."

Tatty listens.

"Do you tell Bentzy something false about yourself?"

Yechiel remembers the sentence at the door.

"I said I don't do the voice anymore. But I do."

"You can correct that. What about before he came?"

"I don't pretend anything. I just don't talk as much."

Tatty asks whether he feels afraid to speak at school or is being treated unkindly. Yechiel says no. Sometimes he needs help with a class answer, and Rabbi helps. Mostly he likes listening to the boys who know the whole table well.

"I feel different there," he says.



"Different rooms can bring out different parts of you. That doesn't make one room's Yechiel false."

Yechiel looks toward the kitchen.

"You talk differently with Uncle Berel than with the little ones."

"I do. Uncle Berel has less interest in how a duck would hold a spoon."

Yechiel smiles.

Chapter 5: Not a Performance

On Sunday, Bentzy comes to his desk.

"The duck?"

Yechiel feels three boys look up.

He doesn't want to perform for them. That is different from wishing the duck doesn't exist.

"I still do the voice," he says. "I said I didn't because I felt awkward. I mostly do it with my brothers."

"Do it here."

"Not now."

Bentzy shrugs. "All right. It was funny."

Yechiel thanks him.



Then the bell rings, and Rebbi begins. Yechiel answers one question in his ordinary voice.

He doesn't owe the class a duck to prove he tells the truth about home.

Chapter 6: The Visit They Have

A week later, their fathers arrange a short visit after school.

Bentzy comes with a little wooden puzzle. Yechiel asks about it. They work on the pieces at the table while Tatty reads nearby.

There is no duck for the first twenty minutes.

Bentzy talks less while studying a difficult corner. Yechiel talks more because he notices a shape that fits.

Neither makes an announcement about changing personalities.

After the puzzle, Yechiel's little brother brings two cups for a pretend tea party.

He asks the duck to join.

This time, Yechiel wants to do it.

The duck refuses the cup because it has no bill to pay with.

Bentzy laughs. So does the little brother, although he doesn't entirely understand the joke.



Chapter 7: Monday's Table

On Monday, Bentzy tells Yechiel about a cousin who makes an even stranger bird voice.

Yechiel listens, then adds one sentence. The other boys begin another subject.

He doesn't suddenly become the loudest boy at school. He doesn't need to become silent at home either.

At supper, Mama asks how the puzzle visit went.

"Good," he says. "Bentzy gets very quiet when he's working something out."

"So do you sometimes."

Yechiel nods.

Later, his brothers request the duck. He gives them the duck for a minute, then goes to finish his homework.

One boy can have a puzzle, a classroom answer, a loud joke and a quiet afternoon.

He doesn't have to seat all of them at every table.