

THE CHANUKAH DUCK

A chapter from the book WINTER BLESSINGS

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MOST FAMILIES in the village of Chelm kept farm animals. Geese, chickens, and ducks were for eggs; sheep were for wool; goats and cows were for their milk. These animals were often treated as part of the family. They ate the same food as their owners, and they slept inside the house during the long, cold winters. Sometimes the animals were given names, and when they passed away, they were mourned deeply (before being eaten).

Not the Gold family. The Gold family was too poor to keep animals. Reb Gold was a cobbler, and a good one. The shoes he made and repaired lasted for years, which unfortunately meant that he didn't get a lot of repeat business. Every bit of money he earned was spent on food and clothing for the family. Wood for the fire was cut from the Black Forest. There was no extra money to feed an animal. Even if there had been money, there was no room in the house. Joshua and Esther Gold had lots of children. The oldest were boys named David, Jonah, Micah, Eli, and Abe. The youngest was a girl, and she was the favorite. Her name was Fegi Shoshana, but everyone called her "Little Bird."

"Mama, shouldn't we light the Chanukah candles now?" Fegi asked on the first night of Chanukah. "Everyone else in Chelm already has candles in their window."

Her mother sighed. "Little Bird, we don't have any Chanukah candles this year."

"Oh." The tiny girl thought for a moment, and then suggested, "We have Sabbath candles. Can't we light them?"

Esther Gold looked at her husband.

Joshua Gold shrugged. "Why not?"

So the whole family gathered as the Chanukah blessings were sung, and the Sabbath candles were lit.

“But what shall we do for candles tomorrow night?” whispered Esther Gold to her husband. “And what will we do for candles for the Sabbath? Those were our last two!”

“Shh. We’ll worry about that tomorrow,” he answered, quietly. “Look how happy they are.”

The two parents smiled together as they watched the laughing faces of their children in the warm glow of the repurposed candles.

“Mama, what about dreidels?” Fegi asked. “All my friends say they play a game called dreidel.

Again her mother sighed. She looked at her husband. “You tell her.”

Her father frowned. “Little Bird,” he began, but just then he was interrupted by a tap-tapping at the door.

“Who could that be?” wondered David, the oldest son.

“I’ll get it!” Fegi said, brightly. She ran to the door and opened it. “Look! It’s a duck!”

“A duck? Nonsense,” Joshua Gold said. “What would a duck be doing at our house in the middle of the night?”

“In the middle of winter!” agreed his wife.

“A duck?” David said. “Really?” All the brothers turned toward the door.

“Come in, Reb Duck. Come in!” Fegi urged.

In waddled a duck. It was a white duck with bright orange feet and a bright yellow bill. Strangest of all, balanced on the flat part of the duck’s bill was a shiny brass dreidel.

With great care, the duck hopped up on the dinner table, and dropped the dreidel next to the merrily burning candles.

“Quack-key!” it said.

“Thank you, Reb Duck!” answered Fegi. “Mama, may we keep him?”

It took every ounce of Esther Gold’s self-control not to snatch the dirty bird off her nice clean dinner table.

All the children clamored for an answer.

“I don’t know if we can afford to keep him,” their father finally managed. “But of course the duck is welcome to stay for the night.”

The children clapped their hands. The duck said, “Quack-key!” And soon the dreidel was spinning merrily. It was a wonderful night, and when it was time for sleep, the duck hopped onto Fegi’s bed, and lay down beside her

“Quack-key!” it said quietly, before tucking its head under one wing

After the children were asleep, Joshua and Esther Gold were whispering to each other.

“We can’t eat the duck, can we?” Joshua asked his wife

“Of course not,” Esther answered sharply. “The duck is our guest. It even brought a gift.”

“Where did it come from?” Joshua wondered. “How did a duck get a dreidel?”

“How should I know?” Esther replied. “Probably it is lost.

Her husband sighed. “Probably it is some nobleman’s duck, and that is his dreidel, and tomorrow they will arrest us all.”

“Sha!” said Esther Gold, making a sign against the evil eye. “Go to sleep.”

The next morning the duck was gone, and Fegi was in tears.

“You didn’t...” Esther accused her husband.

Joshua Gold raised his hands. “I didn’t! I promise.

They searched the house. The brass dreidel was still on the table, but there was no sign of the white duck.

That afternoon, Joshua took the dreidel to the house of Reb Cantor, and told the merchant the whole story.

“A Chanukah duck?” Reb Cantor said. “That’s a good story, and it’s a nice dreidel. May I buy it from you?”

Reb Cantor knew that the Golds were always in need of money, so he offered a good price.

Joshua Gold sighed, and nodded. He took the money and used it to buy candles for Chanukah, and for the Sabbath, and a new wooden dreidel for the children.

That night, the children were hushed as the blessings were sung, and the Chanukah menorah was lit. As soon as the second light was burning brightly, Fegi ran to the door and opened it.

“Reb Duck?” she called. “Reb Duck?”

There was nothing there but the dark, dark night.

“I’m sorry, Little Bird.” Her father put a hand on her shoulder. “Shut the door. You’re letting the cold in.”

With only a wooden dreidel and no duck, the evening was quiet, and the Gold family went to bed early.

Now, it was the tradition in the Gold house to eat fried potato latkes only on the last night of Chanukah. The parents claimed that was what their families had always done, but everyone knew the real reason was because they didn’t have enough money for potato pancakes every night. Still, one night of latkes was better than none, and everyone looked forward to the celebration.

But shortly after breakfast on the seventh day, Fegi tripped over the sack of potatoes that had been brought out for the latkes, and there was a horrible snap in her left arm.

Reb Gold quickly carried his daughter to Mrs. Chaipul, the rabbi’s wife, who also served as the village midwife and doctor. Mrs. Chaipul worked her magic, gave Fegi a soothing tea, set the broken arm back in place, and wrapped it tightly in plaster.

The cobbler carried his daughter back to their house, and breathed a sigh of relief as she fell into a deep sleep in her bed. Then he collected the sack of potatoes and took it to Mrs. Chaipul.

She tried to wave him away. “Nonsense. It was nothing. You don’t owe me anything.”

But Reb Gold refused to take charity when he could pay. At last she was forced to accept the potatoes, and Joshua Gold trudged home, sad and dispirited.

That night, despite her injury, Fegi woke and leaped out of bed just as the blessings were sung, and candles were lit. Her family hugged her tight.

“I want a latke!” Fegi said, merrily.

“Oh, my sweet Little Bird, Little Bird,” Esther Gold said sadly. “There are no latkes tonight.”

But just then there was a tap-tapping at the door.

“Who could that be?” David, the oldest son, wondered.

“Reb Duck!” Fegi said. She dashed to the door and opened it with her one good

hand.

“Quack-key!”

“Come in, Reb Duck. Come in!” Fegi clapped her hands in delight.

In waddled the duck. It was a white duck with bright orange feet and a bright yellow bill. Strangest of all, the duck was dragging behind it a sack of potatoes.

“This is a most unusual duck,” Joshua Gold said. “Not that I’m complaining.”

Fegi knelt down and gave the duck a one-armed hug. “Thank you, Reb Duck.”

All the boys cheered.

The duck said, “Quack-Key”

“Mama,” Fegi said, brightly. “Reb Duck says he would like a latke!”

“Quack-key!” agreed the duck.

“Little Bird,” Esther Gold said. “I’m sorry. We can’t.”

The room was instantly silent.

“And why not?” Joshua Gold demanded. “The duck brought us potatoes.”

“But no eggs,” Esther Gold wailed. “I didn’t think we were going to have latkes, so we ate our last egg for dinner. You can’t make latkes without eggs. They fall apart.”

Fegi frowned, but she realized the truth of her mother’s words.

She looked sadly at the duck and told it, “I’m sorry, Reb Duck. We can’t have latkes. If you want to take back your potatoes, you can.”

The duck sighed.

(Later on, Joshua Gold would swear to everyone that the duck really did sigh.)

It hopped onto Fegi’s bed, nestled itself onto her pillow and loudly said, “QUACK-KEY!”

The Gold family watched as the duck’s eyes grew wide and wild. “QUACK-KEY! QUACK-KEY!”

Suddenly, it flapped its wings and flew right at them!

The Golds were shocked. They jumped back in fear. Everyone panicked and screamed, except Fegi.

She just started laughing. “Look,” she said, pointing to her bed. “Reb Duck is not a he-duck. He’s a she-duck!”

There, nestled on her pillow was the largest duck egg they had ever seen.

“QUACK-KEY!” the duck insisted.

What could Esther Gold do? She took the egg. She shredded the potatoes. She cracked the egg and mixed it into the batter. While the potato pancakes fried, the children spun their wooden dreidel. Every so often the duck would say, “Quack-key,” and Fegi would giggle.

At last the deliciously crisp latkes were ready and the first to be served was the duck.

Later that night, after everybody was full and the children (and the duck) were snoring, Joshua Gold whispered to his wife.

“When a duck eats its own egg is it cannibalism?”

“Sha,” she whispered back. “Don’t spoil it.”

The next morning, Mrs. Duck was still there. She stayed with the Golds and slept on Fegi’s bed for the rest of her very long life. She never again brought dreidels or potatoes to the Gold house, but everyone who tried her eggs swore that they tasted just slightly of latkes.

“Quack-Key!”