

THE MOONLIT PAGE

The Empty Chair



A short illustrated bedtime moment

Eli had almost finished putting the patio back in order when he noticed the empty chair moving.

Not the chair itself. Something beneath it.

A duck came out between the front legs, followed by four ducklings. A fifth appeared from the other side, hurried round the back and joined them.

The café had closed half an hour earlier. Eli stood in the doorway with the last folded tablecloth over his arm. He had arranged the chairs in pairs facing each other, exactly as Nessa preferred them for the morning.

The duck went between two tables. Her ducklings followed through the narrow spaces, appearing and disappearing behind chair legs.

Then she turned back.

“Have we left something out?” Nessa asked from behind him.

“Five customers.”

She looked over his shoulder.

“Six.”

The duck had returned to the first chair. Eli watched the little procession pass beneath it again, this time in the opposite direction.

Beyond the tables, the lake lay flat and pale. The patio opened onto the wide path along its edge, but Eli had put a pair of chairs close together at the narrowest point between the tables.

He waited until the birds had moved to the far side of the patio. Then he crossed to those two chairs and carried them back towards the doorway, leaving a clear gap. He returned inside.

The duck stopped beside a table leg.

Eli held the cloth a little more tightly, as if he were waiting for someone to try a door he had just repaired.

Nothing happened.

"Perhaps they like this table," Nessa said.

The duck lowered her head briefly towards the paving. One of the ducklings sat down. The others remained standing around it.

Eli put the cloth on the counter.

He had a habit of finishing jobs all the way to the end. A chair moved, a table wiped, a cloth folded. Watching a gap remain unused was surprisingly difficult.

Nessa went to count the clean cups. Eli joined her.

They had reached the small ones when he heard the lightest patter from outside.

The duck was walking through the gap. All five ducklings followed, one stopping for a moment beside the empty chair before hurrying after the others. They crossed the path and disappeared down the shallow grassy slope towards the water.

Eli stayed at the doorway until the last one was out of sight.

“Shall I put them back?” he asked.

Nessa looked at the two chairs beside him, then at the passage between the tables.

“Leave the gap. We take the trolley through there in the morning.”

He set one chair at the end of a table and the other beside the wall. From that angle the patio looked slightly different, though every table still had somewhere to sit.

He went back for the cloth.

“Six customers,” Nessa said. “Not a cup between them.”

Eli lifted the clean stack carefully.

“And no chairs to wipe.”

Outside, the empty chair faced the lake. He left it that way while they turned out the café lights.

Four moments to remember

A small memory card for retelling the story in your own words.

1. Finishing the closed café's patio arrangement, Eli sees a duck and five ducklings weaving around one empty chair and the tables.
2. When the birds are well away, he moves two chairs to clear a narrow gap to the lakeside path, then withdraws indoors.
3. The birds do not use the gap at once; he returns to counting cups with Nessa and later hears them walk through it towards the lake.
4. Nessa leaves the useful trolley passage open; Eli relocates the chairs and finishes closing while one empty chair faces the water.