

An Excerpt from **“The Conduct for Consoling”**

By Naama Goldstein

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The cat sprang, landing neatly by a slice of marble cake. A man's hand picked the animal up by the neck. The cat made a quick journey through the air, stood where it fell, then walked off in a hurry, rubbing all along the papered wall. It held its striped red tail like a lamppost, looking back once at all the people in its place. We followed, to the orphan's room.

She was sitting on the tiles, next to a blanket. We got down, too, me on the corner of the blanket when we ran out of floor. We waited, like the teacher said, with not a word of greeting, not a word of pleasantry, no talk, nothing to tax the scant reserves of the bereaved. She started talking right away, but to her cat.

"Here. Here here. Here."

The cat came closer and the orphan made a grab. She was wearing a gigantic housedress so her lap looked like a field of pansies grown over two sticks, on which now stood a cat. She held the animal tight; even though the cat had led us here it seemed to have another place in mind. But soon it slumped, and lay there, front paws pointed towards the orphan's navel. Now she bowed and pressed her forehead to the

furry one. Her hair became a covering to both of them, the two heads overflowed by yellow shine, streaming down like liquid from a tap. I saw the cat's eye narrow, till it closed. The bigger human eye kept staring, wide and blue. Finally the lashes batted, thick as bristles on a brush. The orphan drew up straight, her hair just hers again, her eyes on us.

"Small eyes is happy," she said. "Closed is in the clouds. I know about cats. Do you have a cat?" We waited to see who would answer first. Until this day we had never been to where the orphan lives. "Zeessie loves a guest," she said.

The orphan before being an orphan came to birthdays uninvited and brought stupid gifts. Half a pencil or a notebook with the pages used and then erased. She'd push to be the first in every game. She'd laugh too hard and at wrong times. Whenever she would lose a contest, every single time it was no fair. She'd argue even with the grown-ups, until someone stuck a favor bag in her hand early, so she'd go. With or without, she always leaves last.

She dragged the animal up from her lap and showed it all around. Its weight stretched out the downy armpits so we could see their suede, the hind legs dangling over every lap of ours in turn, and then around again. The velvety toes spread apart like chicken toes, the claws popped out, each lap wiggled back, and every time the orphan laughed and tossed her hair.

"That's what she does!" she said again and again. "She wants to feel something under her. Here, Zeessie. No, here, Zeessie." I thought someone should say something. But could your first word to an orphan be, Stop? I knew it could not.

After a while someone came and whispered, "Quiet, girls. Remember where you are." We couldn't say it was the orphan who forgot.

She set the cat beside her on the blanket, which was baby sized, knitted in loopy pastel checks that I could feel through my skirt. The cat took a step towards the door, but stopped, stepped back, looked at a swelled fold in the blanket and gave it thought. Again the paws reached, toes together now, reaching by choice to test the wrinkle, and make sure, and one more time, and so it stayed there, pawing at the blanket, like a digging for something, but slow and loving, pawing, rumbling, shoulders rising, falling, head sunk down, pointed end nuzzling.

"She thinks it's going to give her milk," the orphan said. "Watch," she said, and tugged a corner so the fold became a flickering snake. The cat's head snapped awake. With round gold eyes, it watched the snake. The orphan tugged again, the cat slapped. The orphan yanked, the cat glared and bit in.

The orphan said, "I've been to your home, and to your home, and to your one," and it wasn't any lie. The cat spat out the blanket and rolled over on its back. The fur was of a different kind below, the palest yellow brown, thick as a heat-spell cloud.

Outside the front door opened, people whispered. The door shut again. A kettle started whistling; someone stopped it right away.

The orphan said, "I like your home the best."

To me.

She said, "Who made your little birthday cakes, sprinkled on top of every single cake with number eights in balls of silver many times like in a jewel box of eights?"

I said, "My mother, but I sprinkled," and I almost put my hand flat to my mouth, hearing I let it slip about her loss. I shouldn't have said Mother. I should have said something else. "The silver is safe to eat," I said.

"In that amount and only once or twice a year it won't catch up for a long time," the orphan said. "So let's say you and her next month can help me with my party. But do nines."

How would I have known the orphan was older than me? She never had a birthday party before. I thought, her mother didn't let. What kind of mother wouldn't let her child celebrate her birth? A mother of that kind you wouldn't want. You would be wishing for a new one a long time. I didn't feel anymore like speaking of my mother. I thanked HaShem our God I didn't have a cat. They said in school a cat can kill your mother with disease, plus anyone who stays the night, and I said, Like I didn't know.

The orphan said, "Americans make better cake than what we do here."

I felt so shy with happiness, I smiled at my knees. This year on Our Many Cultures of Good Taste Day almost all my gingerbread men ended up one-legged in the trash. Everyone thought they would be chocolate. The year before I brought a loaf of mac and cheddar cheese and someone said, because of this your legs are fat. On Our Many Cultures of Good Taste Day suddenly the best thing to be is Yemeni or Moroccan, and I'm not.

"Tell me the recipe," the orphan said. She pushed the cat, both of them sidling up, the blanket bunching towards me. The animal was busy licking its own chest, and didn't look up. The orphan tossed her hair. A strand whipped close. "Two buckets melted chocolate," she said. "Right? Or three. Twenty-five eggs, only the yolks."

Everything sweet and wet as much as possible, the flour sifted fifty times so it fluffs up to full apartness. Nuts. You should have put in nuts. In mine we'll put in nuts. Otherwise everything the same, including favor bags, with red clowns on the front and back, drawstrings to close them, inside every one a singing water whistle, bird shape, red or blue. A two-tone toffee, four big pretzels." Every favor that I had she knew, and every one she wanted. "Sourballs, three, none a color of another, double-joke Bazooka, a nougat banana."

One of my partners in consoling got up on her feet, and stood in her school uniform.

The orphan didn't see. Only a dirty little heel popped out from beneath the pansy field, then ducked in again. "And we should keep all the same games," she said. And she remembered, each one by its rules and name plus how it went that day, from when I tried to pin the donkey tail on Grandfather of blessed memory in his old silver frame, to when I stumped every last guest with my Life Story quiz. From when my team jumped up and down because my soldier cousin said he'd be our mummy, to when I was a hundred percent right it wasn't fair; we had the same amount of time and length of paper as the other teams, sure, but we had more to wrap. She said, "When your mother said to wait for all your guests to be served cake before you stuck the fork in yours, and you knew on your birthday you don't have to? You pulled the anger right out of your face. Almost immediately you really couldn't see, good and quick."

The girl in her school uniform stepped forward. It was a Friday. The teacher said not to stay long. We had a duty to console. We also had a duty to get home before the Sabbath Queen and clean our home for her, and bathe.

"Your mother is beautiful," the orphan said. "Your TV's huge. Your father's smart."

The girl opened her mouth and took a breath. "The Place will comfort you," she said, "among all the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem," just like the teacher said. You cannot utter from your mouth the real name of God, but you can talk about His Place, from which comes consolation for our gravest trials.

Now my second partner in consoling stood.

"Those ruffle socks you wore," the orphan said, "with roses on the ankles out of lace. I love them. There was food enough for a whole zoo. Your parents aren't cheap. Your towels smell good."

"The Place will comfort you," the second one said, "among all the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem." And both my partners stepped around, and out, without good bye, just like the teacher said.

I was surprised that I was left there on my own. I was surprised I didn't mind them leaving. They weren't my friends but they were something like me, pretty good students with not too wrinkled shirts. Us three were picked to represent the class. Not the class president, and not the most pretty, not the precisest dodgeball slammer, not the singing daughter of the cantor. First up the stairs had been the Parsi who uses oil on her hair and lets no one touch. The first to speak the parting consolation was a bucktooth with three bucktooth sisters. Me, the orphan was excited to see.

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