

An Italian Treat
Lilith Mor-Gan

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A decorative floral graphic with intricate scrollwork and leaves, centered on the page. The word "Dina" is written in a cursive font, partially overlaid by the floral design.

Dina

Who doesn't love Dina? Her voice is as soft and soothing as a cool breeze on a hot summer's day and her warm smile lights up her green, cat-like eyes in a way that leaves nobody feeling indifferent. Her blond ponytail sways majestically with every nod of her head, while her slim figure fits neatly into a tight pair of jeans paired with a worn out T-shirt that somehow looks great on her. In short, everyone is enamored with her, especially the men on the Kibbutz, where she has lived since she was a child; but also the women, who have managed to overcome their envy of her beauty. The pupils in her fifth grade class adore her; the stray cats and abandoned dogs love her (especially on Tuesdays when she brings them the leftover chicken from the Kibbutz's kitchen); the flowers in her little garden feel well cared for; and even the caterpillars appreciate the few weeds she purposefully

leaves for them. The anxious human resources manager, who is in charge of finding temporary replacements for sick or absent workers, calls her almost every night. The bitter-mouthed woman from the Laundromat delays her with long talks on the Kibbutz's walking pathway, laying out her complaints one by one. Even the sour-faced dentist who usually tells patients who come for first aid to "take an antibiotic and come back next week," is willing to see her without an appointment.

Everybody knows that if you need someone to organize a festive dinner for two hundred guests on the eve of a holiday, you go talk to Dina. If there is still no one to plan the wedding ceremony for Shulinka and Chocho two weeks before the scheduled date, you should really talk to Dina. And if you are desperately looking for a human resources manager who won't quarrel with half the members and give the other half the cold shoulder, then you must definitely talk to, Dina.

She always listens willingly, empathizing with everyone, regardless of whether he is the human resources manager or the person in charge of organizing the High Holiday ceremonies, and she always agrees to do whatever she can to help out. Sometimes when the tasks at hand accumulate to a worrying magnitude, a flicker of panic can be seen on her usually friendly face. When one of the Kibbutz members who holds a managerial position

approaches her in an attempt to get something done, however, that flicker can easily be ignored.

Dina met Yisrael, her loving husband of the past fifteen years, when she came to the Kibbutz as a girl, shortly after her father committed suicide and it became evident that her sickly mother couldn't raise her on her own. Dina, who was well aware of her mother's frailness and her own cumbersome presence, tried very hard to diminish herself and her physical needs to a state of almost non-existence, and she almost succeeded until she met Bilha, the caretaker at the Kibbutz. At the time, Dina was twelve years old, a scrawny girl with big green eyes and protruding bones. She knew she had to make people like her if she wanted to survive.

Bilha took one worried look at her and went straight to the general secretary of the Kibbutz. She was determined to bang on his door until she got Dina an appointment with the psychologist at the Family Health Care Center, and she wasn't going to take no for an answer. The secretary tried to convince Bilha that he didn't have a budget for therapy, particularly for a girl who was not a daughter of a member of the Kibbutz and only in temporary custody there. But after a heated debate, even he realized he was fighting a losing battle and agreed to six months' worth of therapy sessions for Dina. To Bilha's grave disappointment, Dina refused

to go. She told Bilha she just didn't feel she needed to. What she failed to mention, however, was that things in the children's home had already become difficult for her with the other children calling her "Skeleton," and she was certainly not going to give them a reason to call her "Crazy" as well. The potential for more severe name calling was buzzing around in Dina's head. The last thing she wanted was to be known as "The Crazy Skeleton."

As time passed, Dina settled in with her adopted family on the Kibbutz. She felt mostly at home in Rina and Doron's apartment where she spent the afternoons, between four and seven, with their other four children before going back to the children's home for the night. She saw her sickly mother a few times a year, mostly on holidays, but frankly she didn't miss her very much. The Kibbutz had become her family and home and she couldn't imagine having another.

Yisrael, who also grew up on the Kibbutz as a boy from the "outside," had eight brothers and sisters. Dina was never sure if she had met them all because they were scattered all over the country in different boarding schools and Kibbutzim. This happened shortly after his father was sent to prison and his unemployed mother could no longer take care of the big family on her own. Every now and then Yisrael would mention with feigned indifference that his second oldest brother or his third

youngest sister was supposed to come for a visit. Some degree of tension accompanied the expectation of criticism from them on the Kibbutz and the Kibbutz way of life that was certain to ensue from these visits, but since the visits were few, with many years in between, they never bothered Dina much.

Their mutual plight as “outsiders” had created a strong bond between Dina and Yisrael and by the eighth grade they had already officially become a couple. All the teachers knew that they always sat together at the first table by the window. By the end of the twelfth grade they were chosen as the couple of the year, and everybody knew that Dina and Yisrael would get married right after their army service, which of course they did.

Even after three pregnancies, Dina’s figure is still slim and youthful. If it weren’t for Yisrael’s burning jealousy, many men would ask her to dance the couple dances at the folk dancing parties. Dina doesn’t protest against Yisrael’s unequivocal decree – no male dance partners. She accepts her husband’s jealousy as a compliment and is satisfied in the arms of her best friend Mirale, who swirls her around in a fast polka.

Only late at night after putting the children to sleep, waking Yisrael, who usually falls asleep in front of the TV, and sending him to the bedroom, does she sit down at the small dining table in a circle of light to go over her

task list. Organizing the holidays at the Kibbutz involves many people and requires meticulous preparation in order to run smoothly. Who has already finished doing what she asked him to do for the coming holiday eve, and who still needs constant reminders? Who should be approached about the special seating arrangements? Which songs should be chosen for the singing before dinner is served? Who can she ask to lead the singing without risking an immediate refusal? When she feels her eyes closing in spite of her efforts to keep them open, she gets up with a deep sigh and stretches until she hears her joints crack.

Quickly and efficiently she goes through her daily ritual in front of the mirror on the little cabinet, above the white sink. Flossing, brushing for three minutes, not too hard so as to not wear down her gums, as the dentist has instructed her, gargling mouth wash, facial cleansing, night cream, eye and neck cream, also applied in the cleavage area where the skin is thin and can easily get wrinkled. Most of the time she sleeps on her back, having started this habit after noticing that sleeping on her side made the wrinkles in her cleavage grow alarmingly deeper. She takes the foot and hand lotion to bed so she doesn't have to walk with greasy feet on the not-so-clean floor.

By the time she lifts the end of the blanket carefully and nestles herself slowly into the space beside him,

Yisrael is sound asleep. When her head touches the pillow, she feels his hands reaching for her, groping for her breasts. She holds her breath. Maybe this time fatigue will overcome him and he will fall asleep again, but his aimless caresses become more and more focused and now he is holding her left breast in his hand, massaging it lightly. She sighs quietly and weighs her options: if she declines his wordless offer, she will have to pay the penalty the next morning. His sulking silent treatment will require a lot of apologizing and sucking up (maybe even literally) to make him snap out of it. On the other hand, if she can find the energy, she will get it over and done within a few minutes and maybe even manage to enjoy herself a little in the process.

After a moment's hesitation she turns to him and kisses his neck. He acknowledges her acceptance by enthusiastically lifting her night gown and, with his eyes still closed, takes off her panties. She lifts his T-shirt and presses her naked breasts to his warm hairy chest, moving them from side to side. She likes the way his chest hair tickles her breasts. He spreads her legs and gently inserts his finger into her barely moist slit while his thumb is rubbing her tiny love button. The combined motion produces sighs of pleasure that come from her half open mouth. She starts moving her pelvis against his fingers, but before she can savor the gentle, tantalizing touch, he

rolls onto her and with one skilled movement inserts his engorged organ into her. She gives up on the immediate clitoral orgasm and raises her pelvis to him, helping him thrust deeper into her. She likes feeling him deep, deep inside her, almost on the verge of causing pain. She moves her hips in a rhythm synchronized to his movements, clenching and relaxing her muscles alternately, a technique she remembers the sex therapist explaining to them in the riveting lecture a few months before.

Yisrael picks up the pace. Still in a state of foggy drowsiness, he forgets to do what she has repeatedly asked him to do, to probe with his forefinger into her anus. Dina bites her lower lip, hesitant about whether to remind him or not. She longs for that feeling of double penetration, which invariably lifts her towards the desired culmination of sexual excitement, but she doesn't want to distract him, so she tries to clear her head of all other thoughts and concentrate on the sweeping rhythm. She knows she doesn't have long before he will come. If she wants to have her orgasm as well, she must concentrate. It is probably Yisrael's drowsiness that enables her to ride the tidal wave and come just a second before his face contorts. He pushes his organ into her one last time and collapses on top of her.

“Be a doll and bring me something to wipe up with,” he asks her in a sleepy voice, but when she comes back

with toilet paper and wet wipes he is already breathing the deep, calm breath of sleep. She smiles tiredly, leans over and wipes his organ, which lies flaccid and vulnerable in the palm of her hand, like a fledgling fallen from the nest.

The morning comes as always, much too early. Dina sighs and forces herself to move her feet out from under the warm blanket and down on to the cold tiles. The morning schedule is very tight and any deviation from it leads to her and Alon missing the school bus. She shakes Yisrael's shoulder and impatiently watches him sit up slowly in bed, yawing and stretching his arms. They work together with great agility, like a well-trained crew. He makes sandwiches while she wakes up Dana and Keren. She washes their faces and dresses them. Alon, a second grade pupil, is already independent and doesn't need her help to get ready, except for a reminder to put his science project in his school bag and take his sandwich and water bottle. At a quarter past seven Dina takes Dana to the nursery while Yisrael drops Keren at Kindergarten. At half past seven she and Alon are already on their way to school. Dina tries to remember to not caress his head absent-mindedly and to not call him "Alonush" within hearing range of his friends, an act that will make him sulk all day and avoid interacting with her at school. She sits down in her regular seat beside Mirale and exhales a

sigh of relief, finally allowing herself to relax from the stress of the morning routine.

“Don’t forget tonight’s lecture,” Dina says. “I heard the lecturer is an amazing woman, and remind Shosh to come as well.”

“What’s it about anyway?” Mirale asks with a wide yawn.

“It’s called ‘A Guided Mediation,’ but it’s not as boring as it sounds,” Dina promises her. “She also uses tarot cards and all sorts of mystical things. It should be interesting enough to make all those lazy Kibbutz members abandon their TV sets for an hour and come to a social gathering in the Members’ Club,” Dina adds sourly.

In spite of the widespread publicity for the “Mystical Evening,” only a handful of Kibbutz members show up at the club. Dina sighs. She wonders what it will take to get the members out of the comfort of their homes. A striptease show, perhaps, no less than that. The lecturer, a pretty woman in her thirties, feels Dina’s distress and consoles her. “It’s better to have a small group of people who are really into it than a big group of loud-mouthed skeptics. You’ll see, we’ll have a great time.” Dina doesn’t feel encouraged yet, but it is difficult not to respond to the woman’s radiant smile.

The lecturer talks about “the inner child,” the care-free and fun-loving aspect of our souls that we repress and ignore in order to function in the serious grown-ups’ world. “So gradually we abandon the inner child in us, who also needs loving attention,” she says softly, “that child who likes to laugh and play, who is constantly inventing new things just for the fun of it, that child who experiences life as an ongoing amazing adventure, and not as a series of duties, hardships and sufferings that we have to endure. We have all learned how to be responsible adults [“Not ALL of us,” Eitan whispers cynically, but is quickly hushed up by Mirale], and we have been living so long according to the rules and norms of the grown-ups’ world that we have forgotten how to listen to that child. We have gradually lost our ability to play. We need to get in touch with our inner child so it can teach us how to once again find joy in the things we do. We need to find that child in us to show us how to have fun again.”

Dina feels every word sinking in, creating an inexplicable internal tremor in her. Although, seemingly, there is nothing new in what the lecturer is saying, nothing that she hasn’t read before in the New Age books she has started taking an interest in recently, somehow the lecturer’s soft, warm voice gives it more validity and urgency. After the lecture they practice guided meditation. They lie on mattresses in the darkened room watching candlelight

dance on the ceiling. Dina feels how the soft music unwinds the tension in her shoulders and disperses her usual train of thought, like smoke in the wind. She inhales deeply through her nose and exhales slowly through her o-shaped lips until a tingling sensation spreads over her whole body and a strange lightness overtakes her.

The lecturer instructs them to imagine they're going for a walk in a beautiful place, on the way they meet their inner child. Dina hesitates for a minute, and then her thoughts carry her back to Gordon beach of Tel-Aviv. That was the only place she could go to as a child to escape the busy, suffocating urban environment. She used to spend the long hot days of summer on the beach with her friends. Swimming in the warm water, playing volleyball on the sand and just lying there reading books and chatting until they became as tanned as the beautiful Tahitians on the calendar that used to hang in her father's workshop, before he went bankrupt.

Dina visualizes herself walking on the beach very much like Gordon beach, only there is nobody there except her; golden sands, lightly kissed by foaming waves, stretch as far as the eye can see. The crystal blue water and blue sky have infinity between them. From afar she sees a small figure playing in the sand. She quickens her steps and when she gets closer she notices it's a little girl in a pink bikini with blue flowers, just like the one she used

to have. The girl is absorbed in cupping wet sand in her tiny hands and letting it drip through her fingers, creating complex stalagmites on her sand castle. She kneels by the little girl and caresses her hair.

“Hi sweetheart,” she says gently.

The child lifts her head and gives her a small smile, but deep sadness lurks in her emerald eyes.

“What are you doing?” Dina asks, sitting down beside her.

The girl doesn’t answer and tries to hide her face.

“Are you angry with me?” She phrases it as a question although she knows the answer.

“So you finally came,” says the girl in a perturbed voice. “I had almost given up on you. I thought you’d never come again.”

Dina feels her heart going out to the disappointed child. “Oh no,” she coos, as though comforting one of her own children, “I’d never leave you.”

“Yeah, that’s what you said the last time you came to visit, but that was such a long time ago, I’ve even forgotten when it was.” The girl speaks with a bitterness that doesn’t become her young age. Suddenly she turns to Dina and asks her directly. “Why have you forgotten about me?”

Dina lowers her head. “I really don’t know what to tell you... you know how life goes on... and the routine

schedule is so tight and demanding. Everybody wants a piece of me – my children, my husband, my pupils, my Kibbutz – they all need things, want things from me, and I keep running around, trying to do the best I can in the best way possible. I know I don't always succeed, but at least I try to do the best I can."

The girl pouts and stares angrily at her. "That's just a grown-up excuse. I knew you'd make up something like that. I don't even know why I bothered asking..."

Dina is silent for a minute. The girl lifts her plastic spade and starts demolishing her sand castle. "I'm sorry." Dina's voice is half choked. The girl keeps pounding down the stalagmites. "Did you hear what I said? I AM sorry." Dina raises her voice, determined to win back the girl's trust.

"If you're really sorry, don't talk so much. Show me how sorry you are," the girl blurts out without even looking at her.

Dina is embarrassed. She hesitates for a moment, then spreads her arms and hugs the girl. She cradles her on her lap and whispers in her ear, "I'm sorry, darling, I'm really so very, very sorry I've abandoned you for such a long, long time." The girl's body is stiff at first but she quickly melts in Dina's arms, returning the hug. They remain in their embrace for a while, moving gently together like seaweed in the currents. "What would you like me to do for you?" Dina whispers.

The girl ponders the question for a moment. “I don’t know, just think of me every now and then and come visit me, and do things with me like we used to – playing in the sand, looking for sea shells, laughing and dancing, but *my* dances, the ones *I* make up, not your boring folk dancing. Just don’t forget about me.”

“I promise.” Dina knows this is one promise she mustn’t break.

On the way home Mirale chatters excitedly about the things she has experienced, what the lecturer said to her, what she told Shosh, and how Shosh had her head in the clouds and felt she was floating (those were her exact words), and how Shmil couldn’t believe it when the lecturer told him about the little boy in the snow. He thought maybe Shosh told the speaker about him. After all, he had never revealed that story to anyone except for Shosh, so how the hell could the speaker have known about it? Dina is silent most of the time and just nods absentmindedly.

During the closing sharing circle, she had chosen not to tell her story of the meeting with the little girl on the beach. She felt it was too private, too powerful, to share with Shmil and Eitan who would probably tell it to all the factory workers during their coffee break the next day; or with Shosh who would make sure all the girls in the accountancy department knew all the details. From there it would spread to the kitchen workers, the Laundromat

staff, the people at the clothing storeroom and the child caretakers, who would most likely be updated when they came to pick up lunch for the Kindergarten and nurseries. While half listening to Mirale, her thoughts wander once again to the sad little girl on the beach and the promise she has made her. Even when Yisrael asks her how the lecture was she can't bring herself to tell him the story, although she is usually glad when he takes an interest in what she does.

The days following that evening bring slight, almost imperceptible changes in Dina's behavior. She doesn't cut her hair short like she wants to because she knows Yisrael will be very upset if she does. Instead she dyes her hair a beautiful shade of reddish blond and asks the hair dresser to cut the ends so it will look a bit roughed up and wild, like the singers on MTV. She doesn't buy the pair of jeans that wrap her ass so appealingly because Alon wants new clothes with a print that all the other boys in his class have, and Keren wants a new dress for her birthday. But when she returns home and opens her wardrobe, she bites her lower lip, frowning, then removes all the buttoned up blouses that make her look like an old-fashioned teacher, folds them carefully and packs them in a parcel to be given to charity. She continues to say yes to everything that is asked of her. However when Shmil comes to tell her that his family from Netanya is