

JUST LIKE DINA

Dina Giancarlo seemed to have it all. The middle child between two brothers, Dina had been through a lot of pushing and shoving during her young life and she was certainly the stronger for it. She knew how to handle herself socially.

This was first grade. Impressions were everything, and I wanted desperately to fit in, to belong. I was the younger of two children, and my sister was already married with a daughter of her own. Not having had the advantage of growing up alongside my only sibling, I didn't have battle scars like Dina's. I was cripplingly shy ... naïve ... gullible. I suffered great anxiety, mostly about math and the dark. I felt more comfortable around adults. It was important for me to align myself with someone like Dina so that I would not only survive but also thrive in school.

Dina was olive-skinned and dark-haired with very large brown eyes, full lips and a dazzling smile. I thought her very exotic next to me, with my blonde hair, fair skin and green eyes. She commanded respect ... she seemed to know everything. I on the other hand blended into the bland neutrally-painted institution walls of our classroom. It didn't matter that my favorite color was red because my personality was drab, like the crayon curiously labeled "flesh" in my box of 64 with the built-in sharpener.

Dina Giancarlo. Even her name was romantic, evoking images of the far-away land where my grandparents were born, of the language my mother spoke only to them. I longed to be like Dina, to do everything she did, for if I could emulate her every move

JUST LIKE DINA

and mannerism, then I would command respect from others, simply by virtue of my own confidence.

The day came when I would finally have the chance to do precisely what Dina did, precisely the way she did it, despite my looks, despite my name.

On this day we were working with modeling clay, the rust-colored classroom-issue variety. Because Dina rolled hers, I rolled mine.

As I rolled my clay, I thought about how bumpy it was, and how much smoother Dina's seemed. Mine had little cracks in it, and a piece came off, so I had to start over.

"What are you doing about the cracks?" I asked her.

"I just keep rolling ... the cracks don't bother me," she said.

Indeed, it did seem so.

Determined to emulate Dina to the letter, I abandoned my imperfect clay, took a fresh piece and began anew.

By now, Dina had rolled her piece of clay into a snake shape.

JUST LIKE DINA

Hurriedly, I rolled mine out in a similar shape. I wanted to catch up to Dina, to do what she did step by step.

I watched as Dina carefully lifted her “snake” off the table and rubbed it smoothly over her lips. Although she moved slowly, she moved deftly. Her movements were fluid, graceful, almost like those of an orchestra conductor. She seemed so much older, so much wiser, in these moments.

Just as carefully, I lifted my snake and rubbed it clumsily over my lips, facing Dina as I did. Dina gasped.

“What?!” I asked, panicking.

“You rolled yours too thick,” she said. “You should’ve rolled it thin, like mine.”

“Mine’s thin too,” I said, holding it up.

“Nope. Look,” she said, taking my piece and carefully placing it on the table next to her own, so carefully that the pieces were within a millimeter of each other. Very, very close but definitely not touching. “See?” she continued. I did see. “You did it all wrong.”

She sighed heavily, despondently. “Now you’re gonna die.”

JUST LIKE DINA

“What? I -- I am?”

“Uh-huh.”

“When? When?”

“I don’t know,” she answered, seeming to search for the right words. And then she added, cryptically, “... someday ...”

I couldn’t breathe. That horrible anxious feeling I always felt in the mornings, during math, and when darkness fell, took over. No matter what I did, I couldn’t get enough air. At these times I always feared I would run out of breath and that I would surely die. Particularly at night – I feared going to sleep, for what if I never woke? My face flushed and the sweat broke out all over my body. I was going to die any minute – or tomorrow – or “someday.”

If only I had rolled the clay thin like Dina’s! I had tried. Internally I berated myself for being so shoddy. I had begun with an inferior piece! I was too slow! I hadn’t observed her carefully enough! And now I was going to pay with my life.

JUST LIKE DINA

It was imperative that I reverse what I had done. I snatched my clay up off the table and feverishly worked to make it look like Dina's. She watched me for a moment; then she whisked the clay up off the table, holding it out of my reach. "Don't," she said softly.

Desperately I grabbed Dina's piece and rolled it over my lips. "It's too late," Dina said.

"What can I do? What I can I do?" I begged.

"Nothing. Let's play with the Cuisenaire rods instead," Dina suggested.

Cuisenaire rods?! How was I going to handle all those different sizes and colors if I couldn't even make a thin enough clay snake? I couldn't be expected to concentrate on any task now that I had been given this devastating news!

Besides, I wondered, how could Dina be so callous? Wasn't she worried for me? What if I dropped dead right in front of her? What would she do then?

I had to do something about this. It was unacceptable. But who could I share it with? As frightening as it was, it was also embarrassing and stupid. Oh, how could I possibly explain it? Something about it didn't quite ring true for me, but Dina had seemed so shocked at my rolling the thicker snake over my lips, so certain that my doing this would result in death.

JUST LIKE DINA

It was ten o'clock in the morning and time was of the essence. Everything began to warp and blend together. Was this it? Was this the end?

Dina's mouth hung open in disbelief. She shook her head. She sipped her wine and stuffed another envelope. She sealed it; then she affixed a pre-addressed mailing label to the middle. After that, she took the rubber stamp and pressed it onto the stamp pad and then to the upper left-hand corner of the envelope. "20-Year Class Reunion" showed in royal blue on the white envelope, our school colors. I noticed that it wasn't quite perfect – that she had smudged it a little. "I don't know what to say," she declared, finally.

"You don't remember that?" I asked her.

"No, I don't. Not at all," she said. I believed her. After all, it had happened thirty years ago.

"I remember everything," I said. Whether she believed me or not, she didn't say.

Whether she remembered anything else, I didn't ask. But it would be hard for me to believe that she had forgotten everything.

Regardless of how I felt about it, the only thing to do was to approach Mrs. Storm and tell her what happened. It was far better to appear foolish and continue living than to do

JUST LIKE DINA

nothing and risk death, which would take at least an hour. I had learned that from reciting the Hail Mary in catechism. Its last line: “Holy Mary, mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death.” kept me up at night. This prayer had the power to steal my breath from me as effectively as addition and subtraction of triple-digit numbers.

The last thing I was interested in was suffering for an hour and having my life evaporate afterwards, all because of a stupid mistake.

“Where are you going?” Dina asked, spilling Cuisenaire rods onto the table.

“I’m telling Mrs. Storm,” I said.

“No! You can’t do that!”

“Why not?”

Dina thought fast. “Wait!”

“What?”

JUST LIKE DINA

“I’ll give you my Scooby-Doo pencil topper,” she said. I stopped in my tracks. After consuming four boxes of Alpha-Bits I still kept getting Velma. None of the kids would ever trade another character for Velma and here I had the opportunity to get Scooby Doo for free. I almost took the bribe when I realized that Dina could just get Scooby back following my demise.

“No,” I said, and Dina grabbed my arm. I shook her off. We were wasting precious time.

As I turned to go, Dina called after me, “she can’t help you!”

“Of course she can,” I said. “She’s the teacher!” I was beginning to think that maybe Dina wanted me dead. But I couldn’t figure out why.

As we continued stuffing, sealing, labeling and stamping envelopes, the other reunion committee members had taken an interest in this story of long ago.

Of course Dina hadn’t wanted me dead – as adults we could laugh at this now ... it was so obvious that on that day little Dina had dug herself into a hole and she hadn’t known how to dig herself out. Trying to stop me from going to Mrs. Storm was the only way to avoid being punished for scaring me so.

JUST LIKE DINA

I was sure Dina had forgotten this little episode from first grade. She seemed genuinely surprised to hear that she had pulled such a prank. It was harmless enough. Even I thought it was funny. She did remember being at my birthday parties and my being at hers. "I should have brought the pictures," she said. "I came across pictures from one of my birthday parties and there you were!"

Dina remembered the good things like birthday parties. The days when we were friends; when it was pleasant and fun. But she couldn't have forgotten what happened in later years – the years in junior high school when kids break off into cliques and rival or ignore other cliques. Yet she was behaving as if she had. She was behaving as if there had never been a period between first grade, with its birthday parties and after-school visits, and this committee meeting for our 20-year high school reunion. In fact, she had greeted me with a friendly hello when she arrived at Dixie's apartment for this meeting. At that first moment, just before she said hello, she had seemed a little uncomfortable, a little awkward. But after that, she behaved as if all was well and always had been well between us.

Mrs. Storm was sitting at her desk grading the stories we had written the day before. I admired her. She had a long blond braid and her square features resembled those of a Native American. She was a handsome woman with a throaty voice who was firm at times, but she was mainly kind. She drove to school every morning in a vehicle unlike any of the others in the lot – unlike any other I had seen in our neighborhood, much less

JUST LIKE DINA

with a woman behind the wheel: it was a little red truck. A jeep with fat tires and a convertible roof. It made me wonder what Mrs. Storm did while she wasn't teaching, something I never wondered about any of the other teachers.

I hovered near her desk, not quite sure how to approach. She glanced up from her work for a moment, and I averted my eyes, pretending to be quite interested in the alphabet cards over the blackboard. Without looking up from her work a second time, she said, "may I help you?"

"Um ... me?"

Mrs. Storm continued her work and did not respond. She did not play games.

"I don't know," I said forlornly. Perhaps because of my tone, she focused her gaze on me now.

"Why don't you tell me what's on your mind," she suggested. No one had ever asked me to share what was on my mind before. Maybe Mrs. Storm could help me!

Most of us at that committee meeting had gone to the same elementary school. There were several elementary schools in the district due to the baby boom and we had attended the newest one. Roosevelt School (named after former First Lady Eleanor

JUST LIKE DINA

Roosevelt) was an experimental school, with all kinds of innovative teaching tools made available to the teachers. I am certain that the Cuisenaire rods along with IPI, a seemingly endless series of newsprint math booklets we completed on sheets of acetate with black felt-tip markers (so that the booklets could be re-used over and over) and graded by two volunteers with green felt-tip markers, set the tone for my inability to understand fractions to this day. One child in the entire school, Ruth Dreiden, had completed every single booklet. On the day she finished the last one, a big announcement was made that Ruth Dreiden had completed IPI. All the kids had clapped for her.

Dina was studying a photo I had brought with me to the meeting: the 6th grade class at Roosevelt School, with all the students and teachers assembled in front of the yellow brick building. The photo was in a little blue folder that had blanks opposite the picture to write down the names of all of the people. Upon getting my class picture, I had printed the names of everyone in pen. And on the front and back covers, some of my friends, classmates and teachers had written “good luck” messages. Some of the students pictured had not continued with us to junior high, for they had moved away.

A discussion ensued of “what ever happened to so & so” as Dina and the others looked at the young faces.

I explained to Mrs. Storm about the clay snake and the awful, terrible mistake I had made by rubbing it too thick over my lips, and then waited for her response. I figured it could

JUST LIKE DINA

go one of two ways. There was certainly the risk that she would reproach me for being so foolish as to not do it properly. There was also the possibility that she would simply take immediate action and send me to the nurse's office for medical attention. If that would be the case, I was hoping she would send Scott Gordon to escort me. He had platinum blond hair and was the cutest boy in the whole class.

But neither of those things happened. It was the oddest thing. Mrs. Storm looked me directly in the eye. She did not ask clarifying questions. She put her red pencil down and folded her hands on her desk. And then she said something I never expected her to say. She said, very softly but very firmly: "You are not going to die." Each word was very, very clear.

Could it be? Had she really intimated that I had been misinformed? That I would live? I still hadn't quite caught my breath, but I was actually beginning to feel a little better. After all, she was the teacher and had years of life experience over Dina Giancarlo. "I'm not?"

"Well, someday," she said. I felt the panic rising again and she quickly added: "but not for a very long time."

"You're sure?"

JUST LIKE DINA

“I’m sure.”

I didn’t know what to do, how to act. Mrs. Storm must have noticed because she gently suggested, “Why don’t you go back to your desk now. Continue reading *Curious George*.”

The breathing was coming more easily ... in fact, I wasn’t even aware that I was breathing anymore, a sure sign that I wasn’t really feeling anxious. As I made my way to my desk, I heard Mrs. Storm’s voice like thunder: “Dina Giancarlo! Come here now!”

The students in the photo were assembled according to size: the tallest ones at the top of the stairs down to the shortest ones on the ground. I was off to the left in one of the middle rows. My hair was cut in a short shag and I was wearing a polyester shirt with a pattern of green and yellow peace signs on it. I wore blue jeans: Levi’s straight-legs cuffed at the bottom. And Wallaby shoes.

Dina was in the front row, one of the short kids. She wore a blouse and a corduroy skirt, in burnt orange and warm maroon, a much more feminine look than mine. “I don’t know what I was thinkin’ with those shoes,” she observed as she studied the photo.

JUST LIKE DINA

“Earth Shoes were in, Dina!” cackled one of the committee members. “You were right in style!”

It was true. Dina and the rest of her crowd had been “right in style.” But I avoided dresses and skirts because they were uncomfortable and I felt awkward wearing them. Lainie Zadigan had offered to make me a skirt out of an old pair of Levi’s like she and Dina and the others wore and I had said no even to that.

I never learned if it was my fashion choices that had by the sixth grade resulted in my banishment from Dina and the others in our group of friends, or something else. All I knew was that Dina and the rest were no longer my friends, and they had made it very clear that I was not welcome to hang with them anymore. With Dina as the ringleader, this group of girls whose birthday parties I had been to, who had visited my house for milk and cookies, now seemed to take great pleasure in humiliating me, threatening me, and finding new and innovative ways to convey to me and to anyone who happened to be nearby, how ugly and worthless I was. This continued until just before high school, when they switched to simply ignoring me instead.

It wasn’t until after that committee meeting that it occurred to me that Dina surely had to have remembered how she had treated me, for she would have had to be blind not to have seen: written in pencil over each of my ex-friends’ names, Dina’s included, were words such as “bitch,” “asshole,” and “slut.” I remembered, as I studied the photo, that I had

JUST LIKE DINA

written these words after a particularly bad day in junior high. Calling the girls those names to their faces would only have resulted in violence. So I had rebelled against them with my own property in the privacy of my own bedroom. My only power. After high school graduation the photo lay for many years in a drawer until I dug it out specifically to bring to the committee meeting, just for fun, to get us excited about locating all our classmates.

As I hadn't been careful about rolling the clay thin enough so many years ago, I hadn't been careful about checking for "captions" on that photo before bringing it to the meeting either. And I did begin to reprimand myself for it: why hadn't I looked at it more closely, I could have erased those comments, it wasn't my intention to hurt or embarrass anyone, how careless, how stupid ...

But oh, how funny!

Of course, nobody commented on those captions during the committee meeting. There is the chance that they weren't really seen because the lights were dimmed for ambiance and we worked also by candlelight. And the wine was flowing. But I think if Dina scrutinized that list of names, which I know she read because she read them out loud – if she looked carefully enough she saw the captions and she knew why they were there and that they were written a long time ago.

JUST LIKE DINA

And she knew – we both knew – that it was too late and all we could do at this point, twenty years out of high school, was stuff envelopes together at reunion committee meetings and behave cordially and shallowly and reminisce about birthday parties, after school visits and silly things like the clay snake debacle that happened in first grade. It occurred to me that our relationship has always been superficial. Even when Dina had made herself my enemy it was over something petty and trivial.

I do remember everything. I even remember that ten years ago we weren't at the point we're at now. At that reunion, we found ourselves at the open bar together. We locked eyes briefly and then ignored each other for the rest of the night, just as we had in high school.

But after awhile – after enough time has passed – priorities change. It's nice ... comforting, even ... to know that in five or ten years we'll be stuffing envelopes together again and the first hello will come easily.

As I pulled out my book, Dina sprang to her feet and reported to Mrs. Storm. I strained to hear their conversation but I couldn't from where I sat. I could tell by looking that Mrs. Storm was scolding Dina and that Dina was afraid, because she hung her head and squirmed. Then the conversation seemed to evolve into a heart-to-heart talk. I opened my book and began to read.

JUST LIKE DINA

After awhile, Dina trudged over to my desk and hovered awkwardly. I glanced up briefly, and then went back to *Curious George*. When I saw that she wasn't going away, without looking up I said, "may I help you?"

"Um ... me?" said Dina.

I continued to read my book. I did not respond.

"I'm sorry about what I said before," Dina told me. My eyes met hers. She looked out of the corner of her eye at Mrs. Storm, who appeared to be working on her papers, but was most definitely listening to the entire exchange. Dina added, "It wasn't nice."

"No, it wasn't," I agreed. I went back to my book.

Dina remained. And then she offered: "Do you wanna come over after school and play?"

I considered her invitation and thought about how nice it would be to go over to Dina's and play. Just play. But I didn't say yes right away.

"I'll have to ask my mom when I get home," I said. "I'll let you know."

THE END. ☺