

Gina

Gina walked impatiently to the front door of her cabin, opened it, stepped outside, and screamed into the forest surrounding her little cabin, “Everybody is talking, and no one is listening!” Then she yelled, “FUCK!” as loud as she could.

After walking two times around the trail that her boots kept well-defined and calming down considerably, she began to notice that the path she was walking on had numerous other tracks. There were many Jackrabbit tracks; the neighbor’s cat used this trail, as did deer and a bobcat. There were also numerous grey squirrel tracks. Gina, smiling now, walked around two more times, for this trail was the Albert Memorial Trail, named after her beloved dog who had died the year before. During the last two years of her dog’s life, Gina had carried him on this very trail, and she had carried Albert and walked with him so often that they had created a trail that one could see. Albert lost his sight and then his hearing, and while Albert still tried to walk by himself, the onset of dementia was the demise of his independence. But Gina never minded doing everything she could for her best friend, including driving Albert to the only hospital where doctors could remove his cataracts, a seven-hour, mountainous, round-trip drive. Gina and Albert did that drive so many times that Gina had lost count. The two celebrated their successes, and Gina cried over the failures, but Albert kept being Albert, her patient and ever-loving best friend, and their love and devotion never waned.

Finally, her beloved buddy’s dementia was greater than Gina’s ability to care for him, and Gina decided to have her best friend euthanized. As Gina was driving him to the veterinarian to have him euthanized, a drive that took almost an hour, Albert sat on her lap with his head and neck in the crook of Gina’s left arm. Albert was poorly, and he was dying. As they drove, Gina told

Albert how much she loved him, and at times Albert's little nub of a tail wagged. Gina told him she would not cry for him as Gina knew Albert wouldn't like that. Albert never liked seeing Gina upset, and he always got onto her lap and tried to love her back to smiling. Instead of crying, Gina promised him she would smile whenever she remembered him. Gina told him she loved him, that living with him for 13-plus years had brought her so much happiness, and that their happiness was what Gina would remember.

As they entered the vet's office, Gina became very emotional. This was Gina's best friend, and she was about to have him euthanized. The nurses were kind and caring, and they and the doctor made Albert's transition calm and peaceful. Gina managed to keep her promise to Albert and did not cry. Gina held her buddy as he passed away, and Gina petted and kissed his little head until finally, the Doctor, while listening to the stethoscope on Albert's tiny chest, stated that there was no heartbeat. Gina sat alone in the room with her now deceased buddy for quite a while, until finally getting up to take care of the financial part of their visit. Gina paid for the euthanasia and the cremation, plus she purchased a small cedar box for his ashes and was told to come back two weeks later to pick up his ashes.

During the months since Albert's death, Gina hiked the trails she and Albert used to hike, and she would always smile as she remembered Albert's antics. Gina remembered that she had taught Albert to walk in front because it was easier for her to keep an eye on him and that sometimes Albert would get quite far in front and he would stop, look back over his shoulder, take a deep breath, and sigh loudly as if saying "*Really? You can't keep up?*" Gina smiled, too, as she remembered how Albert would suddenly run ahead of her and turn completely around while running as fast as he could, only to run past her. He would do another turn at full speed

and carry on until he was tired. Gina finally realized that Albert was quite literally running circles around her. Gina smiled as she remembered carrying Albert as they walked the perimeter of her one-acre lot, creating the trail she later named Albert's Memorial Trail. And Gina would smile as she remembered how she often sang to Albert to calm him down. Gina occasionally sang Albert's song as she walked his trail.

To this day, Gina has not cried for Albert. To this day, Gina remembers her best friend and buddy as a happy memory rather than a sad memory. Albert truly always made Gina happy. He was a bright and intelligent dog, and the deep love and loyalty each had for the other were evident to all.

As Gina sat in her comfy chair inside her warm cabin, reflecting on the times with her beloved dog, she recalled how much change she had lived through in her many decades living on this planet. The planet had become crowded in her time living here. There had been many positive changes, there had been many negative changes, and there had been many areas of stagnation too.

The one area that was especially perplexing to Gina lately was how extraordinarily opinionated people had become. People she knew and didn't know very well would often say things as if they were the absolute truth, thus leaving no room for questioning their opinions' validity. Gina knew that while dueling political views had been prevalent for decades, the ideas seemed to have metastasized within the two main political camps, with neither side giving an inch to the other side. Physical altercations began to occur regularly, with some of the more extreme factions from both sides calling for Civil War *as if any war could be civil*, thought Gina.

Gina had noticed the escalation several years earlier and was surprised how quickly people had lost their manners and civility towards one another. Gina would often remind people of the previous generations' practice of not talking about politics or religion while in the company of others. Gina could recall her father pointing that out to her many times, and try as she might, Gina had only limited success over the past several years in getting people to mind those two rules. As a result, her friendships suffered greatly. Gina was a person who was interested in telling stories about her life and listening to the stories about the lives of others. But she didn't want to listen to the often-angry retelling of stories about politics, religion, or education that many people had heard on TV or read on the internet and now wanted to discuss. It became apparent to Gina that each side listened to news channels and documentaries that supported their political, religious, and educational beliefs. Hearing the story once was enough for her to understand, and hearing it repeated word for word several times became too much. Gina stopped those who tried to repeat, for the umpteenth time, that which she had already heard. And now both sides, both factions, seemed to be adding conspiracy theories to their stories. When Gina asked for facts to support their sometimes-wild stories, they would respond with even more conspiracy theories but never facts.

Gina usually said hi to those she met when walking or hiking and to her neighbors. She occasionally fished with her few friends but steered clear of discussing the topics that divided her from others. On several occasions, she had lost patience with those who wouldn't or couldn't stop talking about what Gina felt were unsupported conspiracy theories. During one encounter, when an acquaintance asserted that members of a political party he didn't support had formed a cabal and were sexually abusing children, Gina couldn't listen to these cruel, horrendous, and unsubstantiated claims yet again. She angrily told that acquaintance he was stupid and ignorant

for believing and repeating such terrible stories. Gina later texted him that she no longer wished to speak to him. Gina retreated farther and farther until it was usually only her and Albert.

Gina tried to hide from what the world had become, and she was pretty successful. After Albert's death, Gina found that she still had some friends, and those friends were on both sides of what Gina referred to as "a highly opinionated society." These people had agreed with Gina's simple request not to talk about the things that might divide them but rather to only talk about all the remaining things they could discuss. Yes, there were still minor skirmishes when one side or the other would forget. Still, their friendships seemed more significant than their differences, especially over opinions slightly stronger than impressions but much weaker than provable knowledge.

Gina's life began to settle down. She began to assert herself more and more in her life, and she stopped being kind and considerate to accommodate people who had no intention of reciprocating her kindness and consideration. Gina had always been, since her earliest memories, a person who didn't mind being alone, and, quite honestly, she enjoyed being solitary. Of course, she and her dog could enjoy being alone while being best friends, as most dog owners will attest. The intrusions for feeding, walks, petting, etc., didn't seem like intrusions. Those moments of distraction were a small price to pay for the massive benefit of the friendship they gained.

Gina began dating a man, and they met several times. While she enjoyed the intimacy immensely, the man's control issues soon shattered her joy. It seemed to Gina that she needed to carefully traverse his sometimes outlandish and, at other times, mean assertions. He was indeed intelligent and had been a highly successful man in a very competitive business. After several

dates, two of which had been intimate, one at her cabin and one at his home, Gina told him he behaved like the CEO of their relationship. She didn't mean to hurt him by saying that, but he told her later that it hurt his feelings. On one occasion, he stopped their lovemaking so he could, as he said, use his hand to finish himself off, and after his orgasm, he stated that he had almost had an orgasm during their intercourse. Unfortunately for their relationship, Gina withheld her response to that statement. Inwardly she responded by saying that she would have enjoyed him not controlling their sex, as she too had been near to having her orgasm when he decided to selfishly pleasure himself. Gina's interest in pursuing their relationship continued resolutely, despite the warnings, for two more dates, which, because of the physical distance between their homes, meant that each stayed overnight when they met. Still, it became clear to Gina that while this man was perhaps a loving and caring person, his first intention was to control the relationship. Gina would never know if that initial control was temporary or permanent because her need for freedom from control caused her to quit trying.

Gina's message to herself, to her now grown children, one of whom had stopped speaking with her while the other only talked to her occasionally, and to her friends, was that there are two questions and one rule each of us needs to ask and obey during our lives. The first question is, "Who am I?". The second question is, "Why am I here?" The rule Gina believed we needed to obey was this: The relationship with yourself should be your number one human relationship. These three things seemed self-evident to Gina now, but they hadn't been for years or decades. The fact that she had stumbled upon them became a part of the wisdom she tried to impart to others. Gina would remind people that the two questions needed to be asked every time one's life changed; for instance, after marriage or divorce, after having children, or anytime there was a

significant life change. Gina found that some people, and only some people, found her message helpful, while others were much more restrained in their acceptance.

Gina was, in some ways, undeterred by the response she got from others unless the person's response was in any way mean. Gina could not accept meanness without objecting strongly. Her ultimate objection to meanness came in simply dissolving the relationship, but Gina often tried to persuade the other person to be kind before terminating their friendship.

The bottom line for Gina was that she didn't need people for her to be happy. Gina didn't need Albert for her to be happy. Albert indeed made Gina a happier person, and it is also true that Gina allowed the memory of Albert to continue making her a happier person. Gina woke up happy and optimistic almost every day.

She didn't wake up happy when she was sick with Covid, but she regained her happiness when she realized her sickness could have been much worse. Her optimism fuelled her happiness, and her happiness fuelled her optimism, creating a never-ending loop for both. It seemed to Gina that she was only truly unhappy when she tried to engage with mean people for whom she believed there would be benefits that would outweigh the meanness. Eventually, Gina learned that she could not co-exist with meanness, and as the people in the two main political camps became meaner, she withdrew more. Gina sometimes withdrew without saying why, thus offering that person no chance to restore their lost ability to be kind, and sometimes she learned she had made a mistake by doing that. Gina had a habit of leaving people and places whenever she became extremely unhappy or frustrated, and she didn't care what or whom she left behind.

Gina knew she had stationed gatekeepers at the entrances to her mind and heart. She had done so to protect herself as she had been naïve and weak in many ways when she was young. These

guards had been at their stations since her early teenage years. While a few people had gotten past these guards, those people had only gotten past because Gina had exerted her ultimate authority and allowed them in over the objections of the very guards she had put in place to protect her from those specific types of people. Gina thought she knew better than anyone else. Gina's mistakes didn't necessarily stop her from making more mistakes, but her most egregious mistakes did stop her from repeating those mistakes.

And while her human friends were more of a frustration than a simple, satisfying relationship, she got the latter primarily from her animal friends. She had chipmunks living in her large wood pile. While they initially sounded their high-pitched alarm and would scurry off whenever she appeared, they had become much more docile after months of this bitterly cold winter and Gina feeding them sunflower seeds. The female was pregnant now, and her belly seemed to be a quarter of her overall size, and now when Gina would go out, it seemed to her that the male was saying hi to her whenever he was out and about. His calls no longer sounded like alarms, but now they sounded like he was saying, "I see you," and Gina started saying, "Hi, buddy!". Upon seeing the chipmunk feeding on the sunflower seeds, Gina would slowly open her door and say, "Hi, Buddy," to which the chipmunk would reply, but since his mouth was full, his noises were unintelligible. Gina would always laugh at that.

Gina also fed the myriad little birds that stayed over the winter, and soon she had scores of tiny birds feeding daily. Doves also came to feed, as did a half dozen wood pigeons. Despite there being so many birds, they ate very little. Occasionally the hawk would catch one, but Gina knew that was all part of the cycle of life here.

Gina, though not possessing excellent carpentry skills, made several squirrel feeders. One required the squirrels to lift the feeder's lid, and as they pulled their head back out, the lid closing made a clicking noise. As they fed, Gina would hear the click, click, click, and she would smile. The other feeder had a one-gallon glass jar, which Gina put sunflower seeds in daily during the winter, and the squirrels came into a wooden box and then into the jar. Each feeder was nailed to a tree six or seven feet off the ground, and the squirrels seemed to love them.

A mountain lion was living nearby, and she had videoed him engaged in an epic fight with a raccoon that lasted for thirty-five minutes before the lion prevailed. Neighbors asked her why she hadn't shot the mountain lion, and Gina confessed that she had not even thought about doing that. The mountain lion returned occasionally, and her outdoor cameras would capture pictures of him during the night. Once, he stood looking right at the camera, no more than thirty feet from her front door. Another day, as Gina walked her usual four times around Albert's Memorial Trail, she noticed several large scrapes with a pile in the middle. She suspected it was from the mountain lion burying its poop, much like a house cat buries its poop in its litter box. Only these were huge scrapes compared to a house cat. Gina did an internet search; sure enough, they were mountain lion scrapes covering their scat. Gina went out, and using a stick; she uncovered the pile revealing scat four or so inches in length and about an inch wide, which corresponded precisely with what her internet search had revealed. Since there were several fresh scrapes on her land, Gina knew the mountain lion was living nearby, and Gina didn't mind. She wasn't going to shoot it, so she stopped mentioning the lion's presence to anyone. The mountain lion was her neighbor, she was his neighbor, and there was no conflict.

A young fawn had wandered into her neighbor's yard many winters ago, malnourished and shaking from the cold. Her neighbor saved the fawn and nurtured it back to health. The fawn turned out to be female, and since she had never learned to migrate out for the winter, she lived at his place and was entirely dependent on him for her sustenance during the winter. Her fawn or fawns, which were so beautiful to see every spring, also never learned to migrate before the harsh winters since their mother hadn't been taught either. The mountain lions got some of the fawns, cars got some of the fawns, and none of her fawns had survived longer than six months for the past two years. But Gina made friends with the fawn her neighbor had saved; that fawn was now seven years old. Her neighbor had named her Mama. The year before, during the Mandatory Evacuations, which Gina had ignored, she found Mama standing in her driveway early one morning. Gina went out, filled a can with bird food, and slowly approached the deer while saying her name. Mama stood there watching, seemingly unafraid, and when Gina reached her hand out, Mama touched her wet nose to Gina's hand. Gina was thrilled. She then offered the can of food to Mama, and Mama ate it all. That began a new and exciting friendship for Gina.

After the Dixie Fire raged and incinerated tens of miles in all directions around where Gina lived, leaving only the Peninsula where she lived completely intact, bears moved in as there was no food for them in the incinerated forests. They ransacked garbage cans for weeks and even got into Gina's one night. Many more mountain lions also moved onto the Peninsula, and deer loss was more significant than usual. Mama came by one day with only one of her two fawns and a week later with no fawn. Her two beautiful fawns hadn't survived, but Mama did.

Gina's children had moved to Maryland, and her beloved best friend Albert had passed away. Society had seemingly turned on itself, and the man she had dated was gone. She continued living alone in the cabin she so dearly loved, and Gina was left happy and optimistic. Gina looked around and felt she was physically, emotionally, and spiritually in a good place.

The End.

Written by Peter Skeels © 3-8-22