

Gina

Gina walked impatiently to the front door of her cabin, opened it, stepped outside, and she screamed into the forest that surrounded 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 after calming down considerably, she began to notice that the trail she was walking on had numerous other tracks on it. There were a lot of Jack rabbit tracks, the neighbor's cat apparently used this trail too, as did deer and a bobcat. There were also numerous grey squirrel tracks. Gina walked around two more times and she was smiling now, for this trail she had named the Albert Memorial Trail, 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 much and so often that they had literally created a trail that one could clearly 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, and that included spending hours driving Albert to the only hospital where she could get his cataracts removed, which was a seven-hour, round trip drive. Gina and Albert did that drive so many times Gina had lost count. The two of them celebrated the successes and Gina had cried for the failures, but Albert just kept being Albert; her patient and ever-loving best friend, and their love and devotion for each other 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 quite poorly, and he was literally 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 would always get onto her lap and try to love her back to a smile. Instead of crying, Gina promised him that she was going to smile whenever she remembered him. Gina told him she loved him and that living with him for 13 plus years had brought her so much happiness, and that happiness was what Gina would remember.

As they entered the vet's office Gina started to become very emotional. This was Gina's best friend she was about to have euthanized. The nurses were kind and caring, and they and the doctor all made Albert's transition calm and peaceful. Gina managed to keep her promise to Albert, and she 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, she purchased a small cedar box for his ashes, and she 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 then turn completely while running as fast as he could, only to run past her. He would then 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 more as she remembered carrying Albert as they walked the perimeter of her one-acre lot, creating the trail that 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 would occasionally just sing Albert's song out loud as she walked his trail

To this day Gina had not cried for Albert. To this day Gina has remembered 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 was evident for all to see.

As Gina now sat in her comfy chair inside her warm cabin, reflecting on the times with her beloved dog, she was recalling 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 people she didn't know very well at all, would often say things as if they were the absolute truth, thus leaving no room for questioning as to the validity of their opinions. Gina knew that while the trend of duelling political opinions had been prevalent for decades, the opinions seemed to have metastasized within the two main political camps, with neither side giving an inch to the other side. Physical altercations began to be a regular occurrence, 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 she was surprised how quickly people had lost their manners and their 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 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 they wanted to talk about. 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 literally word for word several times became simply 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, and when Gina asked for facts to support their sometimes-wild stories they would respond with even more conspiracy theories, but never facts.

Gina would usually say hi to those she met when out walking or hiking, and to her neighbours. She still fished occasionally with the few friends, but she steered clear of talking about 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 simply couldn't listen to these cruel, horrendous, and unsubstantiated claims yet again. She angrily told that acquaintance that 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 actually quite successful in doing so. 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 other things that remained that they could talk about. Yes, there were still the occasional minor skirmishes when one side or the other would forget but their friendships seemed greater than their differences, especially over opinions that were only 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 into 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 actually enjoyed being alone. Of course, she and her dog could enjoy being alone while also being best friends, as most dog owners will attest. The intrusions for feeding, walks, pets, etc., didn't seem like intrusions either. Those intrusions were a small price to pay for the huge 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. It was true he was intelligent, and he also had been a highly successful man in a very competitive business. After several dates, and 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, as he told her later, it did 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 to herself that she would have enjoyed him not controlling their sex, as she too had been near to having her orgasm when he decided to simply and selfishly pleasure himself. Gina's interest in pursuing their relationship continued resolutely, in spite of the warnings, for two more dates, which, because of the physical distance between their homes, meant that each stayed overnight when they met, but it became clear to Gina that while this man was perhaps a loving and caring person, his first intention was to be in control of 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 spoke 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?" And the rule Gina believed we needed to obey was this: The relationship with your self should be your number one human relationship. These three things seemed self-evident to Gina now, but they hadn't been self-evident for years or decades of her life. 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 really anytime there was a major life change. Gina found that some people, and only some people, found her message useful 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 the form of 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 she didn't need people for her to be happy. Gina didn't need Albert to be happy. It is true that Albert made Gina a happier person, and it is also true that Gina allowed the memory of Albert to also make her a happier person. Gina woke up, on most days, a happy and optimistic person. Gina simply woke up that way almost every day. When she was sick with Covid she didn't wake up happy, but she soon was happy again 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 source of energy for both. It seemed to Gina that the only times she was truly unhappy was when she tried to engage with mean people for whom she believed there were going to be benefits which would outweigh the meanness. Eventually Gina learned that she simply could not co-exist with meanness, so 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 that she had stationed gatekeepers at the entrances to her mind and her 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, and 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 these 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 again.

And while her human friends were more of a frustration than a simple satisfying relationship, she got the latter mostly from her animal friends. She had chipmunks living in her large wood pile, and while they initially sounded their high-pitched alarm and would scurry off whenever she appeared, after months of this bitterly cold winter and Gina feeding them sunflower seeds, they had become much more docile. 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, whenever he was out and about, was saying hi to her. His calls no longer sounded like alarms but now they sounded like he was saying, "I see you", and Gina started saying "Hi buddy!". Gina, upon seeing the chipmunk feeding on the sunflower seeds, 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 really 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 great carpentry skills, made several squirrel feeders. One required the squirrels to lift the lid of the feeder, and as they pulled their head back out the lid made a click noise. As they fed Gina would hear 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 in to 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.

There was a mountain lion living somewhere near, and she had videoed him engaged in an epic fight with a racoon, 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 came back occasionally and her outdoor cameras would capture pictures of him during the night. Once he stood looking right at the camera, and 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 and 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 exactly with what her internet search had revealed. Since there were several fresh scrapes on her land, Gina knew the mountain lion was living close by, 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 quite dependant on him for her sustenance during the winter. Her fawn or fawns, which were so very 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 that her neighbor had saved, and she 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 hand with her wet nose. 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 literally 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. Apparently, even more mountain lions moved onto the Peninsula too, and the loss of deer was greater than normal. 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 survived.

After Gina's children had moved to Maryland, after her beloved best friend Albert had died, after society had seemingly turned on itself, after the man she had dated was gone, and now that she was still living alone in her cabin she so dearly loved, Gina was left happy and optimistic. Gina looked around, and she felt she was in a good place both physically and emotionally.

The End.