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The Pursuit of Happiness

by Richard Lewis

There was a darkness inside the twenty-nine-year old that no one could reach.

From the outside, Gina appeared to have it all. Simmering looks, talent and an exciting life. Luxuriant hair framed her olive features, eyes deep as pebbles in a mountain lake. The rhythm of her walk was an arresting sight, black leathers clinging like a second skin, crash helmet in hand.

Though some days she could hardly leave her bed or lift her head from the pillow. It was as if she was encased in concrete, until, an invisible circuit having been made, she would wake feeling restored, like a recharged Duracell, ready to connect to the world again.

Her father disappeared when she was five, leaving her with a depressive mother who never recovered from the abandonment. Gina grew up in a suffocating environment and the need to escape never left her.

Professional help had been sought but she lacked the patience to stick with anything and refused to take medication. She worked as a freelance photographer which suited her, as relationships could be difficult.

During her active periods she loved to push the boundaries, taking up extreme sports. Having a passion for speed, she was never happier than when testing her skills along country roads, her Terminator racer pulsating beneath her. The Japanese marvel urging her to ever greater extremes, as if promising freedom from her very self.

As an accomplished rock climber who had tackled many demanding cliff faces, including Huntsman's Leap in Pembroke and Malham Cove in Yorkshire, Gina was now setting her sights even higher, venturing into the breathless world of paragliding.

Having completed her training, she was qualified to fly solo and had for the first time brought along her Pentax, hoping to capture a bird's eye view of the coastline, while holidaying with her friend in South Africa.

Setting off for Lion's Head, a well-known paragliding site, her friend was worried about her flying on her own but Gina just said, "don't worry, I'll be fine," then adding, "but wouldn't it be a great way to go!"

It was late afternoon, the sun preparing to sink into the deep blue Atlantic. Gina gazed out across the panoramic splendour, waiting for the wind to rise up the mountain slope. Behind, lay the purple folds of the paraglider, ahead, the steep, rocky slope fell away to a chasm below.



Having waited for the right moment, she set off, rushing down the slope. Wind filled the delicate sheets of silk, liners and risers became taught and in seconds she was airborne, eager to climb the great towers of cumulus, into the wild reaches of the sky. Gina felt like a prehistoric bird, suspended by the elements, time lost in the miracle of flight.

Finding a thermal, she spiralled upward, gaining maximum altitude where she finally levelled out. Reaching for the Pentax she found the strap was caught beneath the harness. In frustration, without thinking, she released the harness chest buckle to access the camera.

At once realising her fatal mistake, gasping, "God no."

Frantically, she grappled with the straps, hanging on for dear life, the glider spinning out of control. 'Hang on, hang on,' she told herself, desperately trying to get a proper hold on the harness. For long seconds she fought but she could feel herself slipping, her strong grip finally betraying her. Gravity duly responded, separating Gina from the craft, sending her plummeting into the yawning gap and the waiting earth below.

At the funeral service, there were many tributes from fellow bikers, climbers and paragliding friends. Though saddened by the tragic accident, they understood that only by challenging yourself and facing dangers, could you feel fully alive.

Gina had finally escaped. She died doing what she loved.