

Dancing Again – Marylin Nease – Texas

Gina entered my life when she was thirteen. She exited at thirty-nine. In between, she taught me to embrace life in all its fullness.

Before my sister Linda adopted her, Gina lived in foster care. At four she had developed kidney disease brought on by juvenile diabetes, and, unable to care for her, Gina's mother surrendered her to the state.

To introduce her daughter to our family, Linda mailed a loving letter and school photograph of Gina. When I met her, Gina bubbled with delight and laughter.

At twenty-five, Gina began thrice weekly, two-hour round trips to Oklahoma City for kidney dialysis. This routine went on for months while she waited for a suitable kidney donor.

One day Linda got the call: someone had donated a kidney that was a match for Gina, who needed to be in Oklahoma City ASAP for transplant surgery. Linda, a surgeon herself, had a patient on the operating table. I happened to be on another floor of Linda's hospital with our mother, just discharged by her own doctor.

In Mother's room I answered the ringing phone. Linda said, "Marylin, I need your help. Gina has a kidney ready. Will you drive her to Oklahoma City? I'm in surgery. I'll call Gina and tell her you'll pick her up. She knows the way. She'll be fine. Clayton and I will be there later."

Mother and I collected our belongings, hurried to my car, and traveled the few blocks to Gina's home. Smiling with excitement, Gina climbed aboard, then leaned forward from the back seat to thank me for picking her up and to ask Memaw how she was feeling. Assured her grandmother had improved, Gina, hungry, asked for an Egg McMuffin from the local McDonald's. Zipping 'round the drive-through, I grabbed her breakfast and hit the turnpike. We were off to get Gina a kidney!

That morning's drive stands as the fastest trip between the two cities I've made—and the easiest—because of Gina. She enjoyed her breakfast, then became my backseat navigator, guiding me to the hospital where she'd had months of dialysis and made friends with the medical staff. There, she headed off to receive the kidney that would change her life, and I continued across the state to deliver Mother home.

Gina's transplant gave her another fifteen years; still, diabetes took its toll. Waning eyesight, eventual blindness, worsening nerve damage in her hands, amputation of both feet, then one leg below the knee—none of this changed Gina's attitude. She continued spreading joy.

At her memorial service, family and friends gathered in my sister's living room. Sitting elbow-to-elbow, wall-to-wall, we took turns telling stories and sharing tears and laughter. Afterward, Linda passed out markers and brightly colored, helium-filled balloons. We wrote messages on our balloons, then walked outside into the October sunshine, where we released our rainbows to the heavens. Watching the balloons, I remembered Gina's embracing of life. I pictured her dancing again, somewhere in the great beyond.