

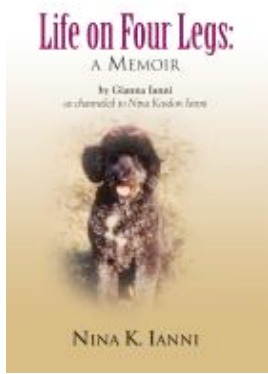
# Life on Four Legs:

## A MEMOIR

by Gianna Ianni  
*as channeled to Nina Kasdon Ianni*



NINA K. IANNI



*In **Life on Four Legs: A Memoir**, Gianna, a Portuguese Water Dog, recounts her life's journey, from birth and puppyhood in a dog breeder's kennel, to her formative years in an abusive home, through the final stage of her journey as a beloved family pet. The book owes its unique vision to the strong emotional and spiritual bond between animal and human, a connection that enabled Gianna's thoughts and feelings to be expressed in words.*

# **Life on Four Legs**

## **A Memoir**

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**LIFE ON FOUR LEGS:**  
a Memoir

Gianna Ianni

As channeled to Nina Kasdon Ianni

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Hardcover ISBN: 978-1-62646-712-5

Paperback ISBN: 978-1-62646-713-2

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., Bradenton, Florida.

Printed in the United States of America.

BookLocker.com, Inc.

2014

First Edition

## PROLOGUE

I'm a dog, a Portuguese Water Dog, to be more specific. For those of you not familiar with this breed, we look a lot like standard poodles. In fact, I'm often mistaken for a poodle. People we meet in the park say to my mom, "Nice poodle." If they pass by in a hurry she doesn't bother to correct them, but if they linger she says, "She's a *Portuguese Water Dog*." Nowadays, people accost my mom in the park shrieking, "Oh, a Labradoodle! I *love* them!" If there's time mom explains that I'm actually a Portuguese Water Dog, but generally the Labradoodle aficionados are jogging or biking and rarely bother to slow down.

Until I got sick I weighed about 60 pounds. I have tightly curled black fur (some Portuguese Water Dogs have wavy rather than curly coats) with a swirl of white running down the middle of my chest. My mom says it looks like someone dribbled white paint on me. I have roundish brown eyes that used to be the color of coffee with just a touch of cream. Now they're so filmed over with cataracts it's hard to tell what color they are. My ears are floppy, like a spaniel's, and I have a long, slender tail with a plume at the end. The lady who ran the rescue group my mom and dad adopted me from explained that the plume is the Portuguese Water Dog's "signature." She cautioned mom never to cut off my plume.

Once I developed a large cyst at the base of my tail. The vet had to remove it and told mom there might not be enough skin left to sew up the wound. In that case, most of my tail would have had to be amputated. Mom said, "Please try to save her plume. It's her *signature*." The vet promised to do his best and he succeeded. When the operation was over my tail was as good as new. My mom had another reason for wanting to preserve my plume. She says it makes her happy to watch it waving like a banner when I'm prancing ahead of her on my 26-ft. long flexi lead. (Mom is fond of saying there's never more than 26 feet of separation between us. I think that's

supposed to be a joke, or a clever observation, but since I'm incapable of abstract thought, I don't get it; nuances escape me.)

It wasn't my idea to write this memoir. Frankly, I didn't want to write it. But my mom's obsessive/compulsive: once she gets an idea in her head she doesn't let go. One day, she announced, apropos of nothing (or so it appeared), "Doggie-girl, I want you to write a book about your life." (I suspect she'd been thinking about the book project for quite some time before she worked up the courage to approach me and decided it was the right moment to bring it up.) "We humans *think* we know what it's like to be a dog, but we don't, not really. People need to understand how dogs experience life. Just think, dog-face: you can do some good. You can make things better for other dogs." [Unbeknownst to mom, this was the wrong tack to take with me. With rare exceptions, I don't much care what happens to other dogs. Like most dogs—and all cats—I'm essentially a narcissist.] "I mean," mom continued, "if people understood how dogs view the world maybe they'd be more patient with them, more tolerant." "Oh, please," I would have said, if I were conversant in the human tongue. "You can't be serious." Lacking speech I did the next best thing: I feigned indifference, pretending to be absorbed in examining a cluster of wild grass.

The next day, mom raised the subject again: "Dogadee, I wasn't kidding when I said you should write a book about your life. I doubt there's been a book written from a dog's perspective." Again, I failed to respond. Instead, I looked down at the ground and scratched in the dirt. I could tell mom knew I wasn't interested. She laid off the book writing scheme for a couple of days, and just when I was beginning to think she'd abandoned the idea she interrupted me as I was straining to move my bowels—how like mom to pick the most inopportune time—and blurted out: "Doggie-girl, I'm not going to stop asking you to write the book. It's all I can think of, day and night. You're twelve years old. I'm 62. Neither of us can afford to put it off much longer." I waited until mom had bagged the result of my efforts. Then I looked up at her. For the millionth time I saw the

love in her eyes, and I knew I couldn't let her down. I owe everything to my mom, not the least of which is my life.

So, reluctantly, I agreed to write my story. But that's not entirely accurate. I promised mom I would *give her* my story. I'm sure I don't have to tell you that dogs can't write. They can't use a typewriter or a computer. Nor can they speak—in English or some other human language, that is. Mom understood this, and she said we could work around it.

When two creatures have as strong a bond as my mom and I share it doesn't matter if they don't belong to the same species. Mom and I communicate. We're so attuned to each other's moods and feelings that each of us can sense what the other is thinking, what the other wants. We've been together long enough to develop a level of understanding that transcends language. Sure, I know the meaning of a bunch of English words familiar to most dogs: sit, stay, biscuit, no, shake—you get the drift. I also understand what “going bye-bye” means, what “we're almost home” means, what “I don't like that” means, what “I love you, dogadee” means. Actually, I have an exceptional vocabulary for a dog. Even if I don't comprehend all the words, I can usually get the gist of what people are saying from their tone, from the way they gesture when they speak. But I don't delude myself into thinking I'm unique. Lots of dogs understand human words. We take meaning from body language; we detect behavior patterns; we know what our human caretakers will do before they do it. We can't converse, though, the way people do, and we certainly can't write.

I have to say, though, I'm proud of my extensive vocabulary. I attribute it to mom. She's always talking to me. When we take our walks she bares her thoughts and feelings freely. I know so much about mom's life I could write a book about *her*. Maybe my next book will be a biography of mom. I decided to propose this idea to her just for the heck of it, and as I'd suspected she rejected it out of hand. “But why not?” I wanted to know, fixing her with what I hoped

was a penetrating gaze. As if she'd actually heard me speak, mom said, "Dogadee, no one wants to read a biography about an ordinary person. People are curious about celebrities. My life story wouldn't interest anyone."

Mom continued to try to persuade me. She revisited the "concern for other dogs" angle, questioning my loyalty to the canine species and insisting that a book written by and about a dog would help other dogs. I responded by giving her an "are you kidding?" look, the kind I'd give someone who tried to pass off a dog biscuit as filet mignon. Mom just didn't "get it." People, some of them, anyway, care about other people. As I've said, dogs tend to have little concern for the welfare of members of our own species. The scorn in my gaze was not lost on mom. She recognizes cynicism when she sees it. "Listen, puparoo," she said. "I want you to collaborate with me on this book, or maybe it's the other way around. The book will be yours. I'll serve as the repository for your thoughts." I sat, silently, my eyes downcast, my facial expression neutral. "Look, dog-face," mom went on. "Let's forget about helping other dogs for now, okay? I can see that approach doesn't appeal to you. It's not really fair of me to expect altruism from you, anyway." I bristled. Mom had, in effect, labeled me callous, which wasn't exactly accurate. Callousness implies a brutish, unfeeling nature. I don't believe either applies to me. I have the capacity to feel empathy, although, admittedly, I seldom avail myself of it. But, still, I resent being thought of as indifferent to the suffering of others. Is it so wrong to put one's own needs first?

Mom now turned her attention to the task at hand, brushing aside (temporarily, I feared) the "dog-as-altruist" vs. "dog-as-egotist" debate. She'd apparently decided it was not worth dwelling on any further. "I don't expect you to sit at my computer desk and type out the story of your life," she said, reassuringly. "I know that's not possible." I peered up at her again. I don't see as well as I used to because of my cataracts, but I trained my cloudy eyes on mom's and gave her a questioning stare. I hoped my stare would convey my



sentiments; in addition to debunking the “dog as good Samaritan to other dogs” myth, I wanted to point out that I’m hardly famous and why anybody would want to read about a run-of-the-mill dog is beyond me. It would be different if I were Rin Tin Tin or Lassie, but even then it’s hard to imagine an audience eager to read a book on the life of one of those dogstars.

Mom smiled and stroked the curls on top of my head. “Dog-face,” she said, “We’re going to do this together. I’ll handle the writing part; you just give me the raw material.”

I wasn’t sure she understood, so I intensified my questioning stare. If I had the appropriate words at my disposal I would have explained to her that dogs have all the thoughts and feelings people do. We experience joy, sadness, loneliness, fear, and anxiety. But we don’t have the words that people wrap around those emotions. I didn’t have to worry, though. Mom understood. She generally does.

She went on, “Dogadee, I’ll be your interpreter. As long as you can convey your feelings about things I can put them into words. If there are gaps I’ll fill them in as best I can. But I want us to tell your story, from beginning to end.”

I wanted to say, “Now, wait a minute,” but I lacked the words, so I tried a different approach. My aim was to explain to mom that dogs aren’t capable of linear thought. We live “in the moment,” something lots of people envy us for. But we don’t do it by design; it’s simply the way we’re made. I doubted very much that I’d be able to dredge up my earliest memories at will and go on from there. I can try to describe being born and growing from puppy-hood to adulthood and what happened to me at each step along the way, but I can’t promise a faithful account of the chronology of events. Maybe I could have written a diary, if I’d started when I was a pup: you know, a day-to-day rendition of my life, an unbroken chain of memories fresh in my mind. (I hoped that wasn’t what mom had in mind.) But at the time I didn’t have mom there to tell me to do it; I didn’t even know what a

diary was. And a diary might have been kind of dull. Who wants to hear about what I ate for breakfast and when I pooped? Nobody, not even another dog.

I'm almost fourteen years old now (I was twelve when mom and I embarked on the book project), an old dog, any way you slice it. No matter how hard I concentrate, I can't always remember what it was like to be a pup, born in a kennel. These memories exist; they float around in my head, but they're often out of reach; they're elusive, like a bone buried long ago in a secret place you were sure you'd never forget, but if you waited too long to retrieve it you wouldn't be able to find the hiding place, or some other dog might have gotten there first. To use canine parlance, I can fetch distant memories only by accident. The smell of a weed I pause to sniff on one of my walks might trigger a memory of the weeds that grew in my first yard. Then I'll remember something I experienced in that yard, which might lead to another related memory. The way the earth feels when I dig into it might bring back the texture of the dirt in the dog run behind the kennel where I was born. When I lie down in a sunny meadow and roll around, scratching my back against the coarse grass, I can sometimes remember other times and places where I rolled and scratched and grunted with pleasure. And then there are the memories that lie, covered up under stacks of other memories in the back of my brain: memories of being left alone or taken to a strange place. When I find myself in situations that evoke these memories, like when my mom took me to a boarding facility a couple of months after she adopted me or when she left me at Aunt Pat's shop to be groomed for the first time. I remember a time when I wandered, lost and exhausted, looking for someone to show me some kindness. I can't always tell if these memories are real or if I dreamed them up. Dogs do dream. We thrash around in our sleep; we whimper and whine.

When a memory surfaces, unless I capture it immediately it vanishes as quickly as it appeared. Since I can't make associations the way humans can, I'm lucky if I'm able to link one memory to another.

The links in my memory chain are fragile and break easily. If I can string together three consecutive memories in a row that's quite an accomplishment.

Living in the moment has its drawbacks. Dogs lack context; the past is a distant phantom, the future incomprehensible. We have no reservoir to draw on when we make a decision, no history of past steps taken to guide us. We can't weigh the pros and cons. We make decisions, take action, impulsively, without regard for the consequences. Not surprisingly, we tend to make the same flawed decisions over and over again. People do that, too, some of them. But they should know better. We dogs don't—know better, that is. We're bound to repeat our mistakes.

I fervently hoped mom would understand that my life story would have to be told in zigzag fashion, as a disjointed patchwork of unrelated vignettes. I think she did—to a point. But she wasn't entirely satisfied. "Okay, Doggie-girl," she said, finally, "You go ahead and call up memories as they occur to you, and I'll compile them and put them in sequence." I didn't want to hurt her feelings, but, at the same time, I wanted her to know I was displeased. Portuguese Water Dogs are one of the breeds that "smile." When I'm happy my mouth stretches into a grin. I turned the corners of my lips downward in an attempt to simulate a frown. Mom noticed my expression and said, "I see that doesn't sit well with you." I gave a slight nod, almost imperceptible. I desperately wanted mom to understand and embrace my point of view. If the book was to be about a dog's life from a dog's perspective, she would have to forego the idea of a seamless chronology of events. Since it's going to be *my* book it will have to be written *my* way. That is, when I think of something it will be inserted into the book, then and there, even if that thought has nothing to do with the thought that preceded it. In human terms, the book will be full of digressions, nonsequiturs, if you will. Admittedly, that might make it harder to read, but making it believable, making it real, is what's important to me. I'm prepared to sacrifice readability in favor of credibility. Trying to be helpful, mom

suggested using segues to smooth the transition from one memory sequence to another. I rejected the idea out of paw. I don't know what a "segue" is. It sounds suspiciously like something mom would ask the vet about, nothing at all to do with writing a book.

Mom said, "Well, you *will* give me permission to make sure it's grammatically correct, won't you?" I assured mom that as long as she doesn't do anything to change my intent she can do whatever tweaking makes her happy. I solemnly offered mom my paw and we shook on the deal.

We were in the park when we had this last exchange. The park is my favorite place. It's not like a city park. There are hiking trails; some of them are quite long and steep in spots. A few of the trails are soft and sandy, like the beach, while others are crusty with hard-packed earth and full of rocks. We're fortunate, says mom, to have the park so close by. There are open meadows in the park, too, where groundhogs and rabbits forage for food. I try to hunt them, but it's hard to be a good hunter when you're on a leash.

Spring time coats the paths that wind through the park with petals and cottony fluff, fragments of flowers, fairy dust for us, dogadee, says mom, a carpet fit for a bride. Summer bakes the paved walkways. My paw pads are tough, but the heat can sear them. Mom and I don't use the paved sections much in the summer; we prefer the earthen trails.

On hot days we usually go to the park early in the morning (if mom can rouse herself, that is), or at dusk, when the sunlight fades. Mom urges me on: "Come on, dogadee; we're almost there, dogface, just a little longer." The best part of summer in the park for mom is the raspberries that grow wild along the trails. She insists on stopping every time she spies a clump of ripe clusters. She picks them, one berry at a time, and pops them into her mouth, exclaiming how delicious they are. This stopping and starting exasperates me. I strain at my leash and mom says, "Oh, come on, doggie girl. I stop when

*you* want to investigate something.” Of course she’s right, but I can’t help being impatient.

Fall is our favorite season in the park. The summer heat has dissipated and I can walk without fear of singeing my paw pads. The surface of the macadam is strewn with acorns: acorns and brown pods shaped like walnuts. Mom seeks out the pods and stomps on them, reveling in the crackling sound they make. As fall inches toward winter the acorns and pods disappear and crinkly brown and reddish leaves take their place. Where do the acorns go, we wonder. Mom says it’s possible that animals—squirrels most likely—eat them, or use them to build nests. Both of us take pleasure in the crunch, crunch of the brittle leaves under our shoes and paw pads. In the forest the dry leaves remain for a long time. Some last through the winter, imprisoned between layers of snow and ice.

Winter follows on the heels of fall. Fresh snow, a gift from nature, swirls around us as we walk through the park. The grandeur of the snow humbles us. Mom treads lightly. She rarely speaks and when she does her voice is soft, out of respect for the silent descent of the snow. In the forest the snow stays white and pure. Not so on our road where it gets trampled by muddy boots and driven over by cars and trucks, turning it brownish and slushy.

When the temperature drops the snow freezes. Mom is afraid of slipping on the ice. Sheathed in an invisible film the park’s paved surfaces are slick as glass and treacherously deceptive. Mom walks in the shallow ditches on either side where she can usually get a foothold on the packed-down snow. Even I, despite the advantage of an additional pair of legs, occasionally skid on the ice.

Mom and I share our most intimate moments in the park. For us, it’s almost a sacred space. Only rarely does another person join us, although, over the years, we’ve made friends with people we’ve met there. We’ve met a lot of dogs on our walks, too. I’ve made friends with some of them. Dogs size each other up quickly. We sniff

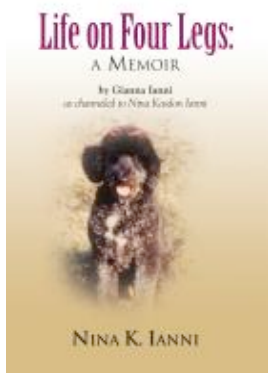
*Gianna Ianni, as channeled to Nina Kasdon Ianni*

guardedly; we note the other dog's posture and facial expression. It doesn't take us long to tell if the other dog is going to be a kindred spirit or an adversary.

I'm afraid I've gone off on a tangent, but I warned mom this might happen. I think she will forgive the digression

To please her I'll try to recall how my life started out. Maybe if my early years had been happier I would be able to remember them better.

If I close my eyes and lie quietly perhaps I'll be able to recall details about the beginning of my life. I don't know how accurate my recollections will be, but at least they'll give you some idea of what things were like back then. I know I'm going to leave out a lot of stuff in the telling, some of it important, some of little consequence. Later on, if I remember more, I'll include it, but I won't go back and place it where it belongs because that would be cheating; it wouldn't be true to the way a dog's mind works. I'll just insert each recollection as it occurs to me, wherever I happen to be in the narrative. I want readers to appreciate the fact that a dog is telling her story. A person is involved, and I couldn't do it without her help, but I'm the author of this memoir, and I have the final say.



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