

# KAYLA

- A short story

By Anthony Paul Griffin

The first sign of a problem was a light situated to the right of the speedometer, shaped like a thunder-bolt, yellowish-orange, blinking slowly. The light pointed downward, looking nothing like the universal symbols. They, symbols, unlike words, represent instructions and commands designed to cross cultural bridges, and language differences - Don't Walk/Musa Walk; Stop/Arrêt; Bike Crossing/Bike Xing. Whether the light had greater meaning: a lightning strike was imminent; the total failure of the electrical system; foretelling the end of the earth - I didn't know. Strangely, time was reserved for me to feel sorry for myself; speeding, then unexpectedly slowing, allowing time to succumb to fate, throwing my hands upward, physically releasing the steering wheel, conceding.

Uncle Philippe had three strokes in one year. First one at fifty-seven, he survived and recovered, meaning he outlived every man in his family – all stroke victims – but not by long. The second came six months later; the third, two years later, killing him cold; much like my first dog Rusty Staub. Rusty Staub was a red cocker spaniel, named by Uncle Philippe. Years later I learned Rusty Staub was also the name of a baseball player. Struck cold in mid-sentence, Philippe; Rusty Staub, mid-bark. We are not quite ready to admit the comparison, electing to tell the stories separately, with a different story inserted in between, admitting still. Flashing the same hard smiles, smiles which appeared immediately after telling of Philippe's story, appearing again before finishing Rusty Staub's; followed by failed attempts to suppress a slow-rolling guffaw, propelling the more reserve to escape to other rooms. Their escapes were never fully successful, the sound of distant laughter visiting, invading from afar; shameful, shameless,

accompanying laughter, on their return, making themselves comfortable amongst those who had not fled.

He, Philippe, was generally happy-go-lucky, even exuding confidence when he had to learn to talk again, after the first stroke. The second, he had to learn to walk. A perverse and profound change took place after the second, Philippe casting his hands upward, conceding. He used to take long walks, on and off the walking path, into the woods and out, always deviating the path taken, disappearing for hours on end. No more. I asked about the behavior change, once, and was told the doctor's words instead. "The men in your family have been blessed with a bad gene. Help as best you can, there is little our profession can do at this time." I am not sure whether Uncle Philippe saw my eyes blink. They blinked, inside and out, causing me to take note, to pause. Studying the family tree, asking, questions following questions, noticing things I had never noticed before, obsessing, being obsessing would make a difference. Mine was over bicycles. Weight, construction, gears, manufacturers, spending more on a bike than the car I occupied. Now sitting, listening and watching, while believing that my obsession contributed to the anticipated death. Uncle Philippe scanned the horizon when he conveyed the doctor's words, flashing a broad, sick smile, revealing exceedingly pink gums barely holding onto his remaining teeth; kissing me on my right cheek, as if saying his goodbyes, lowering his arms, allowing them to settle in place, foretelling his resignation.

I listened for distress from the engine. I heard none. I looked for others signs, smoke, steam, nothing. I did see a pair of cursing eyes, reaching and touching, from afar; contempt penetrating first through glass and steel, now invading my skull. The light continued a persistent silent, synchronized dance, even though contained, ever present, demanding my attention. Others' cars flowed around mine; their occupants, nary a glance. My other pest, the one on my

rear bumper, was now mouthing words; as if I could hear; as if I had time to figure out what was being said. I must admit however, her mouthing was far more universal than the alien symbol performing within inches of my sight. Across lane one, then lane two I moved. Looking behind, to the side, to the front of me; straining neck, back, legs, moving only inches, straining none-the-less. Inching from one spot to the next, demanding, as if my words made a difference, as if they too could hear me, as if they could understand me. Appearing to increase their speed, instead of slowing, playing little or no attention, caring less. “Come on! Come on! Move over ... Oh come on, let me off!”

I had been given plenty of clues that day was coming. The engine occasionally missed, sputtering slightly, off-beat, like a drunken dancer, on beat but not, then quickly giving signs something was wrong; not every day, maybe every three to four days at best, limping, shuttering, a missed beat, then correcting itself, within seconds, then again, repeating. I prayed each time. I called the routine “the little miracle.” Fewer miles to the gallon, five to seven miles less was my calculation. I noticed the difference two to three months before that day. The service and check engine lights came on weeks later and stayed-on. The new light seemed different, causing me to exit. No time for prayer. Magically appearing; magically disappearing. The service and check engine lights’ cadence now was dimming, slowing, off. The engine seemed smooth, silky smooth, to be honest, silently smooth. No place or time for miracles, the engine was not smooth-smooth, but smooth-off; creaking, a pronounced clunk, crimping sounds, as if every part decided to exhale at the same time, in unison, signaling a long-awaited and anticipated death. Celebrating my twenty-fourth birthday, sitting on the side of the roadway, wondering why I didn’t pray this time. Occupying a twenty-year old vehicle, between jobs, situated at an angle on the edge of the roadway, feeling sorry for myself, hands down, down to my side, attempting to

ignore a now silent dash, no blinking, no pointing, no dancing. Sitting in a confined space, interrupted by an occasional horn, but for the part feeling isolated.

My isolation was interrupted by a car which pulled up next to me. It was her, did she follow me or did she turn around and come back to see if she could help? Was that what she was saying? In an almost talk show-ish kind-of-way she spoke, speaking her mind so the rest of the world could see and hear. “Bastard, move that piece of shit out of the road!” Lips blaring, eyes distended, screaming, bellowing, yelling; no horns interrupting, just her lips, eyes, screaming, bellowing, yelling – at me. The speed of the words seemed perfected, allowing little time to respond; distinct words, flowing freely, properly punctuated, entering my space, prior to her securing and raising her shield, prior my even touching mine. A bastard I was, feeling sorry for my sorry bastard-self.

“Huh, I got your bastard!” Words unheard and intended to be unheard – mines were – said in a low mumble, to myself, responding but not responding, not fully understanding her intensity, her hostility. A low rumble from her tail pipe followed, as if helping to make the point, no, assuring her point was made. Pulling back into traffic, gifting me with a distinct line on the pavement, weaving in and out, disappearing then reappearing; emphasizing her position, telling others the reason for her anger.

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The next sound came fast, startling me. Bam ... Bam ... Bam... squarely in the middle of the glass, seen peripherally; causing me to move forward, then sideways, then away before pushing back into my seat. Attempting to focus, worrying, wondering, “What now?” Attempting to control my anxiety, *I thought she drove away.*

“Let your window down!” Let window down!”

“What? Why?”

“Well, never mind, you can leave it up. You need to get off the road. Your car is in the road! Stay in the car, and I will push you!” A new face, magically appearing, quickly disappearing, dreadlocks flying in all directions, moving from the side to the rear, now demanding, “Put it in neutral; put it in neutral!” Shouted with head down, hair covering her face, hands squarely on the back of the car, while she screamed, preparing to push. I complied, looking forward, hands now up, mind wandering, guiding, while we inched forward, three to four feet at most.

Mickey Mantle, the baseball great, said that if he had known he was going to live as long as he did, he would have taken better care of himself. Uncle Philippe didn't buy his idol's late-day wisdom, fashioning his own instead. “Not going be around long enough to know the difference, don't make any difference.” He spoke these words repeatedly, as if to make sense of his suicide journey by chocolate cake. Spoken with a slight chuckle, almost Alfred Hitchcock-like, birds flying to and from, the shower curtain pulled violently, suddenly, revealing all, then then closed, then open – a scream, then another - strange and pale men and women moving about in my mind as he bespoke his demise. Diabetes was behind the shower curtain when it first opened. He made his selection, it opened again - stroke one awaited him. No one in his family had diabetes – “something new”, the doctor's surmised, not knowing Philippe was aiding in the writing the story's plot. He reached and closed the curtain - stroke two took its position behind the curtain. “I don't drink that much,” said when one too many eyes followed the bottle from table to mouth. He raised both hands afterward, closing the curtain for good. It was for good – stroke three and death followed. Philippe died on August 13<sup>th</sup>, the same day as Mickey Mantle, beating Mickey by years, never listening to his idol or to anyone else.

No sooner than I had placed the car in park she appeared again. Bam! Bam! The sound now coming from the roof of the car; she then placed her hand through the crack in the window.

“My name is Kayla. Is there anything else you need? Do you need me to call anyone?”

“No I will be okay?”

“What is wrong with your car?”

“It stopped?”

“I see that, what did it do before it stopped? Do you have gas?”

“I have gas, half a tank. It just stopped.”

I didn't tell her about the lights. I don't know why I didn't. I just didn't. “It just stopped” seemed sufficient. At that time I noticed her bicycle, the largest bicycle I have ever seen. Exaggerated tires, a shiny aluminum cast frame, equally shiny rims, gear rigging I had never seen before, GPS mount, LED lights, and what appeared to be a heart monitor situated in the middle of the handlebars. She mounted by leaning the bike to the left. She then adjusted a black band on her right arm, appearing to synch the band with some contraction on the bike. At the same time, I noticed two prosthetic legs, seemingly cast out the same metal as the frame and rims. She wore military fatigues, covering and obscuring from the knees up, the outline of the abutments shorn through the material however. Her skin glistened, reflecting, as honey does under the glint of light. The sun seemed to point to the dog tags she wore on her neck - bouncing, dancing - before moving away. Sweat poured down her toned arms as she gripped the bicycle handlebars, adjusted her position, and awaited my answer. Traffic flowed about and around us, every now and then a voice could be heard screaming, followed by a horn. *Surely not, she hadn't doubled back to make clear her feelings for me.*

“I'll be okay.”

“Sure about that, okay?”

“Yes, I’m sure.”

After the second stroke, Uncle Philippe’s right leg was amputated. Something told me he wouldn’t be biking on a roadway with one leg gone, no less two. He never walked again for walking sake, remaining latched to the couch, kitchen table, the bed; imaginary barnacles attaching to his body, burdening his soul, causing him to sign the secret, and not so secret, death pact, surrendering, providing meaning to the doctor’s words, “a matter of time.” She moved away, down the esplanade, to the roadway below, causing the distance between us to grow. However, she also drew closer. You know, the time it takes to turn the radio off. The time it took me to look at my nails, as if a solution was contained in the beds of each nail; the time it took to look up and beyond toward the roadway, then to the sky, the ground – that time. Enough time for me to wonder why I didn’t accept her offer to help. A brief and fleeting time, time enough for me to realize my cell phone was dead. Kayla appeared to stop in the distance, the gleam which cast and reflected off her legs slowed, dispersing and disappearing in the sun’s haze.

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Steadying my gait, navigating the incline, wondering how she was able to navigate the slope with ease; bicycle or no bicycle, the rocks made every step uncertain. Grass flies played the persistent pest, moving from the ground, inching higher and higher, a visual, almost silent invasion, barely touching, never landing, in and out of every available hole, following me out of the grasses, as if I was their nectar, onto the roadway. A mess of a union we were, marching in step, until I reached the door of the diner, they electing not to enter, magically peeling off in unison, causing me to ignore Kayla’s bicycle positioned next to the door.

“Did you get your car going?”

She, Kayla, said, turning in my direction, from her seat at the counter. A plate of food was directly in front of her. On the other side of the counter stood a man who appeared to be the cook, wearing a white shirt and pants, positioned in front of a grill, extending his left arm to take slips of papers from others, the same as a relay runner, twisting, turning back, placing the papers on a line behind him. Saying nothing only nodding, turning away; in another direction, then another, fielding multiple instructions at the same time; moving, watching, observing, playing sentry, multi-tasking as if nothing was unusual about his ability. The left arm was tattooed. The tattoos appeared to have names inscribed, covering every inch, up and down, with dates under the names. He too had dog tags, hanging outside of his shirt. His right arm was a prosthetic, bronze in color, leading to a multi-colored hand which seemed to possess a mind of its own; grabbing, pointing, directing, seemingly disconnected from its master. Hissing, and humming, extending, recoiling. Otherworldly, like Kayla’s gears on her bicycle, like her legs; I didn’t know anything about prosthetics but something told me theirs weren’t purchased off the shelf, didn’t come from the local market.

Uncle Philippe’s prosthesis looked nothing like theirs. No holes. Not aerodynamically designed. No unique colors. The cook’s movement caused me to see Philippe’s non-movement. Complaining, electing on most occasions to remain anchored in a wheelchair, lying prone in the bed, positions which didn’t interrupt his favorite life-task: complaining about life. A complaint which originated in the same portion of his brain, the portion which stored the death pack he had long ago signed, detecting sound waves, constructing meaning, responding to others’ spoken and unspoken words, sending out his persistent and self-defeating signals. Their signals were different; they were different.



“No. No. No. I didn’t.”

“Have you called for help?”

“No. No. No. I haven’t. My phone is dead. I didn’t know it was dead when you offered helped me. After you rode off, I realized it.”

When I saw her legs I believed there was nothing she could do for me. I was a guy; she was a girl, no less; standing on two stumps, not much older, asking whether she could do anything else, really! I thought this and more. I said nothing, watching, looking around, occupying time and space, nanoseconds at best, contained with my thoughts. Me, the one who had perfected the art of throwing his hands up, then down, turning inward, making others’ acceptance my acceptance, where now my every day existence meant, doing something meant doing nothing. Images of that expensive bike, covered in dust, flattened tires, never used, played in my head. I said none of this - hoping, hoping, hoping - her incredible skills didn’t also include reading minds.

“You have your keys?”

“I do.”

“Let me have them. Now take a seat.”

She instructed the cook to give me something to eat before leaving; moving, bounding upward, off the stool, to the door, picking up a bag sitting on the floor by the door, then out. Her dreads continued to be compliant, moving, flowing in unison, with her effortless movement. She traversed the incline, more akin to attacking, the reflection from her body now seemed different, one-step behind, as if struggling to keep pace. Speed I have never seen before, otherworldly. Well, there was this kid in middle school named Bobbi Gentry, she was incredibly

quick, not Kayla quick though. Wile E. Coyote? ...The Road Runner? No, they aren't real, nothing like her. Her movement was nothing like I had ever seen before.

"Do you know boss lady?"

"No, we just met. She pushed my car off the roadway? Boss lady?"

"Yep, boss lady, this is her place. I have been with her for three years; we served together, in the same unit. What do you want to eat?"

"I don't know."

"Well, she won't be long."

"I think the car is dead."

"It won't take her long to figure out what is wrong? She'll either fix or blow it up."

He didn't smile when giving his assessment of Kayla's skill level. Blue fingers applied butter, yellow ones extended holding the toast in place, accompanied by a hissing sound, moving hash browns, stacking pancakes, eggs, bacon, separating, dividing, turning; disjointed from the remaining portion of his body, while the tattooed one performed other functions. He somehow positioned the remaining portion of his body in my direction, continuing to ask about food choice.

"Do you have any restrictions?"

"Restrictions ...?"

"Something you won't eat, or can't eat, restrictions?"

"Nope, I have none, eat anything."

With my last words, the right arm twirled in my direction, placing a plate of food in front of me. Humming now, retracting, as if complimenting its performance, moving back behind the cook, stacking, placing additional food on the griddle.

He was right. Fifteen minutes at most. Kayla pulled into the lot, entered the diner and handed me the keys. On cue, the cook's right arm placed a new plate of food on the counter, in front of Kayla.

“What was wrong?”

“You lost contact, the fuses. On that model, the manufacturer never addressed the problem of total engine failure when the fuses age and heat up, dislodging and losing contact. They should have recalled the vehicle and created a new housing for the fuses – costs at most \$20.00 for a new housing. I would recommend you replace all your fuses every six months or bring the vehicle by one day and I will put a new housing in for you. You are good to go.”

“What?”

“You are good to go.”

“It died.”

“If you want her to die, she will. Ignore the little things, she'll leave you. The core is still good, engine and transmission, she's the same, don't ignore the little things.”

“Really, that's it?”

“No, not really ...you never told me your name, you never told me what you thought, and you haven't finished your food. I saw your thoughts, but I want you to tell me. Let me wash my hands, we can talk while you finish eating.”