

Miracle on Malahat The Accident

The rain that started in Cobble Hill was getting harder; slamming into the windshield like baseballs thrown by a professional pitcher. To make matters worse there was thick fog in patches and visibility was practically nil in places. Only in the mountains can you have fog and rain mixed together. I wasn't worried I had travelled this road every Wednesday night for the last 6 months in all kinds of weather. My husband and I and Brianna live in Cobble Hill at the bottom of the Malahat Mountain on Vancouver Island in British Columbia.

Brianna was our miracle baby. Almost 7 years ago the doctor told us we were going to have a baby and we told him he was a liar. We had been through all the testing that concluded Donny's sperm was defective. The only way we were ever going to have a baby was if we adopted and that wasn't in our plans. But the doctor was right and 9 months later a beautiful baby girl was born. We named her Brianna, the female derivative of Brian, after my husband's twin brother that died in a boating accident on his 6th birthday.

Ever since Brianna was born she was exceptional at everything she attempted. She started walking at 6 months and by 10 months she was talking and by talking I mean complete sentences. She was able to read simple children's books at the age of 18 months. She has kept us hopping but boy what a ride. Her latest obsession is gymnastics. She particularly favours the uneven bars, which makes me proud as that was my favourite in high school. To be totally honest she is far better at them than I was at more than double her age.

That is why we are headed to Victoria on the other side of the mountain, or so our little Brianna thinks. Our little town of Cobble Hill, population 1,775, didn't offer advanced gymnastics for any age let alone for 5 year olds. So off to Victoria we trekked every Wednesday night for 45 minutes but truth be known I would go anywhere, do anything for this little girl.

I look in the rear view mirror and see Brianna's eyes all shiny and happy. She is watching 101 Dalmatians on the portable DVD player attached to the headrest on the passenger seat. It's her favourite movie and I'm sure she has watched it 101 times. It doesn't matter that gymnastics is 45 minutes away, to her it's just more time to watch the puppies try to get back together again. I hear her giggle and it makes my heart sing for joy. Today is her 6th birthday and I wonder where the time has gone. We are going to a surprise party for her. Gymnastics has been cancelled so that all her gymnast friends can attend. Most of the children from her class will be there as well. This is going to be the best party for the best little girl, ever.

It's been a beautiful day so far but in British Columbia that can change in a blink of an eye. I've been driving an 18 wheeler for 20 some odd years now and I have seen all kinds of weather from flash floods to fog so thick you can't see the end of your rig. My trusty companion Karabiner, Kara for short, named after the German rifle because she is a King German Shepherd keeps me company and protects the truck when I'm not in it. We travel the roads up and down the Vancouver Island day in and day out listening to old time country music.

Today's CD of choice and Kara's personal favourite Conway Twitty & Loretta Lynn, Louisiana Woman, Mississippi Man.

We've crested the top of the mountain and going down hauling a load for Canadian Tire in Duncan can be tricky especially if the weather changes. I see dark clouds on the horizon but I think we can get down before they can get up to where we are. Kara sees them too and she whimpers deep down in her throat which tells me the clouds are closer and moving faster than I realize. She looks at me and hops into the sleeper where she always goes when she's nervous. Storms have always freaked her out. I reach back and give her a little pet just to let her know I know how she feels. She lays down so she can't see out the windshield just as I notice the first tendrils of fog creeping up over the side of Malahat. It's going to be a hairy ride so I gear down and slow down but because of the decline it really doesn't make any difference.

The rain starts.

It always amazes me how quickly the rain can go from a gentle shower to a full out down pour. Today is no different. Before long the water drops are popping off the windshield like popcorn out of a popper. I turn the windshield wipers on high and they are slapping time to the rhythm of the music playing on the CD player. It doesn't calm sweet Kara down one bit. I'm too busy with big rig to be of any help to her frazzled nerves but I know when the sun comes out she will forgive me my trespasses. The fog is getting thicker. I look over to the right at the trees growing along the edge of the roadway and they are practically bent in half. That tells me that I am in for some windy weather as well as the fog and the rain but the main worry on my brain is the trailer. I need to keep it behind me because if it starts to come around toward the front of the cab Kara and I are in big trouble. This road has many curves in it that make it treacherous in bad weather.

The fog has claimed ownership to the road. I can still see above it so it isn't critical yet but the force of the rain makes visibility much more difficult. I gear down a couple more gears hoping to slow down enough to keep control of both the truck and the trailer. I have trees and a steep decline to my right and a sheer rock face to my left. Either way makes survival a crap shoot. Our only chance is to keep control and be able to outrun the storm and come through it unscathed. Kara is shivering and her whimpering is louder.

"It's ok Karabiner. I'm going to get us out of this. Don't worry," I tell her as soothingly as I can.

Her answer is a louder whimper and a short bark. My heart goes out to her.

The fog has reached the top of the engine compartment and I can no longer see the road. The yellow line that usually is a guide is completely obliterated by fluffy white swirling condensation. The only redeeming factor is that there are periods of clarity where the fog has receded. But it's the white outs that are the most dangerous.

You can't just hold it steady and hope that when the fog lifts for a bit that you are still on the right side of that line. You could be driving right into the tree line or even worse the rock face. The rain comes down harder.

I look in the rear view mirror and I see that Brianna is still totally engrossed in her movie and absolutely oblivious to the weather around the van. That is a good thing. The fog has gotten thicker and the rain is coming down now like stones falling from the heavens. We've hit another patch of fog and I'm pretty sure this a curve but I can't tell because I can't see the yellow center line. Just keep the car straight and hope when you come out of the fog that you aren't headed for the tree line and a trip back down the mountain via a different more dangerous route.

Kara is really whimpering now and I wish I could make her stop because her nerves are making my nerves sit up on edge like a bird on a wire. I've hit another patch of fog and it seems to be thicker yet than the last patch. The rain is harder still and the windshield wipers, even on full, can't keep the moisture off the windshield. Visibility is diminishing by the minute. I have a bad feeling about this. I gear down yet another gear but still it doesn't seem to do anything. And then I see headlights, low like a van or an SUV. They are on my side of the line or maybe I am on their side of the line. I slam on the brakes well actually I stand on them but all that happens is the trailer comes into view in my side mirror. Oh no. A jack knife now is not what I need so I let up on the brakes and steer into the trailer but that just takes me further into the lane of the vehicle coming toward me. In seconds there will be a collision and it's not going to be a good thing.

Travelling along with the sound of 101 Dalmations filling the van I see the headlights high up in the air. I know from travelling this road at night that it can only be a transport truck. It's coming toward us full tilt and I have nowhere to go. It's too big for me to go around and there are too many trees on the side but even if I could go there it's a straight fall down the mountain through the forest of trees to the ocean. I can't cross the road because he's there and there's a straight up rock face on that side. All I can do is hope that he can get control of his rig and get past us without any incident.

And then it happens. The transport hits the drivers side of the van and spins it around. The transport starts hydroplaning and smashes into the rock face head on and the trailer keeps coming. The full weight of the trailer pushes the cab and crushes it together like an accordion. Kara is silent.

The headlight has blinded her and fear has paralysed her. She knows this is not going to be good. When she feels the impact she hears Brianna scream or maybe it is her screaming she can't tell. She feels the air bag deploy and strike her face and the screaming is silenced. All of a sudden the van is spinning and spinning and spinning. She tries to put on the brakes hoping that maybe the spinning has kept the vehicle in the road. Her feet can't reach the pedals. Her hands can't find the gear selector. Her and Brianna are at the mercy of the weather and the mountain. Suddenly they come to an abrupt halt. Thankfully they are still on the road or so she thinks. Everything is silent now nothing but the raindrops making noise on the windshield.

“Brianna, can you hear me? Brianna can you hear me?” I think I am screaming at her. She doesn't answer me. I try to reach my purse which was on the passenger seat before we began to spin but God knows where it is now. I need to find it and get to my cell phone and call for help. I can't move my head. I don't know if it's because of the air bag or because of some unseen damage from the van. None of us are going to get out of here alive if someone doesn't call for help.

“Mr. Trucker, can you hear me?” A little louder I say, “Mr. Trucker, please can you hear me?” Still no answer.

Then I see Brianna at the passenger door reaching in for something and I realize she's got my cell phone.

“Please, baby, call 911 tell them we've been in an accident. We're on highway #1 just past Mill Bay and that there is a transport truck and a van involved. Tell them to hurry. I'm so glad you're ok. I love you. Don't worry about me I'm fine.” I said to her as quickly as I could.

“Ok Mommy, don't worry I will help you all. I will call them but I need to check on the truck driver. Are you sure you're ok?” Brianna asked me just like a grown up.

“Yes, honey, I'm fine. Please make the call first. Get help here as fast as possible,” I replied. And then she was gone.

I could hear her talking in the distance but I wasn't sure if she was making the call or talking to the trucker.

Brianna walks down the highway a ways to the truck after making the call to 911. She sees the carnage of the big truck but she has no fear. She is on a mission. She finds the front of the truck and climbs up to the driver's side window. It was smashed out when he hit the rock face. She sees a man that is drenched with his own blood and can tell that he has extensive injuries. She instinctively knows that he is unable to talk.

“Hello sir, my name is Brianna and I've come to talk to you for a bit. Now I know that you are unable to talk so will you blink your eyes once for yes and twice for no? Do you understand?” Brianna asked him.

He blinks once.

“You have some pretty bad injuries and you are going to be in the hospital for a very, very long time but you are going to live. Do you understand?” Brianna asked.

He blinks once.

“When you do get out of the hospital you are still going to be in bad shape, hardly able to take care of yourself without help. Do you understand?” Brianna asked again.

He blinks once.

“Now I see here that you have a beautiful dog and I can tell that you love her with all your heart and that she is your best friend. Am I correct?” Brianna asked leading up to the real reason she's here.

He blinks once.

“Tonight my mother is going to lose her only child and she will need someone to love. Tonight your dog is going to lose her best friend because you will not be able to care for her and they will put her in the BCSPCA and possibly euthenize her. But, sir, I have a solution if you are willing. Do you

understand?" Brianna asked knowing by the tears in his eyes that he did.

He blinked once.

"If I may take Kara to my van and tie her to the door so that the emergency crews will know that she belongs with that vehicle then she will not be taken to the pound and her life will be spared. I promise you, sir, that she will be loved by both of my parents and will be given a great home. I also promise that my mother will bring her to visit you often so that neither of you will forget. Do you understand?"

Brianna asked.

He blinked once.

Brianna got down and went around the back of the wrecked trailer to the passenger door and once again climbed up to the window. Inside on the seat she found a leash and Kara just inside the sleeper looking at her with her big beautiful head cocked slightly to the side. She looked over at Willy and whimpered for a minute and then leaned in and found a spot devoid of blood and licked him goodbye. She instinctively knew she was to go with Brianna and so she jumped through the window after taking one last look at Willy and got down on the ground with Brianna and let her put the leash on her. She is nearly as tall as the little girl and because of that she feels a great protectiveness toward her.

Brianna and Kara walked back to the van side by side. Brianna tied the leash to the handle on the front door of the van. Her mother looked quizzically first at the dog and then at her daughter. But she knew Brianna well enough that she would have a good explanation for this rather odd behaviour.

"Mommy the truck driver is in really bad shape and is going to be in the hospital for a really long time and then even after that he's not going to be able to take care of his dog. You need to take her home and take care of her and love her even when you don't think you can love again. She needs you and you are going to need her. Her name is Karabiner but he calls her Kara for short. I have tied her to our van so the emergency crews will know that she belongs to you and they won't put her in the pound. Can you do that for me, please?" Brianna asked me.

I thought it must be the effects of the accident because I didn't quite understand what she meant by I was going to need her especially when I had Brianna. And why wasn't Brianna asking if she could keep the dog?

She was standing there with her eyes all wide and questioning waiting for an answer. I looked at the dog and thought what are we going to do with a dog? But I have never said no to Brianna and I wasn't going to start.

"Ok, baby, we'll take the dog home but as soon as the truck driver gets better we'll give her back. How's that?" I countered.

"No, Mom, you don't understand. The trucker is never going to be able to take care of her. You can take her to visit him. I promised him you would." Brianna said. Off in the distance we began to hear the sirens and she looked down the hill. She knew her time was short and she needed her mom to understand. "Please Mom. Just say you're going to keep her and promise me you won't give her away or put her in the pound. Please it's very important to me," Brianna whined.

"Ok, Brianna, ok. I promise," I answered as only a mother could.

The sirens were getting louder and Brianna knew it was time.

"Mom, I have to go now. I love you very, very much. I will always be with you," Brianna said rather cryptically.

She turned and walked away.

The next thing I remember I was being taken out of the van and put on a stretcher.

"Get my daughter out!" I screamed. "Get my daughter, she's in the back seat, get her out!" I screamed louder. No one was listening to me.

A lady EMT came over to my stretcher which was facing away from the van and held my hand. In a soft and soothing voice she said "Ma'am, I'm so sorry but your daughter didn't make it. She died on impact."

"NO that's not possible. I was just talking to her. She made the 911 call. She tied the dog to the van. No it's not possible. You're mistaken. Maybe she's badly hurt but she's not dead. No. No," I refused to hear the logics the kind lady turned the stretcher around so I could see the van. It was wrapped around

a tree at the rear passenger door. Right where Brianna was sitting. Another EMT brought the dog over and it looked me in the eyes and I knew we had witnessed a miracle. The EMT asked me what the dog's name was and I looked at her and said “ Her name is Miracle.” Kara gave a short bark and wagged her tail in acknowledgement.

Penny Pollock