

*The Love of
other
My ^V Life*



TRACI L. SLATTON



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IMMORTAL

BROKEN

THE YEAR OF LOVING

FALLEN

COLD LIGHT

FAR SHORE

BLOOD SKY

THE BOTTICELLI AFFAIR

DANCING IN THE TABERNACLE (*poetry*)

PIERCING TIME & SPACE

THE ART OF LIFE

with Sabin Howard

1

In which insanity enters

I launched myself into a glorious spring day in Manhattan with my customary enthusiasm for leaping over obstacles. I envisioned myself radiating Impressionist pastels as I bounded over everything in my way, every petty detail and wearying obligation, every false cultural ideal and precious lost illusion and brain-fart screw-up, everything keeping me from my ideal life of fame and success and the undying love of my soul mate.

In this case, it was my building super, José, hosing down the sidewalk. “Tessa, we have to talk,” he called. “The co-op board is serious!”

“Late for work,” I hollered, gripping my bag tighter so I didn’t have to pause.

“We have to talk,” he insisted.

“Sure,” I yelled. But I didn’t want to deal with the co-op board. I wanted to relish my own rebirth.

I was painting again! And wasn't it a miracle? It almost brought back my lost faith in something better, something beautiful. To have my talent back, stirring itself like an acorn quickening under the soil. To be returning to myself after a long travail through a dark wood in what I hoped wasn't yet the middle of my life. I was only thirty-four years old, and I hoped to live to at least ninety-seven—painting the whole time. My descendants, if I was lucky enough to reproduce, could pull a No. 6 flat red sable out of my cold, dead fingers when I passed on.

“You'd be better off robbing a bank,” José continued, yelling louder as I sprinted away. “You haven't paid your maintenance bills since your husband left three years ago. The board's not going to wait forever!”

“I'll get the money,” I screamed over my shoulder before rounding the turn onto Riverside Drive where we couldn't see each other. “Somehow,” I panted. The heel of my shoe wobbled, so I stopped by a tree ringed in purple tulips. The contrast of leathery brown trunk and translucent petals pulled me into a reverie.

A landscape painting with purples and browns and sky blues, but almost no reds. A vanishing point far in the distance, as in the vague, exquisite place where ripples fade out in a pond . . .

Someone sighed softly. It was more of a whimper, really. It punctured my moment.

I jumped and looked up.

Not five feet away stood a scruffy man in a beat-up leather jacket. His knee poked through a hole in his jeans, and he wore mismatched sneakers without socks. He gazed at me with an expression of awe.

Homeless. *There but for the grace of God go I.* Then I winced because, if I didn't scrounge up a big chunk of money for the co-op board soon, that would be me. But now I was painting again, and where there was creativity, there was hope. I could soon be selling my landscape paintings for a hundred thousand dollars each. I walked over to the ragged guy. I had only a few dollars in my purse, but I could spare the cash. After all, I could eat the free bagels and cream cheese I knew they had at the Church, and this guy needed a hot meal more than I did.

"Here you go, sir. Buy yourself a cup of coffee." I held out the bills.

He didn't answer. He was intent on my face. His pupils were huge and black. Was he on drugs or just bat-crap crazy? Poor slob.

I picked up his hand and placed the bills on his palm, closing his fingers over them.

He glanced down. "I'll buy you a cup, Tessa!"

Poor fellow—"Wait, how do you know my name?"

I asked cautiously, edging back a few steps. I should have flinched, but I didn't. That should have been my first clue.

"I'm Brian Tennyson," he said. He beamed at me.

He was about my age and not half-bad looking with a smile on his face, if you like the shaggy, unkempt look.

I almost smiled back before remembering that I shouldn't encourage him. How did he know my name? It should have scared me, shocked me at the very least, but it didn't. What was wrong with me? Other than what was usually wrong with me, I mean.

He placed his hand on my shoulder and said earnestly, "I need a place to stay for a few days. Ofee said I could stay with you."

"Ofee?" I puzzled. He knew Ofee? How so? Had I met this Brian with Ofee sometime?

"Isn't he your best friend? He is where I come from. Since you guys were in grade school." The man stepped closer to me.

"Yes, of course I know Ofee," I murmured, scrutinizing Brian's face. Nope, I hadn't met him with Ofee. I would remember that.

"Some things don't change. I just knew you two would be close here, too."

"Ofee's in Thailand teaching a yoga retreat. Uh, how do you know him? And what do you mean, 'he

is where you come from'?" I shrugged his hand off my shoulder, but really, I wasn't perturbed. I should have been, but I wasn't. It was as if I knew him through a glass darkly, even though I didn't know him at all.

"That's a complicated question, and I need to ask, what do you understand about decoherence theory?" His eyes widened hugely, like owl eyes. A determined expression scrolled over his face, and he stepped to within a few inches of me. Too close.

"Personal boundaries," I said patiently but firmly, the way I did with the old folks in the eldercare program where I work part-time. Sometimes they sidle inside my comfort zone, usually to hear me better or because time is different for them, and therefore, space is too. I had learned how to re-establish the space without hurting their feelings.

I didn't want to hurt Brian's feelings, either—for no reason that I understood.

Brian didn't say anything for a moment, nor did he move. Then his face lit up. He threw his arms around me and exclaimed, "Love has no boundaries!"

"Let me go," I ordered, struggling.

"Never," he swore. He clutched me tighter. For a guy living on the street and eating who knows what, he was ungodly strong. Then I caught a whiff of something acrid, like sweat and scorched electri-

cal wires and the must of old cellars. I struggled for real.

“I don’t care what Ofee told you. Find somewhere else to stay. Bye!”

“But it’s only for five days, four hours, and twenty-two minutes, then I’ll be gone,” he said, gripping me ferociously.

I froze. Fighting wasn’t going to solve the problem, I figured that out. What worked with my old folks? Distraction. “Look, a purple chicken drinking vodka while playing an organ!”

“That I gotta see,” he said, turning to look. His arms loosened—so fragile is our hold on everything.

I raced away, not understanding how precious was the moment. Isn’t it always that way? You don’t understand until it’s lost.



***Long ago and far
away, in another
galaxy altogether***

Brian paced in the front of the classroom as students filed in. It was his first day teaching this course, Calculus 101—math gut for English majors. It was his first day teaching any course, in fact.

Thanks to an early gift in physics, he was an assistant professor in the physics department. He was also a sophomore majoring in American Studies. The tricky ambiguity of it all meant that he hadn't asked to teach and hadn't wanted to. Yale had thrust it upon him. Some palace revolt among his fellow Yalies, who were always complaining about something. Apparently, the other undergrads felt that the prevalence of non-native English speakers in the lower-level math courses discouraged students from pursuing upper-level math courses.

A young woman with long hair and a shapely form scooted into the back row. Brian straightened. He had noticed her before. His eyes picked her out

wherever she was on campus, in front of Linsly Chit or by Commons or outside Branford, which seemed to be her residential college. Brian turned to Rajiv, his assistant, for whom English was an excellent third language. They exchanged a look of appreciation.

Some things exceeded language. In Brian's mind, those things were physics, baseball, and the shapely girl he hadn't stopped thinking about since he first saw her at Freshman Orientation last year.

What transcendental stroke of luck had ushered her into his classroom? Of all the math classes in all the campuses in all the towns in all the world, she walks into his It reinforced his certainty of the innate goodness of the universe.

The seats in the class were about as filled as they were going to get. "Welcome to calculus, which doesn't have to be boring," Brian said.

A bald guy with three piercings in one ear and four in the other leaned forward. "Aren't you in my Am Stud class?"

"Yep. I'm a sophomore," Brian said. "I'm also a junior associate professor in the physics department."

That got their attention. Indeed, thirty-seven sets of eyes narrowed and focused on him like laser lines of light. Yalies were nothing if not competitive, boola boola. They wanted to know if there really was someone smart enough to be their professor while also

being their peer. Brian let their questions quiver in the same dilemma that any angstrom of light faced: wave or particle? *Let them wonder*, he decided. He picked up a baseball from the lectern and tossed it to Rajiv.

Rajiv dropped the ball awkwardly, then bent and picked it up.

“Rajiv, my teaching assistant,” Brian introduced with a wave. He motioned for Rajiv to throw the ball back to him.

With hesitation and a haphazard fling, Rajiv did so.

Brian tossed the ball to Rajiv again; this time Rajiv almost caught it. Brian pitched once more slowly, underhand. “I’m Brian Tennyson.”

“Why are you teaching calculus, Brian Tennyson,” asked a tall girl with a hatchet face, very black eyeliner, and a short, tight skirt. She had to be a philosophy major.

“So I can play baseball,” Brian said. He wound up and pitched a fastball to Rajiv.

Rajiv cringed and fell off the platform. The ball bounced off the wall, leaving a divot in the wood paneling.

The girl with black eyeliner shagged the ball and threw it to Brian. She had a good arm. *She’s getting an A*, Brian decided.

“I was an early physics PhD at MIT. Then I came here to major in Am Stud so I can play baseball. I’m teaching calculus because I have to,” Brian said. “Someone circulated a petition demanding that math professors speak good English. The petition claimed that non-English speaking math lecturers of all genders, sexual preferences, religious creeds, and races were turning students off math.” He paused, grinning. “Yalies are equal opportunity critics, you know.” He cleared his throat and took an officious stance, then spoke in a clipped accent. “The administration of this institution takes student needs very seriously.”

People smiled. Tension in the class ratcheted down a notch. The shapely girl in back twirled her hair, looking bored. *How can I get her attention?* he asked himself.

The answer was simple and came to him like a flash of lightning over the steppes, as did all his intuitions about quantum chromodynamics. It was always about the transmission of forces. And what force governed all Yalies?

The force for good grades, known as the universal grubbing force.

“Here’s the deal,” Brian said. “No matter how much you all suck at calculus, no one gets less than a B+.”

The class cheered. The girl in back sat up. She had a good smile, soft and full of promise, as Brian had imagined she would. Dazzling, really.

Shazam, Brian thought, looking into her eyes. “Extra credit for visiting during office hours.”