

THE YEAR OF LOVING

Traci L. Slatton



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Quotation from "When the Past Is Present" are taken from Richo, David. *When The Past Is Present: Healing the Emotional Wounds That Sabotage Our Relationships*. Boston, MA: Shambhala Publications, 2008. Print. pp.107-108.

Frida Kahlo quotes taken from Herrera, Hayden. *Frida: A Biography of Frida Kahlo*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2002. Print

Cover designed by Brandi Doane McCann www.ebook-coverdesigns.com

Published by Parvati Press, New York, NY www.parvatipress.com

Visit the author website: www.tracilslatton.com

Library of Congress Control Number: 2016916533

Print ISBN: 978-1-942523-06-2

EBook ISBN: 978-1-942523-07-9

“Even staying with our doubt, despondency, and utter vulnerability makes them all legitimate landscapes of our psychic life.

“Our practice is to hold and relate to our feelings as *teachings* about enlightenment. The teachings emerge both from what incites our feelings and from our ways of responding. Sadness teaches us about loss and impermanence. Anger shows us how we react to unfairness. Fear teaches us about how we handle danger and threat. Joy teaches us about how we celebrate life.”

Dave Richo, *When the Past Is Present: Healing the Emotional Wounds that Sabotage Our Relationships*

The Year of Loving

CHAPTER ONE

IN THE BEGINNING, THERE was my bohemian poet mom and square attorney dad, who met at a concert and shared only three interests in common: rock and roll, Renaissance art, and me, Sarah Melissa Paige, conceived in the backseat of a Chevy Impala to the strains of Deep Purple.

How do I know this? My Jewish mom never had a clear sense of boundaries. She would say the most outrageous things, not just to me but to anyone, at any time. “Sarah was a vaginal birth and I nursed her until she was eleven months old,” she would tell a store clerk, while I winced. It was one of her lovable quirks. That’s what my Scotch-Irish/Cherokee dad would say, with a small smile.

I still miss them every day. Their death was one of the great losses of my life. Painter Frida Kahlo, my soul sister because of her mixed heritage and her devotion to art, had remarked, “There were two great accidents in my life. One was the trolley and the other was Diego. Diego was by far the worst.” Sometimes I felt that way about the two great catastrophes of my life: my parents’ deaths and my marriage to my first husband George Calhoun, the rich WASP with the perpetual sneer of condescension. George would never forgive me for the humiliation of my leaving him for an impecunious artist.

But let’s move past George. Let’s go to the end of my second marriage, to the realist painter Clifton.

I was in my gallery in Chelsea, working on an article for *American Artist* magazine. I was trying to explain why excellence, beauty, and the artist’s skill were more important than the overvalued and empty wasteland of post-modernism. You can see I’m a woman with strong opinions.

Rosa, my assistant, came in from the front room.

“Sarah, you hear the printer?” she asked, pausing to check her makeup in the reflection of a glass frame. She dabbed at her mascara with her pinky. “A fax came in.”

“Something from Clif’s lawyer. Or George with a snotty note about not being able to reach me via email,” I guessed, in an absent tone. “Nothing I want to see.” Will Michelangelo’s *Doni Tondo* illustrate my point about the supreme rapture of the human form? I smiled at her.

She sparkled back. “Weren’t you waiting for something?”

“Alex’s meds,” I remembered. I pushed back from my desk and hurried over to the printer, where a prescription lay in the out box.

“Want me to run it in?” Rosa asked.

“I’ll go,” I answered. I had been writing for two hours, and it was a cold, drizzly day with no foot traffic, so no customers to come in and peruse the beautiful representational paintings I sold. April is the cruelest month. So, on the flimsiest of whims, without bothering to shrug on my coat, I headed out into my life.

The pharmacy was located only a block up on Eighth Avenue. I banged into the door with my umbrella. A gust of wind caught me just at that moment and blew the umbrella inside out and I tumbled through the door askew, my umbrella struggling like a trapped animal and my Jimmy Choos sliding out from under me as if I’d skidded on a candy bar wrapper.

‘Cartwheel’ would be an accurate description. Which explains why my linen skirt was up around my waist like a belt.

“Now that’s an entrance,” a man said, his deep voice amused. He bent down and offered his hand. I fought my linen skirt down to cover everything that was on display. It’s not like I wear shorts over my thongs—which had twisted up inside my lady parts. Leaving everything on display. I groaned. He cleared his throat. “Don’t worry, I’m a doctor.”

“You’re not my doctor,” I said, furiously, batting his hand away. I managed to scramble to my knees and yank my skirt to a more appropriate semblance of coverage. What is it about linen? It goes out of its way to be uncooperative. I have a theory that clothing designers have a hidden agenda to torture women. Of course, it served me right for wearing linen in April. I just loved the navy blue, forties’ era suit I’d found in a consignment shop on Greenwich Avenue. *Note to self: check out usability standards before purchasing vintage clothes.*

That blasted umbrella was determined to thwart my efforts, so I

dropped it and pulled myself up via the shelves of cough suppressants and analgesics.

“Glad that’s so,” the man murmured.

Was he still ogling me? I didn’t answer because I’d managed to sweep the display of Robitussin onto the ground. I bent over to pick them up.

“Ahem,” the man said, and his rich voice thickened with the effort not to laugh. I glanced and he was pointing.

At my behind.

The back of my skirt was still bunched up around my waist. I’d stuck my ass in his face.

I grasped my skirt by both sides and jerked downward as hard as I could. The waist button popped off. Luckily the zipper stayed firmly sealed, or everything I have would have been revealed. Again.

The man laughed outright.

I held the skirt closed with one hand while I shook the other index finger accusingly in his face. “Listen, you!” I started, accusingly.

He blinked, bemused and amused. He was tall and toned, with fine, poreless skin, cropped black hair, and the kind of substantial nose that certain men carry off very well indeed.

It struck me how silly I looked. I broke up with laughter.

After a few seconds, he took off his glasses, rubbed the bridge of his nose, and blinked a few times, laughing with me. “It’s not often you find a beautiful woman who can laugh at herself.”

“Yeah, well, if I couldn’t, I’d have been in big trouble a long time ago,” I murmured. He had nice dark eyes. There weren’t enough crow’s feet or the lines of laughter and sadness that reflect the gravity of a life fully lived to put him in his forties. I smiled. “Thanks for the compliment.”

For a moment, the most delicious, open softness encompassed us. We smiled at each other a little sheepishly.

Then I remembered why I was there. A new prescription for my younger daughter Alexandra. Maybe this one would be the magic bullet that kept her from shooting herself in the foot. I desperately wanted it to be, and I could only pray that it was, as I’d been praying for the last few years, watching Alex get herself tangled up with one bad decision after another and get herself thrown out of two schools. She was now at Devon Town, the private school of absolute last resort in Manhattan. If she could graduate, she could still attend a decent college.

I shrugged and waved to the hot man who was at least ten years younger than me and I walked back to the pharmacist. I handed him the scrip.

Katsu, the pharmacist, an old Japanese guy who came to every show at my gallery for the free food and drinks, shuffled unblinkingly off to the back as if he'd never seen me before in his life.

I sighed.

"Excuse me, miss." It was the hot man, looking carefully at my left hand, where I wasn't wearing a ring.

I perked up.

The skin stretching across the cheekbones of his angular face deepened in color. He cleared his throat. "Would you like to get a cup of coffee?"

"Sure," said Katsu, who had returned. "Venti half-caf cappuccino, wet and fat-free. Would you get me a scone, too?"

"Not you," the young doctor said.

Katsu shrugged and then looked at me. "I have it in stock. Come back in an hour." He turned back to the doctor. "Hey, doc, just coffee, or will you buy me dinner, too?"

The doctor grimaced and followed me as I walked toward the front of the store. He touched my elbow lightly as I reached for the door. "About that cup of coffee?"

I straightened myself, which was hard to do with one hand, because the other hand was still gripping the waistband of my skirt, to keep it closed. "You don't have to buy me coffee just because I stuck my ass in your face."

He looked embarrassed and I noted again how smooth and silken his skin was. I remembered being 38. From the vantage point of 48, it seemed innocent and hopeful.

He said, "This is not about your ass."

"You don't like my ass?"

He flushed and looked about twelve years old. "Your ass is very nice. That's my professional opinion."

"You think I'm a *professional*?" I demanded, in a tone of outrage.

He flushed a brighter shade of red. "Coffee. Just a cup of coffee."

"You're sweet." I sighed while I smiled. I had baggage older than he was, and I'm not talking about the dinged-up Tumi cases I take to Europe on scouting trips.

“But ...”

He had straightened his back and shoulders and was listening hard—the antennae were practically standing straight up atop his head.

“It’s flattering, but I don’t think so. Thank you anyway.”

A few minutes later, torn and bedraggled, I stood in the door of my gallery.

Rosa glided over to me. She’s of Mexican and Finnish descent, an actress and a dancer with cascades of black hair and striking pale blue eyes. She’s fresh and juicy and sassy. I was newly aware of every wrinkle on my face and every dimple on the back of my thigh. With her lissome dancer’s body and face still unlined in her late twenties, Rosa was a better fit for Dr. Gorgeous than I could ever be. What the hell was he thinking, asking me out for coffee?

“Why are you staring at me?” Rosa demanded. She narrowed her big vivid eyes at me. “What happened to your skirt?”

“My umbrella,” I muttered.

“OK, don’t tell me.”

“I tripped over my umbrella,” I amended, not knowing that was when I woke up in a dark woods in the middle of the journey of my life. There’s a flux to the divine comedy of life, the way it empties out, grows full, and then cracks to empty out again, so that fullness can be reborn. I still don’t know if my heart can stretch to encompass all the shattering. But, in that moment, I was just thinking that I should have accepted that cup of coffee. I think I would have enjoyed it.

“Strip it off, Mamacita, my sewing kit is in my purse and there’s twenty minutes before I leave for my audition.” She wagged her fingers at me.

“I’ll take it off in the back office,” I said. I was still clutching the skirt to keep it closed properly. “I’ve been naked in public enough for one day. And thank you.”

CHAPTER TWO

AT FIVE O’CLOCK I went home. Alex was out so I changed into my yoga clothes. They were stinky but that just made me feel virtuous: it meant I practiced a lot. I had to work off the red wine and chocolate somehow.

I was en route to my favorite yoga class—not too easy, not too hard, and only an hour long—when my best friend Trudi called.

“Why are you on my mind?” Trudi asked.

I could feel her blonde head pressing into the phone, willing me to tell her why she was thinking of me. Something was up with me; she could feel it in the ether. She knew me too well. Despite that, she still loved me, which was a real plus in her favor. “What do you think of younger men?”

“You’re a cougar now? Isn’t that the term?” Trudi asked. She’s been married for thirty-five years to the same college sweetheart, an American in her hometown of London on his spring break, all those decades ago. I envied her dedication.

And her luck.

After two failed marriages, I could definitively state there was luck involved in marriage. Trudi had married a sweetheart who remained a sweetheart and who didn’t suddenly sprout a grinning narcissistic head at every turn. That was a feat I had never accomplished.

My third husband, if I ever went there and I wasn’t sure I wanted to, would have “I am not a narcissist” tattooed on his chest.

“Cougar,” I said, wrinkling my nose. I picked up the pace so I could make it to class.

“Do men under thirty have anything to say?” Trudi asked.

“Not under thirty!” I snorted. “Anyone under thirty is a match for