



Chapter 1

AVATAR OF LOVE

BY ANNIE LALLA

I'm running down the street barefoot. Everything whizzes by in a blur. My heart is racing but my thoughts are in slow motion. I weave between a moving yellow cab and the curb, wondering what could happen if I let it hit me. It doesn't but I'm startled by the near miss. Being so close to death reminds me I'm alive.

I look down at my naked feet, toes painted pink. I don't know why I'm here, what I'm doing or where I'm going. Shame slides edgewise into my heart as the insanity of my situation settles in. Tears and confusion well up in my throat. How did I get into this crazy mess... running barefoot through NYC to escape a boyfriend I'm convinced is trying to kill me.

My name is Annie Lalla and I'm a Love Coach.

As a relationship expert, I help people communicate their feelings effectively so they can find and keep True Love. I show clients how to build their self-esteem and attract the highest caliber life partner. Here is the story of how I almost lost my one chance at True Love.

I believe romantic relationship is a portal to self-actualization. Being in love is a spiritual path. It's the place you are forced to excavate your darkest shadows and asked to fulfill your potential by becoming the most extraordinary version of yourself. We all need a mirror to see our blind spots. Our partner is that sacred mirror.

But like all things sacred, True Love is shrouded in mystery. The journey is equal parts excitement and terror. If done right, you inevitably enter a process of annihilation. The individual "I" is forced to die into a "We." That's why it's scary, and why we resist it on

pain of death. It's not always apparent, but the "We"—when cultivated with fierce commitment—gives us back an "I" vastly more expanded than the one "sacrificed." But few romances live to tell this truth.

True Love is not for the faint hearted, it's a gladiator sport. Many give up when it gets too hard. But once you're actually in Love, you simply cannot leave; there's nowhere else to go. Like an exquisite trap it holds you tight, binding you to growth.

True Love is the only force strong enough to keep you in the game when everything else says run. Anything less, is a brand of settling, where "good enough" dresses up as The One. I'm great at finding would-be sell outs in love, because I came so close to selling out on myself.

Here's what happened: A few years ago, I was dating a true gentleman—a brilliant psychiatrist with a PhD from Columbia University, top of his class. We quickly fell into a deep romance. Within three months he was ready for marriage, kids and a nice house in Brooklyn. At 38 years old, I was very tempted. He was smart, handsome, sensitive and treated me with reverence. I loved him dearly, but something was missing.

In retrospect, I see how much of our connection was funded by my primal reproductive imperative. Getting older had me anxious to make a baby—and he could feel it. His readiness for that future was very compelling. On some unconscious level I was interviewing for a baby-daddy rather than looking for my soulmate. I couldn't see it clearly at the time but I was actually selling out on True Love for the incessant ticking of my biological clock—a common blind-spot in aging women.

While we were dating, I was a fully-fledged love coach. My clients adored me and thought I'd found my True Love, which of course inspired them. I remember thinking, "If I break up with him, the world will think I'm a total fraud—no one's ever going to trust me." How could I support others if my own relationship failed?

In some ways, I got better at my work during this period. I could easily smell the indicators of any client's potential selling out—because I was living it. Despite a low-level unease with my relationship, I kept squinting at my doubts and let the affair go on for months. I met his family, he met mine. He even 'secretly' bought me a wedding ring.

But there's only so long you can keep a lie to yourself. In my deepest heart, I knew we weren't a match. There was a subtle, but ever present question, "Is he the one?" That incessant uncertainty is what finally clued me in. *My hack: if after a year of dating, you're still not sure, then they're not the one. If you think you may be settling, then you are.*

When our soul finds its mate, that particular question disappears. You go from "Is this going to work?" to "How is this going to work?"

What finally allowed me to make the painful and heroic shift out of that relationship, were the powerful insights I gleaned from a deep meditative journey.

During that journey, I had a vivid, surreal and traumatic dream vision. My boyfriend and I were sitting in my apartment, talking about our future—marriage, kids, the whole thing—when suddenly I began to panic. Terror rushed through me, inchoate fears began to spin into private hysterias. I shared my distress but everything he did in response reduced my sense of safety. As my emotions intensified, I quickly descended into a bottomless paranoia, which sent me darting full speed out of my apartment, terrified he was going to "kill me."

Barefoot and petrified I raced down three flights of stairs while visions of blood flashed across my mind. I ran my fastest, never looking back, for fear he was chasing me with a knife. I found myself hurtling through the streets of NY desperate for help. Nowhere was safe, I felt alone and afraid. Four words kept looping inside my mind: "I'm going to die. I'm going to die. I'm going to die." That's when I noticed the yellow cab and wondered if jumping in front could end the terror.

Eventually, I found my way back home and the visceral nightmare subsided. With some space, time and processing, I realized the whole experience was my subconscious trying to tell me, "Your spirit is going to die if you stay in this relationship. Your purpose, your mission, everything you stand for is going to die."

During that journey, I woke up to the painful but undeniable fact that I was selling out on my most valued belief: True Love is real and possible for me, no matter how old I was. My animal had been choosing a "good enough" baby-daddy over a sacred soulmate. This was in such defiance of my truth. Some wise part of me knew the moment I stopped believing in True Love would be the moment I stopped wanting to live. My very identity was tied to this belief. To sell out on that would cost not just my happiness, but my very soul. I saw how close one can come to a silent, cynical betrayal of what we hold dear. I almost defiled my most sacred truth. And if I could do it, anyone could.

Soon after that, we broke-up. I made a clearing in my life and a pact to my self. I stopped looking for the father of my future child and instead committed to finding the man I could love forever, baby or not.



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Two weeks later I met someone in a dusty tent at the Burning Man art festival. He was speaking to a large group of people about leadership, describing the future and explaining how the success of the whole world depended on the success of each individual. I was instantly smitten. He would go on to change the definition of what “man” was for me. His name was Eben Pagan and he turned out to be the love of my life.

That’s when my whole story—indeed my entire life—shifted.

But I almost missed meeting him in the first place. I woke up that fateful morning at Burning Man with my entire camp going to hear some semi-famous marketing guy (Eben Pagan) do a talk. At the time, I thought sales and marketing was smarmy, so I opted out of going. Two hours later, I leisurely walked over to pick up my friends. As I entered the tent I saw the “marketing guru” at the front. He was still talking, but strikingly handsome; so I sat down.

To my surprise, he wasn’t speaking about business or marketing. He was giving a heartfelt invocation for each of us to wake up and discover our unique gifts, then bring full attention to honing those powers. Until each of us actualized our individual skills, the species as a whole—he claimed—could not get to the next level. I was in awe.

Powerful, articulate and passionate, I felt him speaking directly to every un-manifested dream in the room, especially my own. It was the most inspiring talk I’d ever heard. And from that moment on, my heart was abducted into Love.

I had many ways to categorize men. There were smart men, good men, bad men, nice men, interesting men, worthy men, sexy and shady men. But he didn’t seem to fit into any of those labels. I was forced to create a new category just for him.

Imagine all the fanciest cars you know: Rolls Royces, Mercedes, Ferraris and Lamborghinis, they’re all amazing but Eben was an intergalactic vehicle like the Starship Enterprise. He was a whole different class of space/time machine—going where no man had gone before.

On some level I knew I’d fallen in love. On another level, I just felt starstruck. I had cultivated the ability to chat and flirt with intelligent men, but this encounter had me paralyzed and silent.

My girlfriends walked over to him after the talk. I hovered nearby, deathly quiet, way too shy to speak. They bantered back and forth, then he gave us all his email. I took the piece of paper—like a sacred object—and knew once I was at home and calmer, I could reach out to him online. The rest of Burning Man, all I could think of was Eben.

He was smart, he was handsome, he was making an important difference in the world. But what really pulled me in was the earnest congruence in his demeanor. I’d never seen anyone do marketing or sales that didn’t seem shady, but he felt authentic and honest. His intentions were immediately trustable.

I initiated an email dialogue, hoping to pull him in closer with clever writing. My deepest insecurity is about my intelligence, so I overcompensated by turning up my intellect in hopes he'd fall for the 'smart' girl.

Turns out he was already dating someone, and despite being envious of her, I didn't try to undermine their connection. Instead I offered myself (being a love coach) as a sounding board for any of his relationship issues. One weekend while Eben was in NYC, I hosted a party with some friends at my place and invited him and his girlfriend over. They were having some relationship drama, so I sat and coached him (the man I wanted to marry) on how to be a better boyfriend to this woman. When you love someone, you love them whether they're with you or not.

His relationship ended a month or so later, and I continued to connect with him via witty and flirty email dialogues. But I wasn't the only woman in his life; he still had a cadre of ladies he saw periodically. Despite sharing a vast array of philosophical interests and epic conversations, he did not recognize me as his future mate. I was but one of the girls in his rotation. At one point, Eben confessed he wasn't very good at relationships and didn't even believe in True Love. He claimed he'd given up on the dream of a life-partner...alas.

I kept trusting that eventually he'd realize there was something cosmic between us. It isn't easy knowing the man you're in love with is off on a date with someone else. But we weren't in any official relationship, and I figured he just needed time to see how compatible we were, so I trusted in the process. One of the reasons I was willing to wait, as long as it took, is because I knew on some deep level that I would love him better than any other woman ever could. This is what gave me the courage to be patient. Besides, once you meet the most extraordinary man you've ever known, there's nowhere else to go. It was impossible to settle for less, now that I knew he existed.

One evening, while staying with him in LA, Eben suggested we go out to dinner with another lady he was dating—let's call her "yoga-girl". Since he'd given up on ever being in love with one woman, he wanted to have the two main girls he was dating meet in person, so everything would be less secretive and complicated. Being very open minded, and feeling confident in my ability to meet Eben in a future partnership, I agreed to go on this triple date.

She was very sweet over dinner, we all talked and hung out for a few hours back at his place. But throughout the evening I started to sense he had more familiarity and rapport with her than with me, and I could feel my heart beginning to break. I observed subtle cues—like where he

chose to sit, how often he touched her, the amount of attention he gave her and by the end of the evening, I realized that he wasn't with me, he was with her energetically.

As the night progressed, my fantasy of being his future partner slipped away. Nausea moved through me as I realized my dream was turning into a nightmare. A familiar terror crept into my psyche, with that same haunting mantra in the background... "I'm going to die. I'm going to die". At some point during that night, a part of me did die—it had to. The Annie that was desperately in love and looking for him to love her back died. She died into LOVE itself. It was then that I realized what True Love was—the willingness to keep my heart open and stay committed to the connection even (especially) while going through the deepest heartbreak. When you're really in love, them loving you back doesn't change your affection. "It is an ever fixed mark."

A part of you must die into True Love; this is both terrifying and necessary. It's an initiation into the most elite club available to human beings.

I felt everything that evening—from fear, to anger, to relief—but I surrendered to the situation as it was because I loved him.

There's a fine line between loving someone and truly being Love, where the conditional lover dies into the unconditional one. Yet, across that line lies a vast chasm. My friend John Perry Barlow says it well: "The difference between Love and True Love is the difference between a very large number and infinity."

That takes courage and audacity; something I would learn more about the next day.

But back to the romantic drama.

Two women with one man—there definitely was jealousy on both sides. There I was, sitting in Eben's apartment while the 'other' girl (my competition) was garnering more of his attention.

But we each kept it hidden. That's how jealousy rolls (like shame and envy), always hiding its tracks and often in the guise of anger. I could tell she was agitated and didn't want to go home and leave him alone with me. Suddenly all her 'emotional issues' starting coming up, I knew she was bidding for more attention. Noticing his commitment to helping her through her own emotions, I stayed on his side and actually ended up coaching her and him through some intense drama for about two hours—secretly fighting back heartbreak and tears the whole time.

Once she calmed down it was so late she just stayed over in his bed. Her on one side, me on the other, Eben in the middle. Nothing happened, everyone was exhausted and seemingly asleep. I didn't sleep a wink. I lay there comatose, sobbing secretly as my dreams crumbled inside.

Eben thought everything was fine with me because I'd put on a strong face of being "supportive" all evening. Inside of course, I was totally heartbroken. The other girl left early before Eben woke up, for yoga. By morning, I had finally let go of the idea that we were ever going to be together. I knew I loved him, but he was not choosing me. So I decided I would simply be the best friend possible by trusting and encouraging his life choices.

The next day, I couldn't hide my pain and for the first time, upon his inquiry, I shared my raw feelings. Since I'd already surrendered to us not being together, I somehow allowed my trembling heart to come forward and express my disappointment. Through streaming tears—without blame or make wrong—I shared how hurt I was at observing his preference for the other girl. I admitted directly, "I really, really like you, I don't think you realize how much." Then I started to cry. It was the first time he'd ever seen me show any vulnerable emotion and it affected him. In a sudden surprising resonance, he shed some tears as well. He was so sorry to have hurt me.

It turns out, he had no idea I was in such pain; I'd covered it up so well. It was an amazing experience to see how much he cared about my feelings. Eben explained, that to him, I seemed so composed and resourced while the other girl was upset and shut down, that he put his energy on making her feel safer, instead of me. With my seamless facade, he never once thought I might be hurting. In that one conversation, I felt his heart touch mine directly and a new level of intimacy emerged. Soft and empathic, he persuaded me to stay one more day with him.

Having now given up the attachment to him being my soulmate, our interactions became more fluid and tender. I was coming from a deep place of friendship with no mating agenda and that allowed me to relax into being fully expressed and real.

That whole day we unfurled in riveting conversation. We exchanged our most granular world views, debated philosophies, shared our future visions and discovered even more beauty in each other. It was engaging, expansive and immensely fun. I felt so free I realized I wanted to tell him my whole truth. In the middle of the day—as a charming anecdote for our new friendship, I revealed that I had been in Love with him this whole time. And after giving up on us being in a romantic partnership, I still loved him but was willing to support whatever romantic choices he made. I expressed this new truth with such ease and grace, I think it landed with a congruence that shocked him.



He was totally bowled over in disbelief. Something about my unclenched unattached assertion unlocked a door in his heart. I told him earnestly, “I love you, I’m in love with you,” with no expectation of reciprocity in my voice. And instantly I knew, he heard and believed it.

For the first time in my life, loving another was not contingent on anything, especially not on him loving me back.

We spent the entire day trading insights on a sofa together, up late into the night, and at some point when I was least expecting it, he said, “I see you Annie. I recognize you as the one I’ve been looking for my entire life. You’re the one.” I recall that exact moment with dizzying glee. Every experience in my life seemed to lead up to this. It was, is and will likely be the most ecstatic moment of my life.

The next morning, Eben wrote an email titled, “I Found Her”, to his friends sharing how he’d finally discovered the woman made for him...and it was me. There I was, inside my biggest dream come true. It was so real, it was surreal.

One of his friends wrote back immediately asserting this must be a joke...April fools etc. They mostly assumed ‘someone like Eben’ would never fall in love.

But they were wrong. The man I saw speaking in that dusty tent at Burning Man, the man that I instantly recognized as being my soulmate, had finally recognized me as well.

A man who firmly did not believe in true love, marriage and children is now married, deeply in love and the soulful father of a delightful 2 year old. We named our girl “Love”, so that we could be “in Love” forever.

Before you assume this is some sort of happily ever after story, know that it’s been the hardest relationship I’ve ever known. I have never fought, cried, howled and stood at the edge of my sanity as much as I have in the last 5 years of our romance. If happiness is what you’re after, True Love is *not* for you. You’ll feel it of course, often...and at a level that will flatten whatever you know to be ecstasy. But True Love is your ticket to fulfillment, deep soul-level joy, not the transient ephemerality of happiness. It contains within it every possible emotion—from euphoria to terror, from delight to despair. If you want to feel the most alive, so alive that at times it will feel unbearable, then this is the game for you.

In the end, I found my life partner—the man who’ll be at my side for the rest of my life. And that makes all of it worthwhile.

As human beings we are fallible, imperfect creatures. Our wabi-sabi messiness is what makes us unique and irreplaceable. Yet we ache to be more than we are, good enough never is. All neuroses and insecurities stem from our knowing we’re going to die someday. Death is the mother of all fears.

However, when you know you’re loved completely by a partner that chooses you anew every day, your existence ceases to be empty or meaningless. It provides indisputable proof that you matter, deeply. Every moment you meet your lover’s heart in that sacred house of US...you wake up into magic, you feel omnipotent, you taste eternal life. And those are moments we measure our life with.

True Love can also offer immortality in the form of a child that carries your imprint into the future. Creating a successful human being is the most romantic project a couple can undertake. And when the parents are in love, the child feels it’s own body as a testament to that love, producing the esteem of someone who knows they deserve a magnificent life.

Love also keeps us from going mad. We all have some secret form of insanity that courts us incessantly. Sanity can come from being in love, because you have at least one other person “in here with you”—creating a shared reality that keeps you tethered to this world. When there’s a safe place to be our full self (which is what a Love relationship affords) we can finally fulfill the sacred purpose we came here to do and leave our legacy. This is another form of immortality.

Within the crucible of True Love you can fully realize your greatest gifts, and generate the courage to contribute them to the world before you die. In a way, our entire species depends on you actualizing your full potential. We need you to hone your unique super powers and become your highest self. And romantic relationship is the ultimate context for that existential imperative.

True Love is the most powerful answer to death, emptiness and madness. I invite you to take it very seriously. Believe in it as if your life depends on it. Because it does.



About the Author

ANNIE LALLA



A thought leader, speaker and teacher, Annie is known as the “Cartographer of Love”. She’s spent her life mapping the subtle complexities of communication in romantic relationships.

Annie has created a suite of practical tools to help her clients resolve toxic patterns, increase romantic esteem, defuse conflict, assuage shame/blame and cultivate deep, resilient relationships that last a lifetime.

Specializing in love, sex and conflict resolution, Annie shares her signature method: ‘The Art of Fighting’. She sees conflict as a crucial part of developing intimacy. ‘Arguments are opportunities to understand your partner better. When handled with curiosity and skill, they can pull you closer rather than apart.’

With an Honors Degree in Human Biology and Philosophy (minor in Buddhism), her studies include integrative psychology, evolutionary science, therapeutic sexuality, and family systems dynamics. She also has professional certifications in NLP, Coaching and Hypnosis. All these realms converge in her unique Relationship Coaching practice where she helps individuals build extraordinary connections that maximize freedom and minimize shame.

Learn More: www.annielalla.com.