

## A Romantik Trajedy

A young couple gets invited to an art show that tells the story of the doomed romance of the world's most popular, yet misunderstood, artist.

item 1 / BSA \$25,000 for **\$38.52**.

“What’s BSA?” Kevin whispered to Margo.

“I don’t know anything about art. Neither do you. How did we even get invited?” she whispered back.

Kevin shrugged as he and Margo looked over the bid sheet for the art show. 24 titles that all had “BSA \$25,000” before them. Except for item #7. That one said BSA \$10.

Newly engaged and struggling to make ends meet with part time jobs and full-time college, the two of them were awestruck when they got a random invitation to see a special showing of the most famous artist in the world. To see a worldwide event like this was a once in a lifetime opportunity and well worth the six-hour drive from Sacramento to LA.

SlipKlaw was a brilliant, renegade, elusive, and amazingly popular artist. His works challenged reality and mocked the truth. His style and sense of humor were legendary, but it was all still rooted in his art. SlipKlaw’s signature primary color slashes and dynamic tones blasted you in the face as color schemes which should be bold and refreshing become haunting with a greater depth. There was something jovial yet a little heartbreaking about his work. With work that was on canvas at a high-end gallery event, painted overnight on a brick wall outside the United Nations or splattered on Brad Pitt’s limousine while he was attending the Oscars, SlipKlaw was a household name by now. He dented a Wal Mart toaster, then painted it to look like a fold in the universe and it sold for \$400,000. It was rumored he was paid a million dollars to paint his *dogs playing video poker* piece on live TV last New Year’s Eve using a Guy Fawkes Mask to hide his identity.

Stories circulate all over the internet on how he started. A disfigured orphan with no formal training. The son of a wealthy couple driven mad by years of abuse. A suicidal high school art teacher whose life took a turn. No one really knows.

The international buzz around this show was that tonight was the night he would reveal himself to the world. The place was crazy with the news media.

The invitation read:

You and a guest have this invite - to boldly ignite - all that’s right - on this night, Sept 18th, 2021.

24 pieces of SlipKlaw’s Romantik Trajedy (how my one love and I met, danced and crashed)

Acrylic on Canvas. Private Ushered tour. Your two-hour tour starts at 7:09 pm exactly. Optional bidding available.

The RSVP required signatures that the recipients would agree not to text, post or otherwise disclose any info until after the event’s close.

Kevin and Margo arrived promptly at their assigned timeslot. An usher greeted them, checked them in, took their RSVP and explained the night. Groups were anywhere from 2 to 6 people. An usher would be assigned to each group to lead them through and explain each piece of art. They had a rehearsed speech to give. There would be no questions, no chatty dialogue. They had forty groups to get through today and everything had to run on time. Kevin nudged Margo to see an usher talking to himself by item #4. The tour for each group started exactly at the specified time, with or without the group. They all wore black turtlenecks, black trousers, and a bowler hat.

Item #1            titled **\$38.52**

It was a painting of a tiled floor with a pile of coins strewn about it. Though the dull metal colors of coins were adrenalized by bright red and yellow accents.

Upon walking up, their Usher turned as he heard their question and quietly said, “BSA is ‘bidding starts at’.”

Then he went into his anecdote with the first word being world-shaking.

“James . . . “ he paused as he let Slipklaw’s real name loose and watched Margo clutch Kevin’s arm in excitement . . . “was walking into the produce section of a grocery store. A metallic popcorn crash filled the store and he saw Holly. Holly was *kind of*. And right away James loved that about her. “

Margo and Kevin looked at each other.

Usher explained, “Kind of overweight. Kind of pretty. Kind of confident. *Kind of* kept him interested. If she were gorgeous or stunning that would have him moving straight on to the bananas. But *kind of* kept him. There’s a machine that you dump your coins in and it sorts and counts them for you. And the *kind of* girl spilled her can of coins. Some landed flatly, note the flat splatter of some of the coins. Some rolled off, note the smooth streaks of others. One can almost here the crash in the painting itself. He helped her pick those coins up. She thanked him and made a joke about using her coins for dinner.”

As the usher flipped back and forth recreating their dialogue, Kevin wondered if he was a trained actor, hired for this specific event.

“ ‘Well, you should have plenty with, let’s see, \$85 and 34 cents.’

‘You don’t know how much is here,’ she said.

‘Oh I think I do.’ James was having a good day and was feeling confident and playful.

She asked ‘Are you like Rain Man?’

‘I have a thing for coinage.’

‘Right.’ She said skeptically.

‘Tell you what, if it is \$85 and 34 cents, and I’m right, which I am, you buy me a candy bar before you leave.’ He told her.

‘And when *I’m* right that the amount is, what? any number other than that?’

‘Yeah. I’ll buy you dinner. There’s an Applebee’s across the street. A quick dinner, you save your meal money for a different day.’

‘Since I’m a poor college student, I accept that offer. There is no way I have more than \$50 here.’ She said. And that was their first meal together.”

Usher turned to them, “you know how much the coins totaled?”

“\$38.52.” Kevin and Margo said at the same time as they checked the title card.

“No. \$27 and 50 cents.”

Margo gets a confused look on her face, “then why was it called-“

“No idea. He’s quirky. Let’s move on.”

As they walked away, Kevin nudged Margo and pointed to SlipKlaw’s signature in the bottom corner, there was a fraction on it, 194/9580.

She shrugged and they walked on.

The Usher took them through the next few paintings.

Item #2, *Through a looked glass* was a pair of glasses taking up most of the canvas. Beyond it was a scene at a mall, their first date. But everything through the glasses was distorted and blurred. Everything on the outside of the glasses looked normal. The Usher talked about James’ anxiety for their first date.

Item #3, *A café street scene*. Holly and James were seated at a table surrounded by random people on the street. Some of the people were transparent. The Usher talked about their third date, first kiss and their bonding over all things Star Wars.

By his signature, 208/9594.

Each piece of art was a moment from their growing relationship. The Usher would say his anecdote and the three of them would move on to the next painting. From the stories, they learned James had grown up in Michigan. Worked as a cook. Was not comfortable with girls. Had been very lonely.

Item #6 *mélange* was split down the middle with a rugged, teal stripe.

On one side was an image

of an empty medicine cabinet

On the other side was a

Closed kitchen cabinet door.

Item #7 *The struggle is teal* was angry and scribbled and shaky and vulnerable. Lots of greys and blues and blacks with a burst of teal erupting from the center. This was not like the other work on display tonight. It was completely abstract. There was no anecdote for this. The Usher stared at this one longer than the others and then simply walked to the next item, a scene on a rocky beach, telling the story of their first vacation together in northern California with Holly's family.

Item #12 *a teal tie surround by life* was James and Holly posing in a mirror. She was smiling. He was looking off. In the reflection part of the painting Holly looked normal, where James looked like he was in a funhouse mirror, swirled and twisted. He wore a teal tie. It was unsettling.

There was a break after that. Appetizers were laid out and drinks were available. The Usher asked Kevin, "You old enough to drink?"

"Yeah, I'm 22." Kevin said.

Usher nodded and gave them each a glass of champagne.

Margo whispered, "He didn't ask me, do I look that old? Jeez."

Item #13 *the thing about schizophrenia*

The top half was the same kitchen cabinet from item #6 only wide open to reveal stacks of pills and prescription bottles. There were cobwebs on some of the bottles. A child's rubber duck at the left and unopened mail on the right of the meds.

The bottom half of the painting was the side effects that came with the meds. They were handwritten in strong confident letters for some and shaky, almost illegible letters for others, and everything in between. Some meds' side effects were written in childlike handwriting with bright red and greens. Some at the end were written in illegible dull-black cursive.

By his signature, more numbers, 358/9744 only this time with text.

It looked more like a sign you would find on a factory floor about days without an accident. It read:

Days without a suicide attempt, 358

Days without a suicide, 9744

Then Usher soberly elaborated,

“She didn’t know. He hid his meds from her. In doing so, he inadvertently started messing up his routine. He would forget to take pills. Or take a double dose if he wasn’t sure. Then what happens to many like him . . . he’s feeling good, holding a job, dating a girl and thinks he is okay, so he starts going off the meds. And he gets worse. It was clear she knew something was wrong. So, he told her the hardest thing he ever had to. He told her about the voices he tries so hard to shut out. The confusion, the cutting, the hiding. The suicide attempts. The fear. He hated that part of himself. Hated the things that he couldn’t tell were real or not. He tells her sometimes he sees people and he doesn’t know if they really exist. She tilts his chin up, kisses him on the mouth and says, ‘just ask me, I’ll tell you if they’re there or not.’ He looks at her, as vulnerable as he ever has been, and said, ‘you don’t know, sometimes I slip really far away from reality.’ She said, ‘Don’t worry, baby, I’ll always help you claw your way back.’ It was the best thing anyone ever told him and he felt he finally knew love. And maybe even peace.

Some days it was so easy they joked about it.

‘Why do you blink so much?’ She had asked.

‘I’m just trying to see the world as a stop motion movie.’

One time they were in a bookstore and he said there were voices telling him to break the window. So he reached behind the counter, grabbed some glass cleaner and wiped the window down instead. He said ‘this’ll really piss them off.’

But there were hard days, too. “

#16 *scrawlers* an abstract painting with thousands of flecks poking and stretching the canvas. The canvas corner was bent in, intentionally broken. The Usher told the story how Holly watched him get arrested when James stripped off his clothes in public and scratched his skin until he bled because he thought bugs had fused into his skin. Another night she was in California and spent four hours on the phone talking him out of taking his own life. There were hard days.

#22 *shock therapy*

This one was a TV sitcom studio audience, most of whom were a varying degree of transparency, circled around an oversized pregnancy test. The audience was laughing and clapping. There were light up signs that said APPLAUSE, but several letters were burnt out, leaving only: A PL US .

A positive pregnancy test.

By his signature, **952/10,338**

The Usher took a deep breath and explained.

“She told him the hardest thing she ever had to. She knew him well enough. Knew he wouldn’t trust himself with a baby. Knew he could barely take care of himself. She even knew his darkest secret, that his biggest fear was bringing a child like himself into this world and watching that child suffer through life. Plus Holly had two more years to finish law school. To quit that now to be a mom? It was an impossible situation. James finally said the word abortion. It was heart wrenching for them both. He begged her not to have the child. Even adoption would be passing along a child with such a serious potential. Defeated and exhausted, she agreed. The next day she kissed him and left to have the abortion.

He never saw her again.”

#23, *untitled*, showed a man in anguish clutching his head, kneeling, who casts a shadow and, in that shadow, a smaller, transparent figure, in anguish clutching his head and kneeling, who casts a shadow and, in that shadow, a smaller, transparent figure, in anguish clutching his head and kneeling.

4/12,873

#24 *onward* The last art piece was a teal diving board over a canyon with no bottom.

The numbers were **0/0**

The Usher said with tears in his eyes, “Thank you for coming out tonight to see SlipKlaw’s A Romantik Trajedy. One last thing as to what he was thinking about the title. When you see a misspelled word like that, it gets your attention. You understand it’s meaning but you know it is not quite right. Most people even think less of it. That’s how he felt to the world. In everything. He was never normal. He saw himself as a misspelled word that just could never be truly fixed.”

He turned to Kevin, “Do you have any questions about my brother?”

Margo gave him a look of sympathy as her tears welled up, “Brother?”

Kevin asked, “Did she have the abortion?”

“He told me once, a few years after she had left, ‘I think about that kid every day, and I don’t even know if he exists.’ No, he never found out. After he passed, I spent more time digging around as I was putting this show together for him. I now know she moved to Sacramento. I now know she had a baby 22 years ago. And her name wasn’t Holly. It was Elizabeth. Your mom’s name. He believed in you, Kevin. And he loved you. He just didn’t know if you were real.”

