

*Beth Rheinhart: sultry looks of a bronzed model in a perfume ad ... She came to Washington, DC for an Internship at the Foundation Hospital. Police in Bel Aire arrested Ed Duzssel—once Beth's attorney, and later a close friend. Charge: possession of cocaine. Investigators questioned Beth—her photographs had been discovered at Ed's ranch. Did she know about his young wife—confined to the Nursing Home? The hospital asked for Beth's psychological profile ... Old stone wheels at the hospital started to turn—they rumbled: medicine is a calling, the Foundation must preserve its image; and an inquisition ensued.*

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**Intern Beth**



**Ayul M. Zamir**

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A Novel By

**Ayul M. Zamir**



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by

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*Geok-Yan: a swallow in jade*

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# Part I.

## A House in Mill Valley, California

*But time and chance happen to them all.*

— Ecclesiastes 9:11

### 1

*A picture is worth a thousand words – perhaps; I am not so sure. Do you know the words between the model and the photographer before the shutter release? Surely a lot was said before the photograph was taken: the image you see now. From a picture alone, you know very little; perhaps some half-truths: the rest is speculation. Sometimes you are misled: you see what is not there – pictures can lie – unless you know all the words behind them.*

*Eyes cannot see what the mind doesn't know. To know the moment captured in a photograph, you need to know the whole story – the details matter.*

### 2

Beth, short for Elizabeth, used several names. Some she had chosen herself, thoughtfully and with care: because of their meanings; and some were given, out of love, by others: those who had wandered into her life ...

Jade, for her intense blue-green eyes, was the first. It came from a Burmese nurse, an assistant to Beth's father, and a constant helper to the family in a foreign land: a refugee camp in Thailand, close to its border with Burma. Beth's father was a doctor who often volunteered for *Médecins Sans Frontières*.

Vivacious little girl with blue-green eyes reminded the nurse of the most precious jade from her country, the kind found nowhere else in the world.

Kyrie, short for Valkyrie, came from Ed. In the Nordic mythology, Valkyries are virgins who wear helmets and armor and carry shields and spears. They ride magnificent horses and descend into the battlefield to choose the slain, and then carry their souls to Valhalla, the great hall of Odin: there the chosen warriors feast forever.

Beth responded to her new name by pointing out her rich auburn hair and laughed.

They mused what happened to the Valkyries in heaven? They might have made their choices; however, what if the dead warrior had a wife? And what if the mortal wife was as beautiful as the Valkyrie, and killed herself out of grief?

“What names would a Valkyrie get, if she behaved like that, today?

“Acceptable behavior? –I doubt: she would get a label and be condemned to the stake, like a witch!” Beth laughed. “And what if she liked more than one slain warrior!” she laughed uncontrollably.

Maya, the name Beth uses in her journals, is a word from Sanskrit; it means an illusion. Ancient Hindus believed: the world as seen by humans is simply an illusion. All acts, from creation to destruction, and from love to anger or hate, start with different feelings. Moods and emotions that are manifested are varying forms of the same force—such extremes call for different names. Hindu goddesses, therefore, take different forms and names for performing different acts, just like the Hindu gods.

Maya is also the power to create illusions. Is it possible to transcend time and reach across through words to touch another soul?

Beth is always there: an eternal presence—hers is a ghost that follows me day and night, everywhere, and it seduces and charms. Constant

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talk, wisecracks and astute silly observations: she makes me smile! Does not matter where I am: in the house, or out in the grocery store; in the valley, or out on the highway; time does not matter, day or night, she is there. We talk, have long conversations, and we laugh; my fondness for her grows every day.

Very funny, she has been making up new stories to impress me; but I am always eager—have you ever had a sultry woman indulge you in her lies!

*We met a long time ago: both of us were interns at the Foundation Hospital in Washington, DC ...*

Beth has never lived in this house though—just like me; I am a houseguest. However, I see her photograph every morning when I wake up and every night before I sleep. The photograph hangs on a wall in a room in the house, the room that I occupy.

She is good looking, has a very attractive face; the soul behind those blue-green eyes, big and so full of life, reaches out and touches and caresses: grabs my entire being. Playful smile on her red lips is teasing. Rich auburn hair: a wet smell lingers in the room after she shampoos and intoxicates me.

She has a distinctive mole on her right cheekbone, it gives her certain vulnerability—my heart wants to shield her from harm.

A thick black string around her neck carries a large oval turquoise stone set in silver. It contrasts with the fair skin and black clothing and vies for attention with the blue-green eyes. There is no contest: the eyes are alive, hold many secrets, and inspire a will to live.

This house belongs to my friend Bern Duzssel, and I am his houseguest. Bern met Beth about three years ago, when he was visiting Ed, his son. He fondly talks about their dinner together and the conversation at the table that night ...

But hardly ever, at the dinner table, Bern mentions Laura—Ed's wife.

Beth schooled in Geneva. During her teens, when she visited her parents in Santa Fe, sometimes she would model native jewelry

for a little shop that sold beads ... And years later, those old photographs led to her first meeting with Ed ...

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Every morning for the last two weeks, I have been walking down the narrow paved path from the house: it leads into the valley – the walk is a picturesque zigzag along the rows of flowers cultivated on the terraced hillside ...

From my favorite spot in the valley, a slab of sandy rock, every now and then I look up – the hillside reminds me of wet rice-fields carved on the mountain slopes in Indonesia: emerald plants growing in still water that reflects the green of the plants and the deep blue of the sky. Here, alternating steps of sandy rock and rosebushes with red and yellow flowers create an illusion of the plants sprouting out of solid rock. Bern Duzssel worked hard over the years, along with his faithful Chinese gardener, to create this illusion.

When I left the house, about seven, the air was still cool; however, the sun was rising up fast in the eastern sky and had promised another warm day of summer. Only a couple of hours have passed and it is getting hot and muggy down here in the valley.

I managed to make notes from quite a few pages of Beth's journal this morning, not bad at all. However, this is only the beginning and a lot of work remains.

She writes clearly, it is easy to read and alterations are rare – as if crystallized thoughts were simply pouring out of her mind onto the notebook in her lap.

The words, simple but rather candid, evoke strong visions and hypnotize – on me they cast spells; resonate in my heart and leave behind echoes that reverberate for a long time in my head. Often I end up reading way ahead ...

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Her journals span years. The first entry dates back to the time when she was in the boarding school in Geneva: she was sixteen. She started to keep a journal because the inevitable in her life had come to

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pass: an overwhelming pubertal crush that set the course of her heart's sentimental journeys—long roller coaster rides of raw emotions. Her feelings ran deep; and the heart went through the chaos of an impossible relationship. She was naïve then: blindly trusting and innocent, and being so far from home—highly vulnerable ...

Dominic was the proverbial prince charming to the hilt. The first and the only son of a wealthy British diplomat and an aristocratic Peruvian mother: he was darkly handsome. Avid skier and an excellent photographer, he spoke half a dozen languages fluently—and he was one incorrigible flirt.

His little sister: Beth's roommate introduced them — she had promoted her brother fondly; when he came for his first visit from London, Beth felt she knew Dominic already. When she met him, it was that love at first sight: she felt dizzy and high and had goosebumps all over her body, a shiver ran through her spine.

Once he started to tease and flirt, she started to blush and felt warm in her face; soon she was giddy and looked him fondly in the eyes—she felt she needed: whatever was supposed to be given.

Dominic was much older: he was an intern at a University Hospital in London.

Beth felt a deep desire to get closer to him and form a bond: she eagerly told him that her father too was a doctor, in Santa Fe, New Mexico, in the United States—and yes: sometimes she did feel so lonely ...

As soon as he had met her, he was filled with a desire: like so many other times, and so many other girls before her— Seduction was his second nature and conquest always followed. He started the slow and steady pursuit: she was eager and he stayed the course. She had no reason to not return his attention—and during the later visits she allowed him to get close and closer.

He was good. He never gave her any reason to run away.

He was a practical man, and had no misgivings about what he wanted. As desirable as she was, he knew the situation was hopeless—he was to be engaged soon. He took his time and followed his instincts; acted naturally, and did not lie—to himself.

Soon Beth was receiving pretty cards with printed verses of love; and every week—she was sending back sentimental notes: written in her own hand ...

A few months later, once he had Beth pinned against the wall — and filled with passion as she was helplessly pressing against his body — he was gentle but brutally honest. He assured her of a deep love, and told of his own helplessness in loving her—and explained the ties from the past that shackled him. He told her, that for years he had been seriously involved with another woman—a classmate: she was an intern in pediatrics in the same hospital. He told Beth the limits that she would need to accept, if she were to accept his ardent offerings of love—and yes, Beth was an obsession of his soul. Had he met Beth earlier, it would have been different, but now the families had expectations. He was being honest and truthful and he cared deeply for her—he reassured Beth. Destiny was cruel and they had to grab what they could — that is how love was, he said.

It was a masterly seduction. His honesty about his love for her, and the sad story of his infidelity, made Beth feel deep for him. What mattered to Beth was his acknowledgement of her being, and reciprocation of the feeling that occupied her day and night—her soul felt loved. Tenderness for Dominic overwhelmed her; carried by her feelings, she was beyond care.

Her heart experienced the first thrills of intimacy, as his hands touched, caressed, probed, and squeezed her virgin body. His mouth tasted her—and she wanted to be devoured completely. During her first Christmas vacations in Europe, Beth stayed for two weeks at the country home Dominic’s family had ...

Before dinner, he took her out for a walk into the woods; held against a giant old tree, Beth tasted the first kiss from a man—until they both were so out of breath. And that night she experienced his mouth on her naked breast. She was breathless, and she thought she would die: the intensity of her arousal was such—but she did not want him to stop. After he left, she lay helpless in the bed: for a long time, sleepless and warm, and fuzzy all over. Her own hands wandered to the places where his hands had been exploring and caressing: his hands had left her wet and tender—and open to new

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possibilities of love and loving.

From the next day on, they were out for long forays into the country. Dominic knew every tree, rock, creek, and little hill around – and he knew every cabin in the woods. Hidden from the world and the cold weather, inside one of those cabins, her body tasted her first lover.

Reclined against the wall, he sat on the jackets spread over the dry hay; legs stretched out, and stripped of the jeans down to his knees – Beth straddled him – he had asked. After kissing and fondling for a long time – he guided her. Without hurry, he gently led; slowly her pelvis moved and sought and in time her flesh swallowed him, inch-by-inch and deeper and deeper – until they could go no further. Rest of their bodies remained clothed, protected against the cold, and the shy hesitations of complete nudity; they kissed and stayed joined for a long time.

Over the following days, their little hesitations charmed and seduced each other; they would grab each other and do it with the urgency of animals in heat – he taught her how to mate without inhibitions, explained the new language of sexual pleasure.

A week later he held her pinned against the wall of the cabin and thrust into her pelvis uncontrollably; overwhelmed by the physical intensity, she was completely helpless in the face of her own yearning – that was when he told her the truth. Brutally honest and brutally loving her young body, he whispered words without stopping – he cried but did not stop his loving for even a moment.

He looked Beth deeply in her eyes, with sadness and with a certain smile of helplessness of a man in love – she saw that as a deep understanding between the two of them. Without stopping or slowing down for a moment, he told her of his coming engagement – she abandoned her body completely to his will. She had not made any long-term plans – she just loved.

During her last year in Geneva, towards the expected end of the affair, when she was ready to fly back home, with careful maneuvers, Dominic finally broke away from her: gently, carefully, being kind, and always leaving some innocent hopes now and then – they were all impossible plans.

Dominic was an artist getting ready for the next play; his had been an act of class; when the moment came he gently ushered Beth off stage: according to the script—allowing their lives to go their natural separate ways. That final separation left no anger or bitterness in her; there was no sense of crisis or doom: she simply felt sad and was left yearning for love.

She was left filled with compassion—she could understand his sadness at their separation. Though she felt a little lonely and hurt during her last flight home, she was without anger or remorse—separations were an acceptable part of the experience of living in foreign lands ...

She had discovered the magic of two bodies making love: the overwhelming power of her own sexuality, and the helplessness of its needs.

Perhaps surprising—but maybe not at all: her response, to the limitations that he had imposed on their relationship, was not depression or sadness—but a motivation to go and get! In the school, she plunged into her books and developed a taste for academic success—it was just a little different focus.

Once she saw a photograph of the other woman, his fiancée. She was older, not as good looking, but she was a doctor—and somehow—that seemed to be the key. Professional success, thought Beth, was the necessary first step to fulfill the desires of the heart. She decided how she would bag the better things in life; and by the time she was back in Santa Fe—she was determined to be a doctor like her father.

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A few years later, now in her early twenties, Beth wrote fervently: as if she was possessed; it all started after meeting Ed, in Santa Fe ...

Reading her journals is like walking through a secret garden—there are many nooks that hold deep secrets. Listening to her thoughts and dreams, seeing through her eyes, is to know the passion of loving without conditions ...

Reading is addicting, certainly more absorbing than making notes, and sometimes I just get sucked in and simply copy it all down.

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Reading is an indulgence, editing is work—enough work for this morning! I close my own notebook and put it back into the old leather satchel, and read through her notebook once again: it is the voyeur in me. But we all are naturally curious sometimes, and I love Beth ...

I can see the two of them, inside his ranch house in Bel Aire, near Santa Fe in New Mexico ...

When she wrote this page she was twenty-three, a visiting medical student from San Anselmo in the Caribbean—living in Albuquerque for an externship at the Academic Doctor's Hospital.

He was a successful attorney in practice: tall and handsome, well read, widely traveled, and an avid photographer. However, at that time in his life, he was a very lonely man who lived an enforced solitary life: he was a sage in the desert—literal and metaphorical. His body carried a soul that had been starving long—and he was only in his forties. At forty, the primal drives, natural urges and needs of the body and the desires of the heart can hardly be fulfilled by fantasies from the life in the past.

Beth entered his life and his solitude convulsed. One morning he found her in his office: she was there seeking his professional advice ...

A few weeks later, one Saturday afternoon, she got off the highway and drove two miles on a dirt road leading to his house. He had been waiting—nervous, anxious, and pacing about, and she walked with him into the house. He closed the door behind them and bolted it. She walked straight into his arms. Her visit brought a heavy sea breeze, moist and salty, into his house in the desert.

She was full of life and knew how to laugh. She was a delight, refreshing and beautiful, and raised wonderful new possibilities. Life made new promises: like the red roses one gets for Valentine.

It's a rare tropical fruit with firm skin, color like a ripe California peach, and the flesh is pink when exposed: clear nectar oozes from the surface when it is cut. When served: the aroma intoxicates, the taste of the flesh is a feast for every sense—it satisfies so many deep hungers ...

*I sit on the table in the kitchen and watch him—he's pouring tequila into a tiny glass ...*

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## Ayul M Zamir

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*An old story speaks of a beautiful woman who fell in love with a beast – he lived all alone in a castle ... and everyone lived happily ever after ...*

Like so many other lovers, they too had believed, once you had bolted the door of the house from inside – the world was shut out. And nothing could touch you!

Life is beautiful, sacred, and precious – privacy is inviolable. You make love and then lie in a slumber until you are ready for each other once again. You can live on bread and wine, oblivious to the world around: forever lost in dreams and fantasies coming alive around you ...

*Another precious weekend: Ed was uncontrollable, an animal in heat – my stallion; we were like two horses in the wild.*

*The big beast takes the beauty; the monster mauls; sucks her will away; overwhelmed, she moans: later she lies in his arms, in a bliss – in a slumber that feeds all the senses; his satisfied body nestles against hers.*

*I have such a dirty mind! But brain is the most vital sex organ ... My beast with an uncontrolled monster; a physical comfort – what deep satisfaction he gives me!*

*I am so deeply in love – and I am loved so deeply!*

*He has no control – and I have no shame.*

*Two consenting adults – so what can you say?*

*The yearnings of my body and soul, my deepest desires, my need for love, and my need for loving: he takes care of it for a night and a day, every weekend. When he is done with me, I am left exhausted: achy, shaken, trembling, mauled, happy, ecstatic, and for hours I lie in a slumber, in a sensual bliss, and wait for him to take me again.*

*And now, just a few hours later, only fifty miles from him, I am alone in my bed and wondering: how many hours to the next Saturday afternoon – and I dream.*

*I crave him: the beauty craves the monster. He mauls me; he molests me like an animal – I go out of my mind thinking about it.*

*Some afternoons he plays the avid photographer, sees me through his camera: an object; he focuses and takes a shot; moves the object, positions the body – a woman half naked – and he focuses and shoots again.*

*She is distant and he begins to desire her; walks closer and stands by her: his object. Without a word he touches her, undresses her, and takes her bodily: his precious object. I am addicted to what he does to the object: my*

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body.

*And when it is calm after that drenching storm of passion: full of tenderness, he holds me like a flower, whispers the hope that he did not hurt me, and lies with his legs wrapped around mine.*

*His mouth on my breast, heat emanates from his face into my chest and I feel his eyelids blinking, caressing my skin in tiny butterfly kisses – I could die that moment and have no regrets.*

*This Saturday, we were in the kitchen and I sat on the table, I had just walked in. I sat there wondering and waiting, anticipating and watching his huge body moving about – fixing shots of tequila.*

*He brought me the tiny shot in his big beautiful hand; his skin is so delicate.*

*It started with a passionate hug; he held my body tightly; towering above me he started to run his fingers through my hair. I love the feel of his fingertips on my scalp. And then he brushed my hair out of the way and exposed my ear; his breath felt warm – I felt so naked. I look so naked, he whispered.*

*Every time he does that, exposes my ear and whispers, I get so turned on; electricity runs through my spine; it is so intimate an act – outright sexual. Your lover loving your earlobe – the beginning of the ritual; he is about to take you and he is hard like a rock.*

*I feel a little guilty. I have trained him like a pet – to talk to me when we are about to fuck. He is shy, so he whispers and tells me what he is thinking, what he desires and what he wants to do to me – to my body. He lowers his mouth and whispers in my ear: his lips touch my skin; it is so tender over the ears and then he whispers. I feel his lips moving on my ear – caressing me, it is unbelievable, his moist warm breath caresses – each whispered word sends a wave of pilo-erection / goosebumps all over my body – from my scalp to the dorsum of my feet. I feel so helpless. I crave that feeling, the helplessness of being in his arms. I want to just lie back and let him maul me like an animal.*

*His lips are soft, warm, wet – no, only moist, not wet! They caress my skin like the wings of a butterfly when he whispers; delicate kisses like the butterfly kisses from his blinking eyelashes accidentally placed on my nipples – left wet and tender from his mouth earlier!*

*His lips flutter like the wings of a butterfly, but it is not the rapid flutter of the flight when it is hovering and dancing in the air, but the lazy flutter – after it has found and landed on a flower it likes; have you seen it! Then it crawls, moves about in tiny steps, and slowly flaps its wings: opens them, at times wide, very wide, completely, all the way, and at times just a*

little bit. *Why do the butterflies do that?*

*A balancing act as it takes little steps, like the automatic arms movements we have when we walk? Hope not! I want to believe, especially right now, it is – well, I wonder if it is engaged in sex with the flower; sex as in mimicry – pseudo-copulation! That is how some of the orchids get pollinated: male bee is fooled into thinking that the vivid central petal of the flower is a female – it goes out of its mind. “A waiting female offering herself,” it probably says. “Here I come my pretty!” It goes berserk and gets into this passionate love making; the vigorous male sexual frenzy, uncontrolled, as he is sometimes; actually, he is uncontrolled most of the time, more like all the time! I wish you were here in my bed. Nature is so erotic and so liberal, when the mind is free and able to see! I feel him through his jeans and through my shirt; he feels so hard and warm on my skin, when I am sitting on the table and he hugs me tight...*

Maya

*In the mirror I watched two bodies ...*

*I think I was hallucinating. I was seeing dozens of lipsticks on the table, lipsticks in multiple colors, dozens of them. They shook with each thrust of his body into mine: in unison, like a marching band; and then they all started to grow big and monstrous and started to bend and contract – and in a flash, they all melted. I looked at the giant splash of melted lipstick on the top of the dressing table – waves and swirls of melting bright colors. Colored melted liquid trickled down the front, down the legs, over the feet, and finally on to the floor. Probably it was all that tequila we had, or maybe I was a bit vasovagal and experiencing a near-faint! We dragged our bodies to the bed.*

*I wonder if we are drinking too much. There is too much love, too much loving, and too much sex. Question: can there ever be too much love or too much loving or too much sex, I mean ever? A good question! It is wonderful: pleasure, pleasure, and more pleasure – so deeply satisfying. He satisfies me; so deep and he still thrusts his pelvis: yes lover. Deep he thrusts again, the monster throbs: yes lover. Deeper the monster mauls, throbs, erupts, and floods: yes my darling yes, harder my darling harder; where are you – I need you, I want you. You leave me alone on too many nights and I nurse too many dirty thoughts. I left you just a few hours ago, only a few hours alone and I am craving you. My body is aching, the molested body of a woman who was in her lover's arms a few hours ago. When your big hands gripped my waist and grabbed my body, with the power of a carnivore*

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*bringing down a captured prey, you tore and ripped me apart and I watched you in the mirror – you are such a beast: I have no regrets. I am left yearning for more, craving for that pure ecstasy; I am addicted to your loving – chase me once again and capture me for one more night.*

*One day, I'll let you read this Ed!*

*Maya*

I inhale deeply and watch a butterfly flutter about; it settles on a yellow-eyed-daisy, one of the many covering the valley floor, growing close to the rock I am sitting on. I look closely, as the butterfly crawls on the flower, in tiny steps. And just as Beth described: it slowly flaps its wings every now and then; separates them wide and closes them back, as if it's yawning; and then opens them once again, but not as wide; and it moves about the flower ...

Whether the movements are a simple but necessary balancing act, or pseudo-copulation: the mimicry in nature, daisy is white and yellow like this butterfly: I do not know. I studied biology long ago and my knowledge is rather rusted. This would not have occurred to me, had Beth not written this down; bright woman – I sigh and close the journal.

I look around: there is no dressing table, no mirror, no naked lipsticks, and no bed. It is lush green all around and all kinds of wild flowers cover the valley floor; I am two thousand miles away from the ranch house in the desert near Santa Fe. I look up at Mount Tamalpais and then I look back up the hill: the house looks beautiful, almost a natural growth of the hill. Rows of rosebushes, long flowerbeds terraced across the hillside, wide zigzagging steps of bright colors – like the emerald rice fields in Indonesia.

I stand up and stretch, pick up the satchel and begin the long walk up the hill. I will love to have a glass of water and then some coffee – still too soon for a beer, wonder what Bern is up to.

Golden Gate Bridge. On the outskirts of the town, on the western side of a hill overshadowed by the Mount Tamalpais—there is an old house ...

In the evenings, when the sun has descended behind the mountain, the house fills with dusky glow of the sunset; redwood paneled walls add another dimension: rich, dark, and solid; the light in the house acquires a weight—it can be touched.

In the living room, amber glow from the fireplace mixes with the pale yellow from a dozen flickering candles; the house warms up and fills with an intimate comfort—you want to stay home, inside.

Bern walks from room to room and turns on dozens of little light bulbs: each floods an Old Dutch painting on a wall with a pale yellow light. Paintings look like glowing patches of colors on the dark walls, in every room, and along the stairs. And when you wander around the house, your mind wanders to distant places—and the mood turns contemplative. That is when Bern likes to serve wine and settles down to converse ...

This is the house where Ed grew up. Ed, short for Edward Duzssel, he studied law in Berkeley and later moved to join a practice in Santa Fe, New Mexico. He did well; he had moved away right after his marriage ...

The house was built around 1890, and it has survived a few earthquakes in its lifetime. Bern bought the house from its original owner, over fifty years ago. He never fails to tell his guests that the capacity of the house to tolerate damage has grown with time, with little help from him now and then, of course!

“Houses are resilient living things—like humans; and like humans, houses too can recover remarkably from moderate damage. But sometimes—sometimes they just crumble and fall apart ...

“There are events that we simply cannot control. Sometimes everything just goes wrong—

“Most of the life is tragic, anyway—just ask the Greeks! With that long a history, well, they knew ...”

“It is not that the time heals all the wounds and the pain lessens, it is that our capacity to bear the pain grows with time: we learn to cope better.”

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In the evenings, after dinner, we sit in the living room once again and converse leisurely, and now and then we just stare into the darkness in the valley below, or look at the lights from the houses far off in the distance—homes on other hills. Mount Tamalpais seems asleep, just to our right, during the night. In dark, it looms close, gives an illusion that you can actually touch it—it would be alive and moving with each breath.

Most of the valley, easily seen during the day from the living room, is a part of the property; Bern bought it when he came to America after the war.

During the war, Nazis kept him under house arrest: in his family home in a small village in Holland. He lost a lot of weight, he tells me, there was little to eat.

He survived those years of confinement by reading every book that was there in the house. There was a whole library; all kind of books, including old medical books of his brother: a psychiatrist who practiced in Amsterdam and later in San Francisco—Bern simply read everything.

By training he is a petro-chemist. Before the war he traveled widely and explored oil for the Holland Petroleum; in Indonesia, in Arabia: wherever there was a chance of finding it. Nazis wanted his help; Bern was still very young and rather angry—so he decided otherwise. Caught inside the old house in that small village, he read and read; and he swore he would leave Europe forever, once the hostilities were over. He is in his eighties now. Over the years he labored and filled up the original sprawl of the valley with stone hedges and flowerbeds; and the cellar in the house with wines—both rare and common.

After dinner we usually sip port, sometimes rum, and occasionally both—life is wonderful ...

And we talk late into the night. Bern has gone through a lot in his life, many experiences: good, bad, happy, and not so happy. He has so many stories from the time of the war; when he talks, I can see

him live those experiences. He is a great storyteller with one rare character: he is an attentive listener and there is hardly anything that does not interest him.

He is amused thinking about something and grins, “Do you see it: from San Francisco you’d go west to reach China, and of course the rest of the Orient! Can you imagine how different the map of the world would have been, if Columbus was born in China? They were a seafaring nation once and then some emperor stopped it; it was in ...

“He would have discovered Europe by walking west! Or he would have sailed east to discover the Americas!”

Serious narrations interspersed with simple observations and amusing facts, and occasional wild musings—suitable for a man in eighties or a smart student yet to be eighteen—some of his speculations can be really wild and entertaining!

I like his voice and the way he speaks, the age shows: slow and methodical, he takes his time and pauses too long now and then; has a natural heavy accent, thinks loudly and waits for a response, and then carefully listens.

There is a deliberate slowness about him, or it is just that he does not hurry! He does everything in a particular way, a precision that comes with age and insight, I think. He is much older than I.

Bern married rather late; he was in his fifties. She was much younger, very attractive, a refugee—and spoke five languages fluently! They met in San Francisco. Once her family was one of the wealthiest in Belarus—cloth manufacturers from Grodno, they escaped the communists and arrived in San Francisco but carried little.

She was a beautiful dark haired woman and had a style of her own. She died young, from advanced breast cancer—Ed was only two, her first and only child. Ed grew up without a mother. Diagnosis of cancer was delayed by months due to her pregnancy. Bern never remarried.

For Ed, the mother has always been the dark haired bejeweled woman in black and white photographs—slightly faded with time ...

There is an impressive collection of artifacts from the Orient,

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most of them from Indonesia and China; quite a few gods and goddesses in wood, ivory, jade, and brass—Bern can tell you the story behind each one!

Indonesian shadow puppets, on a wall in one of the guest rooms, make you feel you are somewhere in Bali. There are lots of precious silks, Japanese swords, and oriental porcelain in the house, however, the tableware you actually use is from China—porcelain from Holland is kept behind glass.

“European stuff is simply too expensive for everyday use. I am a very practical Dutchman; happy in a house on the top of a hill—that keeps the water out you see,” Bern winks and grins.

Dozens of Old Dutch paintings are displayed around the house, on redwood-paneled walls, by the painters well known and not so well known; nearly all depict the Dutch countryside; and there are a few family portraits—Laura, Ed’s wife, her photographs—there is none ...

## 8

A month ago: I have just arrived and Bern is taking me around the house ... we enter my room—instantly, I notice the two photographs on the wall—

“This is Ed’s work,” an obvious pride in the voice; “Beth: she had these in her apartment in DC.”

I begin to look at her, but right away the other photograph diverts my attention: I know the story behind that one—I have seen that photograph before; one Saturday afternoon, she had told me about the Indian Paint Brush ...

As I look at the picture of the IPB, I feel her blue-green eyes on me—and then she too gets interested in the picture. I see her from the corner of my eyes—the liveliness startles, emanates a foreboding happiness. It takes only a moment and we are chatting once again—one more silent conversation begins; I wait for her to laugh and utter her first words, “Did you know—

A solid black wood frame and a white border highlight the photograph in the center—a treat of bright reds and all shades of orange, yellow, and green. I know, in the days to come I would look at this photograph often. I would wonder about the events that lead

to its making; and the events that followed that afternoon, right afterwards; and later, much later. The picture is rather simple: two flowery shoots of Indian Paint Brush are seen, off center, to the left of the photograph, they are magnified and placed in sharp focus by a zoom lens. Colors of the leaves dominate the image. In the background an expanse of desert melts; blue of a clear sky and rolling low hills fade into distance – like past ...

Bern begins to explain: slowly, taking his time, heavily accented voice, the learned precision of a foreign speaker of English. “Indian Paint Brush,” he says, “this is a parasitic plant. It is quite remarkable: this plant can survive and grow in the desert, in very sandy soil, without much work,” he smiles. “Can be a devil! It sucks all its nutrition, all the elements that it needs for staying alive, from the roots of other plants around it ...

“You should never attempt to grow one of these in your garden. You get into trouble. It is hardy and brings you grief; but you can try, like Ed did ... It would flourish for sure, but in the end everything around it would be destroyed – the plants around it essentially starve to death.

“It has these small tubular flowers, not particularly attractive, irregular shapes with little color – often you miss them.

“The bright colors that you see are really the leaves. In reality, it is the leaves that are attractive, with all these bright colors at their tips. That is what draws the birds and the bees; the plant gets pollinated; it can procreate. Because of the way the leaves are colored – just on the tips – the plant gets this particular appearance: as if a paint brush has been dipped into little pots of paint, of many different colors.”

He is left a little breathless, and both of us are left with no choice except to look at the other picture on the wall.

We both look at Beth, and I wait for him to speak.

He inhales deeply and sighs, “She is beautiful. Even an eighty years old can easily see that,” he pauses and looks at me, “you would agree with that?”

“Yes, absolutely. As you said – she is beautiful. Perhaps she would have done better as a ...” I catch myself from completing the sentence.

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He turns his head and looks at me, “Yes, as a model!” he sighs. “Don’t feel bad: everyone who has met Beth says that. That is a very natural first reaction.

“Let me show you something else: she would have done better as a writer than a doctor.”

We are downstairs once again and I follow Bern into his study. The room has a large desk, an old leather couch, a small fireplace—three walls of the room have shelves full of books. I notice an old stamp album on the desk—

“You still collect stamps!” I look at him—he is pleased by the remark.

“Oh yes,” he smiles, “I still receive my mail the old fashioned way, with postage stamps; from all over the world.”

Two piles of school notebooks are neatly arranged on the desk. He picks one up and glances at it, holds it delicately for a moment and then hands it to me.

“Take a look—she poured her heart out in these. It was a year of turmoil; well, you know how it was—these are precious.”

I flip through a few pages: recognize her writing, neat and deliberately cursive—I had read so many of her notes in the patients’ charts, when we were working together in the ICU at the Foundation Hospital in DC.

### *Roger Fenton Exhibition*

*This was our first real date... We loved the exhibition...*

*I have fallen in love, like never before.*

*The photographs are from another time and place...*

*... They affect you deeply ...*

*I loved the lone girl in the cloister. Ed joked that she could be me—in a Victorian school uniform!*

*I think he likes me. I feel it. When we were on the hill later, at one point I thought he was going to kiss me ... I wonder what it would be like with him. I kept thinking, I was feeling sexy—making love under the stars—he puts his hand on my thigh and then he just takes me ... two wild animals amongst the bushes ...*

*When we were at the museum he touched my arm one time and I felt*

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*nearly faint, goosebumps all over! I am in love. I have no doubt about it.*

*Because of Laura he might hesitate. I might have to play Artemis – the huntress!*

*Ed was so absorbed looking at the photographs, totally immersed. I love looking at him, he so lovably serious, and me: a little spy with a dirty mind!*

*Now I understand the phrase – cannon ball lesions in the lungs on the chest X-rays.*

*Roger Fenton too practiced law!*

*Technically he is married, but for all practical purposes he is not ...*

*Jade*

*I told him he would do better as a photographer than as an attorney...*

*He is very fond of his father...*

*There is a picture of Laura, in front of the Half Dome in Yosemite.*

*What an idea! Grays and whites of the rock provide a harsh background, her peach-white skin and golden head contrast with black and white and she comes out so alive. She looks so vulnerable; she is a very neat and sexy woman... unfortunate/cursed.*

*Only other colors are a pure black wrap around her hips, black sandals, and a black silk scarf that's tying her wrists. She is naked above her waist; she has beautiful breasts, not huge, still looks pubertal – like me. Nipples, a very deep pink, nearly purple, erect – an aroused woman. What a tender color against the gray of the rock!*

*It happened ... We had been drinking tequila ...*

*My body feels mauled by an animal! He is like a stallion in the wild. I feel a lot of aching muscles – my hips, my thighs, my pelvis – I did not know I had muscles in all these places, sounds silly coming from a medical student. But I was had for a sexual intercourse, fucked and fucked – rather than made love to! It was wonderful. I wish I were with him now. He took me – and I was a helpless doll being worked on by a gothic stem engine ... he has starved for years. And I am left with the taste of a man – the taste of a much starved man sticks to the back of my throat.*

*Jade*

*Hardly a word is cut or altered – these were completely*

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formed thoughts; complete sentences poured out of the mind onto the paper. *This was the first draft!*

I feel jealous—of Ed. My face feels warm; perhaps it is Heineken—

“Her use of those names is very interesting,” I hear my voice speaking, “Maya and Jade—intriguing; her choice of names is beautiful.

“Simply reflections of different moods—not multiple personalities ... I did not know Beth could write so well.

“She would have made a prolific writer—highly intelligent ...

“And then I have all these—Ed wrote them. Not as well written, but do tell a story—complementary. I know his feelings, he went through a lot—they both went through a lot.

“Ed was never a great writer, but in the SHU: the Segregated Housing Unit; they held him in the solitary confinement, for his own protection, they tell me; he had nothing to do, but to write

“Sometimes things just happen and everything spins out of control; like the Hindus say ‘*it is the karma*’.” He shrugs his shoulders and shakes his head and begins to walk out of the room ...

At times he is almost unaware of me.

## 9

It is after lunch. We are lounging in the living room by the window: that spot is a great lookout over the valley. It is a sunny day outside. Mount Tam is deep green; with dark shadows here and there that constantly change as the sun moves.

“This is excellent Bern, thanks!” I raise my glass of port saluting him.

“Yes, let us walk outside afterwards; it is one more sunny day in California!”

“Maya is an interesting word,” Bern begins to speak as we walk, “here in America, they use it in reference to the ancient Mayans. But it is a word in Sanskrit as well. One meaning of the word: an illusion; the other: a power—an ability to create an illusion. When a god or a goddess can create an illusion and make you believe in

something that does not exist—they are said to possess ‘Maya’. According to one belief, the world that we see is simply an illusion, and we—the humans—cannot know: because we do not have the ability to know.

“Maya is a very pretty name for a writer; it intrigues, it can mean a lot.

“I don’t remember who it was, but someone did say, ‘all poets are lovers, but all lovers are not poets!’” Bern nods to himself; “However, being in love is not enough; you need more than just deep feelings; you need brains to write well—and it is hard work!”

He looks carefully at each flower bush as we walk downhill, zigzagging on the wide paved steps that contain flowerbeds. Now and then he stoops over a bush, looks at the flowers closely, removes a dead leaf, pulls out a weed, and then straightens up again—we resume our walk. He touches flowers like one would touch a baby’s cheeks.

Now I can easily understand—why the place where young plants are grown is called a nursery!

We’d take time to stop and smell the roses! —She whispers. I cannot help the thought and smile to myself ...

We are at the bottom of the hill and sit on a giant slab of rock.

“Her father was a doctor—German—an old Heidelberg family. He immigrated after marriage and had a busy practice in Santa Fe. He died of a heart attack; it was unexpected—about three months before Beth was to enter the medical school. She postponed her life to be with her mother and the following year she went to the medical school in San Anselmo, in the Caribbean. Her mother is from San Francisco originally; she teaches at the University in Santa Fe—a very remarkable woman ...

“Story behind the other name, Jade, is quite interesting. Believe it or not, but Beth was born in a refugee camp in Thailand! Her father was working with *Médecins Sans Frontières* at that time. The little girl with blue-green eyes was big news in the camp; she fascinated everyone. Can you imagine—a little Caucasian girl born in a refugee camp! There was a Burmese nurse in the camp who often assisted Beth’s father, and for the blue-green color of her eyes, she gave Beth that name—Jade. Some of the most precious jade comes from Burma.”