The Faces of Love

by Sam Bluefarb (February 2015)

> *"There is a fatality, a feeling so irresistible and inevitable that it has the face of doom, which invariably compels human beings to linger around and haunt, ghostlike, the spot where some great and marked event has given color to their lifetime. . . ."*
> — Nathaniel Hawthorne*, The Scarlet Letter*

She was one of the brightest, most perceptive students who had taken his Modern British Lit.—Doris Lessing was a favorite of hers—and in some ways, the most mature. She thought of herself as a "moderate feminist," posessing a wonderful sense of humor that probably tempered what she called her "darker side"— said with a smile. Paradoxically, she was also an incurable romantic, something she would not have felt comfortable admitting.

Judy had crammed lots of living into hertwenty-three years—experimenting, the occasional recreational joint, once a brief—and frightening—experience with LSD, and then a spell of housekeeping with a graduate assistant who'd left one morning after taping a note on her bureau mirror: "Sorry, Judy, but I've found someone else. . . ." She'd taken it hard—which of course made her the perfect candidate for this "field trip," which had more to do with the novel he'd been working on, the story behind it, than anything more insidious. Would this be a cynical exploitation of a vulnerability? But his whole (conscious) reason for choosing her was that he knew she would be the one to appreciate such a sharing.

He'd long ago vowed that he would never become involved with a student, and he wasn't about to do so now—even though he had his urgencies that demanded release from a celibacy imposed by circumstance: a chronically ill wife, a shut-in who needed the attentions of visiting nurses and round-the-clock home care. So an affair with a student was out—and for more than just the home situation. Too risky professionally, too messy personally.

By any measure, Judy was an attractive woman, with her long chestnut hair, those dark, bewitching eyes. But he'd chosen her for other reasons.

On this particular morning, when the hour ended and students were making their

way from the room, he held her back. Something in his manner—a caution she hadn't noticed before—told her that this was going to be more than just another invitation to coffee. Curiosity and the hint of a flirty smile lit up her face.

"I don't quite know how to go about this, Judy. . . ."

"I've never known you to be so hesitant, Dan. What's the problem?"

"No problem. But no coffee in the Union either—not this time."

When she'd first used the familiar "Dan," he'd felt slightly uncomfortable. But after a while, he found himself accepting what had become routine. It was not so much her lack of respect for protocol, or for him, as what she must have felt was a growing bond between them, something that transcended form—and of course her being in sync with the Zeitgeist. But as the relationship had grown, he'd not only resigned himself to that not-so-subtle change, he'd begun to take some satisfaction from it.

"I'd like to show you a place I think you'll find interesting."

"Gee, it sounds intriguing!"

"Interested?"

A coy glance. "Where is that place?"

"In a moment, Judy. I'd like us to meet there instead of going together."

"A tryst!" Again, her eyes lit up, her girlish enthusiasm coming through.

"Not exactly," he smiled.

"But it makes no sense to go separately—oh, I know! An assignation!" she laughed. But there was something more behind that laugh than the kidding. "That's why we can't go together."

"Hardly!" He was determined she not get the wrong idea. "It's just that I'd prefer to do it that way."

"Because of 'appearances'?"

"No. . . ." he shook his head, shrugged, as though "appearances" were the least

problem.

“Okay, separately, if you insist. So where is this mysterious place you’d like to share with me?”

“Over in East L.A., part of what was once Jewish Boyle Heights.”

Her face lit up. “Oh, my dad grew up there! He graduated from Roosevelt High.”

Once, when their relationship had grown into something more than student-teacher, she had confessed that her dad, a physician at Cedars-Sinai, had offered to pay her way through college if she’d quit “fooling around” and “do something with your life,” sign up for a long-term course of study—he didn’t care which—as long as she stuck with it. So far, she hadn’t taken him up on the offer, though she was taking courses, but with little plan and less focussed purpose. “I simply want to stuff myself with more useless knowledge,” she’d laughed.

“Look, Judy, I have to meet just the one seminar tomorrow at ten, then I’ll be free. What’s your schedule?”

“A couple of classes, one in the morning, one in the afternoon. But I’ll cut the afternoon class. I can stand just so much of that Women’s Studies fakery. They ought to call it Male-Bashing 101!” Another outburst of laughter; it was infectious enough to bring an ill-suppressed chuckle from him. “Yes, I’ll be free tomorrow afternoon.” He gave her directions on how to get over to the Casa Internacional, as it was now called; USC’s International Students Association had once utilized it as an off-campus meeting place where they’d put on their annual fall dances. But that was long ago, and La Casa was now a senior center for Mexican seniors who had lived in the U.S.A. for a couple of generations, many of them proud, naturalized American citizens, some, like himself, World War II vets whose own kids were now slogging through the rice paddies of South Vietnam. He’d heard that in World War II Mexican-Americans had taken more casualties proportionately than any other ethnic group their size. And now, Vietnam. His wife Linda, herself Mexican-American, had been born and raised in that neighborhood, though she couldn’t abide the trendy “Chicana” identity, and wasn’t too thrilled by the hyphenated one either. (The eldest of her two brothers, a first lieutenant with the Army Air Corps, had been killed in the war, his plane brought down over Germany.)

Those oldsters who came to La Casa for the daily hot lunches—they addressed each other with teasing, affectionate “Viejo!”s and “vieja!”s, roughly, old coots—came there not only for the hot lunches, but for the exercise groups, blood pressure readings, lectures on good health habits, English language courses, and of course the bailes—the dances—on Friday afternoons from one to four. After lunch, with the tables cleared, what had been a makeshift dining hall was transformed into a ballroom again. But now, with some differences: instead of the mellow strains of “Moonlight Serenade” or “I’ll Be Seeing You.” a fiddle-trumpet-and-guitar band blasted out deafening polcas, boleros, paso dobles, as if they were performing in some El Salon Mexico south of the border. (In a moment of fond remembrance, a distant smile on her face, Linda had once told him: “My mom used to dance the Paso Doble when she was a young girl down in Mexico.”) The band leader would step up to the mike to give ear-splitting renditions of “Mi Cafetal,” “Guadalajara,” and a variety of sentimental canciones—love ballads.

On that mid-week afternoon, he and Judy would meet long after those who came for the hot lunches had departed. So the place, with the exception of an English language class in another wing of the building, was now silent.

“At what time?” She was excited, seeing it as an adventure, even the “tryst” of her half-serious teasing.

“After lunch . . . two o’clock.”

“Two’s okay.”

He’d given her directions on how to get over to the East Side: she’d drive a mile or so over the East Sixth Street bridge, make a left, go a couple of blocks, and come to those high white calcimined walls surrounding a rambling complex of buildings. “After you get there, there’s a patio beyond an archway leading in from the street. I’ll wait for you there.”

“I’ll be there,” she gave him a reassuring smile.

He sat on a gnarled, much painted-over bench, and when he glanced at his watch, he saw it was two-thirty. He now began to think she’d either forgotten or, at the last minute, decided to back out. He thought of the novel he’d been working on over the past three years, in it the description of that place, except that

it fitted another time, another evening back in the late-forties, some twenty-five years earlier.

The International House was a sprawling, hacienda-like complex two miles east of downtown Los Angeles, just north of the darkened hillocks of Hollenbeck Park. It was a poorly lighted neighborhood of early twentieth century clapboard houses, with their roofs shaped like witches hats and their wide verandas. . . .

As he waited for her, he remembered telling her that he was married to a woman who was a shut-in, an invalid suffering from a chronic disease from which she would never recover. He hadn't done that to hint that he was open to anything beyond their present friendship. But if she guessed his needs, he wanted her to have no illusions about her place in them. To make sure, he'd spoken of how he could never get involved in a deeply committed relationship, now, or for the foreseeable future. What he hadn't told her was that, if his love for his wife had not been a burning passion in the early days of their marriage, what had grown with time, was a love stronger than anything he could have imagined, something that went far beyond momentary passion.

* * *

Several years before he met Linda, he'd got involved with a diminutive Jewish girl from India, an exchange student from Calcutta. They'd met at the university in the late forties when he was almost three years out of the war and back in civilian life. Until then, he hadn't taken up with anyone who'd appealed enough to him to wish for a longer-lasting relationship--that maddening word again! But when he met Kathy, all of that changed. Yet, one morning, after her dry-eyed goodbye, he'd awakened to the reality that all of the passion and commitment had been his; and after a year of intimacies; of "deep-sworn vows," marriage plans, a gaping hole had appeared in what he thought was firm ground, and he'd taken the dark fall. But the clues had been there all along—the cooling off, things about him that irritated her, trivial things—things that provoked her impatient outbursts, almost as though she were looking for a way to end it. But he'd put it all down to "passing moods," the onset of her period? Or maybe its delay?

For two years, he'd haunted all the "old familiar places." In that first fall after the break, he'd wandered the evening pathways near the quonset where she had an evening class, hoping to catch a glimpse of her coming out of class,

fixing it so that he'd run into her "by accident;" Malibu, where he'd taken her on their first date in that earlier fall, now a dismal anniversary; Newport Beach and its marina, remembering that afternoon watching the sailboats glide in and out of the channel; remembering the Lido, with its seafood and pasta places where they always stopped for an early dinner.

* * *

He'd met Linda through her brother who had been in the navy and was also attending university on the G.I. Bill. Sal had sat in the seat next to him in that Age of Milton class. He was one of the few Mexican-American vets majoring in English and, like himself, intending to go into teaching.

At first, he suspected that meeting and marrying Linda had been a case of rebound; and it may have been partly that. But rebounds often ended in disaster, whereas his love for Linda had grown like the poet's "vegetable love," deeper, more abiding with each passing year, until that first one had become a memory, yet a memory that would not completely die.

That's when he began work on a novel—a project as obsessive as the sense of loss that had inspired it. But now, after many rejects, turn-downs from big-name publishers and hard-nosed agents, when he was finally about to give up on it, a small Midwestern publisher had offered him a contract. Writing that behemoth—of over 400 manuscript pages—had been something of a catharsis (and back-breaking challenge) though not as complete as he would have liked; there still remained the unfinished business of wanting to personally share some small glimmer of the experience with someone. And he'd chosen Judy. She, better than some faceless reader.

For a moment, he thought he'd heard the click of her footsteps in that arched passageway that led into the patio from the street, but they were phantom footsteps. T.S. Eliot may have had something like that passageway in mind when he'd written in "The Four Quartets," "Footfalls echo in the memory / Down the passage which we did not take / Towards the door we never opened / Into the rose garden," lines presumably written out of Eliot's deeply religious feelings. But he, Dan, had long suspected that "The Four Quartets" had not been inspired by religious zeal alone; there had to be something more, some longing for a very earthly—and unattainable—beloved. Yes, he and that girl from Calcutta had

certainly walked through that passageway on that evening all those years ago, had entered that patio, hands clasped, and gone beyond it into the ballroom—but they had never truly opened that door, never entered that rose garden.

Suddenly, she strode in, eager, out of breath. She came up to him. “Oh, Dan, sorry I’m late. That downtown traffic!”

He rose. She looked about her. “I never knew about this place. God! It seems so redolent of. . . . You can almost feel. . .” she searched for a word, “the ghosts.” She eyed him with a look verging on intimacy.

“There was someone you met here, wasn’t there.”

“Not here. We met at a party. But there was this ball a couple of weeks later. It was an annual event. She asked me to take her to it. And this was where we came. The ISA had rented the place for that evening.”

“The ISA?”

“The International Students Association. She was a charter member,” he smiled.

“And then one day she dumped you for some rich guy.”

“Not all that rich.”

“Financially stable.”

“Something like that.” Albert Segal had been a moderately successful stock-broker with a large Beverly Hills financial institution.

“And she lived to regret it,” she gave him a small rueful smile, “and is now pining away someplace.”

She laid out the consoling scenario in luscious detail, though there was something teasing—almost childlike—in the way she said it, as if she didn’t believe her own words, though she seemed to think they would console him.

He shook his head. “She made a happy marriage--for as long as it lasted.”

“What happened?”

“She died a few years later.”

She shook her head, as if there should have been a more satisfying ending, the loose ends neatly tied up, some sort of poetic justice, like the happy ending of a popular novel.

“And now, let’s go in there,” he touched her elbow.

The ballroom looked smaller than on that night when he and Kathy had walked into it. The place was the same yet not the same, with its dais at one end, and those elongated Norman Romanesque windows at the other, windows that looked out on what had become—and was becoming—the high-rise sky-line of a changing Los Angeles. The light coming through those dust-filmed windows was crepuscular, as though any suggestion of cheer in such a place would be inappropriate at this time.

There had been no orchestra then, only a speaker attached to a record player, and Nat King Cole’s mellifluous vocals coming from it in the crooner’s rendition of “There Will Never Be Another You,” alternating with “I’ll be Seeing You. . . .” That was in the third year after the war, when the peace and the long-expected prosperity had materialized. But he’d shared little in that prosperity. He’d then lived in a basement of a rooming house in the Westlake (now McArthur) Park district, a student on the G.I. Bill, scraping by on $65 a month and earning a little extra part-time, proof-reading galleys for a local newspaper. Yet, though he roomed in the basement of that late Victorian clapboard, his heart sang and he strode a mountain top, because in a couple of hours, on that bracing fall Sunday, he’d be picking her up in his battered ’39 Chevy to drive her up to Malibu, to that mini-promontory overlooking the sea, that spot that had eventually become “theirs.” It had been their first date.

“You still treasure her memory, don’t you.” She was looking out over the ballroom, the ghostly echoes of those past balls still holding sway, like those spectral dancers. . . . “It must have been a fabulous evening!” Her words were hushed, as she imagined that radiant past. By contrast, the ballroom was drab now, made drabber by motes of dusty light creeping through those grimy windows. But the detals of that time would escape her—the men in formal atire, the Sikhs among them in turbans; the Indian women, some of them friends from Calcutta, mostly graduate students, resplendent in their flowing saris of pinks and saffrons, the urbane air they carried about them, the Arab students from Syria and Lebanon whom she got on so famously with and who were fond of her because

“you sympathize with our just cause in Palestine.” That was actually a slight misconception, because she did not so much as sympathize with as deplore the bloodshed, on both sides of the Israel-Arab conflict. A worker in the Indian Red Cross during the war, and for a short time after, she had seen the carnage on the streets of Calcutta, the explosion of Hindu-Moslem violence after the British pull-out, seen enough to last her a lifetime. Not surprisingly, having come from a family of Iraqi-Jews who identified more with the British Raj than with their Indian co-religionists, she had distanced herself—or perhaps was already distant—from a Zionism that, to her, was a European ideology. And in spite of the revelations of the Holocaust, in spite of her compassion—her Red Cross work—she had been unable to see it as anything other than a universal tragedy, something not uniquely Jewish. Beyond their shared faith, she was simply unable to identify with those East European Jews who had been the Holocaust’s principal victims. As a Red Cross worker, Kathy had not only ministered to Allied soldiers who had lost arms and legs; she had had a close-up look at the thousands of refugees who had poured into India’s cities during the Hindu-Moslem violence, so that she could not comprehend, much less sympathize with Israel’s struggle to survive in a sea of hatred. When the armies of Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, and Transjordan had attacked the newly independent state, she could only deplore the violence and invoke the name of Mohandas K. Gandhi, whom she venerated and who had been assassinated at about that time. They had had their arguments over Jews having a country of their own, especially after Hitler’s near success in exterminating “all of our people”—he had stressed their shared peoplehood—but his appeal had had no effect. Indeed, it only seemed to strain relations between them--and, in some subliminal way, may have had something to do with their break-up!

Judy suddenly broke in on those reveries. “I wish I could have been here back then, Dan. It must have been fabulous!” She turned to eye him in a way he had never seen before. But he couldn’t allow her to go further, because if he did, he’d find himself falling in love all over again, and that could not be. . . .

“Funny,” he shook his head in sudden remembrance, “I’d long forgotten this place—oh,” he broke in on himself, “not quite forgotten, but, well, you know. . . .” He’d been about to say something mawkish but held off. “Anyway, one afternoon I’m on my way home from a conference at one of the Claremont colleges. The freeways were bumper-to-bumper, so I decided to get off because I figured

I'd make better time taking the streets. But once off the freeway, I got disoriented and found myself on a street I couldn't quite place. Something familiar about it. But as I drove by, I noticed those high walls off to my right, and it all came back. I parked, got out, and walked through that archway into this patio. A young fellow, a Chicano, I soon learned, was pruning rose bushes. He was polite but curious, wanted to know if he could be of any help. I thanked him but told him—well, I told him the truth. I confessed that I'd brought a girl to a dance here, years ago, that this was a sentimental journey. And he asked how long ago, and when I told him, he shook his head. 'Jesus, that was before I was born.' And then he said, 'She must have meant something to you for you to come back here after all these years.' And I said, yes, she did. I asked him how long he had worked at that place. And he told me he'd been working at the Casa, on and off, for the past couple of years, that this was just a part-time job; he was in his final year at Cal State L.A., and was going for a law degree. Then he went on to tell me how the place was now a senior center. 'You might want to drop in for lunch sometime', and I said, 'Yes, I might do that.'"

Judy now asked, "Your wife—does she know about this place?"

"She knows." And, almost as an irrelevancy, he added, "She grew up not far from here."

"She must be a very understanding person."

"In more ways than you can imagine."

He turned to her. "Come on, Judy, I'll see you to your car."

When they reached her car, she leaned over and kissed him on the cheek; then she got in, and started up the engine. As she pulled away, she waved; and he waved back. He watched her drive off, then walked away. There was one more thing to do.

* * *

The señora looked younger than a woman in her sixties. She lived in a one-bedroom clapboard behind a larger house, on a street cutting into Indiana Street. He had met her at one of those drop-ins over at the Casa when, thinking

back on that invitation that young Mexican-American had casually dropped and on a whim, he'd gone down there to share a lunch with those seniors for the buck "donation." Most of them were widowed or widowered, as was she. Some separated. She had a married daughter living on Eastern Avenue. The daughter occasionally picked her up to baby-sit the grandkids.

When he'd met her, he'd sat across from her at the lunch table, and they'd chatted about one thing and another, her own origins, having come from Mexico and lived in L.A. for "t'irty years." He'd been about to tell her that he was a professor at a local college in the L.A. area—but that might have been intimidating--or make him the object of some over-valuation. After they'd finished their lunches, she'd asked if he had a car, since she would have to take the bus home. Would he mind if. . . . ? No, of course not. He'd gladly give her a ride. And that's how it began. In spite of her years, she retained the firmness and figure of a younger woman. She had long since ceased to dye her hair, but her periodic visits to her hairdresser kept it neatly coiffed. She had invited him in, flashed a seductive smile, and moved toward him. . . .

At the Casa, he hadn't noticed the scent of her perfume, not even in the car. But now the fragrance of lush tropical flowers—frangipani, jasmine—her closeness, he was a world away from antique college romances, from daily academic routines, from what, phantom-like, nudged at conscience—and they drew close. . . . It had been a long time…

After that, it became ritual, their embrace, her bed. He'd spoken of a wife who for years had been *enferma*, and she'd nodded understanding, murmured a compassionate "*pobrecita*!" especially after he'd mentioned Linda's Mexican shared heritage with hers, parents from Guadalajara, etc. From what little he told her, she knew, without his coming out with it, that he must not have had any sex life in a long time.

Once, in moments of rising passiom, the sudden image of Linda intruded, bed-bound, her breathing labored, which pierced him to the heart—and he wilted. The señora drew him to her. "Aye! mi amor, I help you." And she did, with something more than pedestrian kisses and fondlings.

Afterward, she comforted him. "Me contento now, mi amor. Next time better…" And in that moment, he saw a beauty that had little to do with age, and everything

to do with the ages.

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