

PART ONE – Chapter 10

Upon signing out, I cast around for¹ some place in the New England countryside or sleepy small town (elms, white church) where I could spend a studious summer subsisting on a compact boxful of notes I had accumulated and bathing in some nearby lake. My work had begun to interest me again — I mean my scholarly exertions; the other thing, my active participation in my uncle's posthumous perfumes, had by then been cut down to a minimum. One of his former employees, the scion of a distinguished family, suggested I spend a few months in the residence of his impoverished cousins, a Mr. McCoo, retired, and his wife, who wanted to let their upper story where a late aunt had delicately dwelt. He said they had two little daughters, one a baby, the other a girl of twelve, and a beautiful garden, not far from a beautiful lake, and I said it sounded perfectly perfect.

I exchanged letters with these people, satisfying them I was housebroken, and spent a fantastic night on the train, imagining in all possible detail the enigmatic nymphet I would coach in French and fondle in Humbertish. Nobody met me at the toy station where I alighted with my new expensive bag, and nobody answered the telephone; eventually, however, a distraught McCoo in wet clothes turned up at the only hotel of green-and-pink Ramsdale with the news that his house had just burned down (...). His family, he said, had fled to a farm he owned, and had taken the car, but a friend of his wife's, a grand person, Mrs. Haze of 342 Lawn Street, offered to accommodate me (...).

Now, since the only reason for my coming at all had vanished, the aforesaid arrangement seemed preposterous. All right, his house would have to be completely rebuilt, so what? Had he not insured it sufficiently? I was angry, disappointed and bored, but being a polite European, could not refuse to be sent off to Lawn Street in that funeral car, feeling that otherwise McCoo would devise an even more elaborate means of getting rid of me. (...)

A little further, the Haze house, a white-frame horror, appeared, looking dingy and old, more gray than white — the kind of place you know will have a rubber tube affixable to the tub faucet *in lieu of* shower. I tipped the chauffeur and hoped he would immediately drive away so that I might double back unnoticed to my hotel and bag; but the man merely crossed to the other side of the street where an old lady was calling to him from her porch. What could I do? I pressed the bell button.

A colored maid let me in — and left me standing on the mat while she rushed back to the kitchen where something was burning that ought not to burn. The front hall was graced with door chimes, a white-eyed wooden thingamabob of commercial Mexican origin, and that banal darling of the arty middle class. A door ajar to the right afforded a glimpse of a living room, with some more Mexican trash in a corner cabinet and a striped sofa along the wall. There was a staircase at the end of the hallway, and as I stood mopping my brow (only now did I realize how hot it had been out-of-doors) and staring, to stare at something, at an old gray tennis ball that lay on an oak chest, there came from the upper landing the contralto voice of Mrs. Haze, who leaning over the banisters inquired melodiously, "Is that *Monsieur* Humbert?" A bit of cigarette ash dropped from there in addition. Presently, the lady herself — sandals, maroon slacks, yellow silk blouse, squarish face, in that order — came down the steps, her index finger still tapping upon her cigarette.

I think I had better describe her right away, to get it over with. The poor lady was in her middle thirties, she had a shiny forehead, plucked eyebrows and quite simple but not unattractive features of a type that may be defined as a weak solution of Marlene Dietrich. Patting her bronze-brown bun, she led me into the parlor and we talked for a minute about the McCoo fire and the privilege of living in Ramsdale. Her very wide-set sea-green eyes had a funny way of traveling all over you, carefully avoiding your own eyes. Her smile was but a quizzical² jerk of one eyebrow; and uncoiling³ herself from the sofa as she talked, she kept making spasmodic dashes at three ashtrays and the near fender (where lay the brown core of an apple); whereupon she would sink back again, one leg folded under her. (...)

But there was no question of my settling there. I could not be happy in that type of household with bedraggled magazines on every chair and a kind of horrible hybridization between the comedy of so-called "functional modern furniture" and the tragedy of decrepit rockers and rickety lamp tables with dead lamps. I was led upstairs, and to the left — into "my" room. And she called that servant maid's room a "semi-studio"! Let's get

¹ Cast around for = look around for something.

² Quizzical = amusingly odd or strange. (perplex)

³ Uncoil = se dérouler (sens figuré)

out of here at once, I firmly said to myself as I pretended to deliberate over the absurdly, and ominously, low price that my wistful hostess was asking for board and bed.

50 Old-world politeness, however, obliged me to go on with the ordeal. We crossed the landing to the right side of the house (where “I and Lo have our rooms” — Lo being presumably the maid), and the lodger-lover could hardly conceal a shudder when he, a very fastidious male, was granted a preview of the only bathroom, a tiny oblong between the landing and “Lo’s” room, with limp wet things overhanging the dubious tub (the question mark of a hair inside); and there were the expected coils of the rubber snake, and its complement — a pinkish cozy, coyly covering the toilet lid.

55 “I see you are not too favorably impressed,” said the lady letting her hand rest for a moment upon my sleeve: she combined a cool forwardness — the overflow of what I think is called “poise” — with a shyness and sadness that caused her detached way of selecting her words to seem as unnatural as the intonation of a professor of “speech.” “This is not a neat household, I confess,” the doomed ear continued, “but I assure you [she looked at my lips], you will be very comfortable, very comfortable, indeed. Let me show you the garden” (the last more brightly, with a kind of winsome toss of the voice).

60 Reluctantly I followed her downstairs again; then through the kitchen at the end of the hall, on the right side of the house — the side where also the dining room and the parlor were (under “my” room, on the left, there was nothing but a garage). In the kitchen, the Negro maid, a plump youngish woman, said, as she took her large glossy black purse from the knob of the door leading to the back porch: “I’ll go now, Mrs. Haze.” “Yes, Louise,” answered Mrs. Haze with a sigh. “I’ll settle with you Friday.” We passed on to a small pantry and entered the dining room, 65 parallel to the parlor we had already admired. I noticed a white sock on the floor. With a deprecatory grunt, Mrs. Haze stooped without stopping and threw it into a closet next to the pantry. We cursorily inspected a mahogany table with a fruit vase in the middle, containing nothing but the still glistening stone of one plum. I groped for the timetable I had in my pocket and fished it out to look as soon as possible for a train. I was still walking behind Mrs. Haze though the dining room when, beyond it, there came a sudden burst of greenery — “the piazza,” sang out my 70 leader, and then, without the least warning, a blue sea-wave swelled under my heart and, from a mat in a pool of sun, half-naked, kneeling, turning about on her knees, there was my Riviera love peering at me over dark glasses.

It was the same child — the same frail, honey-hued shoulders, the same silky supple bare back, the same chestnut head of hair. A polka-dotted black kerchief tied around her chest hid from my aging ape eyes, but not from 75 the gaze of young memory, the juvenile breasts I had fondled one immortal day. And, as if I were the fairy-tale nurse of some little princess (lost, kidnaped, discovered in gypsy rags through which her nakedness smiled at the king and his hounds), I recognized the tiny dark-brown mole on her side. With awe and delight (the king crying for joy, the trumpets blaring, the nurse drunk) I saw again her lovely indrawn abdomen where my southbound mouth had briefly paused; and those puerile hips on which I had kissed the imprint left by the band of her shorts — that last mad immortal day behind the “Roches Roses.” The twenty-five years I had lived since then, tapered to a palpitating point, 80 and vanished.

I find it most difficult to express with adequate force that flash, that shiver, that impact of passionate recognition. In the course of the sun-shot moment that glance slithered over the kneeling child while I passed by her in my adult disguise, the vacuum of my soul managed to suck in every detail of her bright beauty, and these I checked 85 against the features of my dead bride. A little later, of course, she, *this nouvelle*, this Lolita, my Lolita, was to eclipse completely her prototype. Everything they shared made one of them. I have no illusions, however. My judges will regard all this as a piece of mummery on the part of a madman with a gross liking for the fruit vert. *Au fond, ça m’est bien égal*. All I now is that while the Haze woman and I went down the steps into the breathless garden, my knees were like reflections of knees in rippling water, and my lips were like sand, and — “That was my Lo,” she said, “and these are my lilies.” “Yes,” I said, “yes. They are beautiful, beautiful, beautiful.”

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