

PART ONE – Chapter 1

Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins¹. My sin, my soul. Lo-lee-ta: the tip of the tongue taking a trip of three steps down the palate to tap, at three, on the teeth. Lo. Lee. Ta. She was Lo, plain Lo, in the morning, standing four feet ten in one sock. She was Lola in slacks². She was Dolly at school. She was Dolores on the dotted line. But in my arms, she was always Lolita. Did she have a precursor? She did, indeed she did. In point of fact, there might have been no Lolita at all had I not loved, one summer, a certain initial girl-child. In a pryncedom by the sea. Oh when? About as many years before Lolita was born as my age was that summer. You can always count on a murderer for a fancy prose style. Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, exhibit ³number one is what the seraphs⁴, the misinformed, simple, noble-winged seraphs, envied. Look at this tangle of thorns⁵.

PART ONE – Chapter 3

Annabel was, like the writer, of mixed parentage: half-English, half-Dutch, in her case. I remember her features far less distinctly today than I did a few years ago, before I knew Lolita. There are two kinds of visual memory: one when you skillfully recreate an image in the laboratory of your mind, with your eyes open (and then I see Annabel in such general terms as: “honey-colored skin,” “brown bobbed hair⁶,” “long eyelashes,” “big bright mouth”); and the other when you instantly evoke, with shut eyes, on the dark inner side of your eyelids, the objective, absolutely optical replica of a beloved face, a little ghost in natural colors (and this is how I see Lolita).

Let me therefore primly limit myself, in describing Annabel, to saying she was a lovely child a few months my junior. Her parents were old friends of my aunt’s, and as stuffy⁷ as she. They had rented a villa not far from Hotel Mirana. At first, Annabel and I talked of peripheral affairs. She kept lifting handfuls of fine sand and letting it pour through her fingers. (...) The softness and fragility of baby animals caused us the same intense pain. She wanted to be a nurse in some famished Asiatic country; I wanted to be a famous spy.

All at once we were madly, clumsily, shamelessly, agonizingly in love with each other; hopelessly, I should add, because that frenzy of mutual possession might have been assuaged⁸ only by our actually imbibing⁹ and assimilating every particle of each other’s soul and flesh; but there we were, unable even to mate as slum¹⁰ children would have so easily found an opportunity to do. After one wild attempt we made to meet at night in her garden (of which more later), the only privacy we were allowed was to be out of earshot but not out of sight on the populous part of the

¹ **Loins** = les reins

² **Slacks** = des pantalons (souvent chics)

³ **Exhibit** = ici, « pièce à conviction »

⁴ **Seraph** = séraphin (ange)

⁵ **Tangles of thorns** = enchevêtrement d’épines

⁶ **Bobbed hair** = des cheveux coupés au bol. (à la Jeanne d’Arc)

⁷ **Stuffy** = ennuyeux et trop formel

⁸ **Assuage** = dissiper / apaiser / calmer

⁹ **Imbibe** = absorber / assimiler

¹⁰ **Slum** = quartiers pauvres

plage. There, on the soft sand, a few feet away from our elders, we would sprawl¹¹ all morning, in a petrified paroxysm of desire, and take advantage of every blessed quirk in space and time to touch each other: her hand, half-hidden in the sand, would creep toward me, its slender brown fingers sleepwalking nearer and nearer; then, her knee would start on a long cautious journey; sometimes a chance rampart built by younger children granted us sufficient concealment to graze¹² each other's salty lips; these incomplete contacts drove our healthy and inexperienced young bodies to such a state of exasperation that not even the cold blue water, under which we still clawed at each other, could bring relief.

Among some treasures I lost during the wanderings of my adult years, there was a snapshot taken by my aunt which showed Annabel, her parents and the staid¹³, elderly, lame gentleman, a Dr. Cooper, who that same summer courted my aunt, grouped around a table in a sidewalk café. Annabel did not come out well, caught as she was in the act of bending over her chocolat glacé, and her thin bare shoulders and the parting in her hair were about all that could be identified.

(...)

That photograph was taken on the last day of our fatal summer and just a few minutes before we made our second and final attempt to thwart¹⁴ fate. Under the flimsiest of pretexts (this was our very last chance, and nothing really mattered) we escaped from the café to the beach, and found a desolate stretch of sand, and there, in the violet shadow of some red rocks forming a kind of cave, had a brief session of avid caresses, with somebody's lost pair of sunglasses for only witness. I was on my knees, and on the point of possessing my darling, when two bearded bathers, the old man of the sea and his brother, came out of the sea with exclamations of encouragement, and four months later she died of typhus in Corfu.

(...)

I am convinced, however, that in a certain magic and fateful way Lolita began with Annabel.

Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita*, 1955

¹¹ **Sprawl** = to sit or lie with your arms and legs spread out in a relaxed or awkward way

¹² **Graze** = effleurer

¹³ **Staid** = guindé

¹⁴ **Thart fate** = contrecarrer / contrarier le destin.