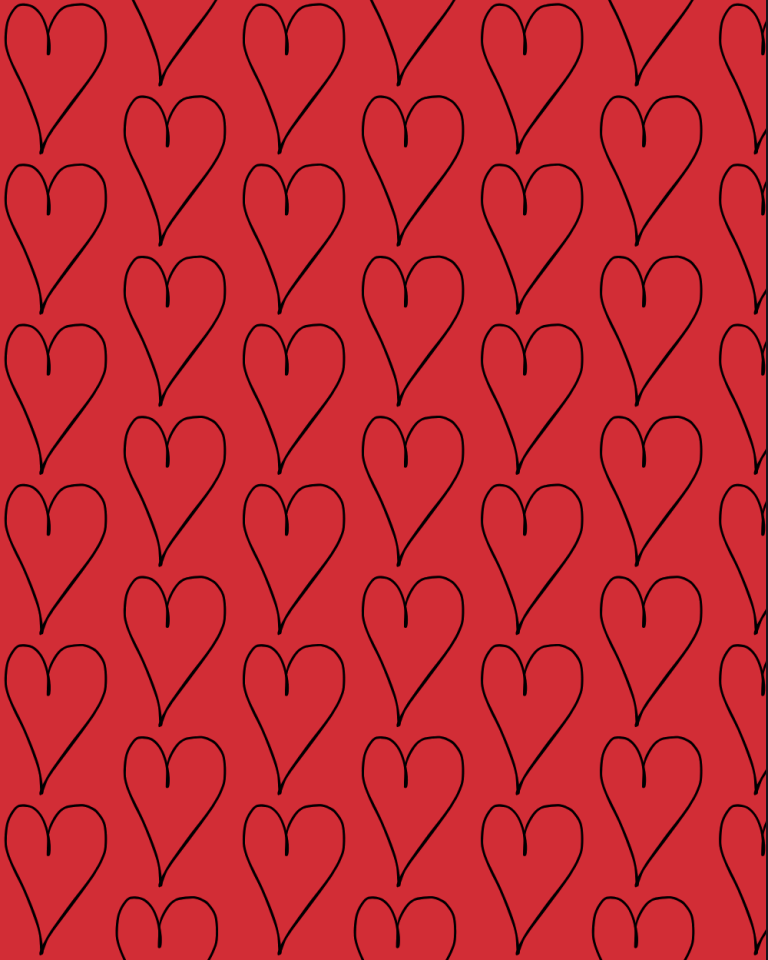


one
must
imagine
Lolita
happy



*a zine by
lo riddell*



I am not the first writer to notice
our culture's little problem
with *Lolita*.



I'm sure I will
not be the last.



heart-shaped sunglasses,

half-licked lollipops,

underage girls singing
sultry pop songs:

these images are fixed
cultural associations with
Vladimir Nabokov's novel.

of course, fixed images
are antithetical
to *Lolita*.

Lolita is the power of language.

Lolita is writing about writing.

Lolita is a fictional confession

penned by a fictional abuser
masterminded by a man who understood
the dangers of an unreliable narrator.*

On the issue of a book cover, Nabokov requested:

*“I want pure colors, melting clouds,
accurately drawn details, a sunburst above
a receding road with the light reflected in
furrows and ruts, after rain.*

*And **no girls.**”*

*Though assertions of sexual abuse are debated and refuted by some scholars, Nabokov wrote in his memoir *Speak, Memory* of his uncle: “he would invariably take me upon his knee after lunch and [...] fondle me”

why, then, have we delighted
in plastering images of young girls
-- purported “nymphets” --
on every book cover since 1957?

why has *Lolita* received
two film adaptations* that
fall fatally short of the
novel’s intended takeaways?

*when brainstorming how *Lolita* might
bypass the Hays Code in 1962, some
producers floated the idea of revealing that
Lolita and Humbert had been secretly
married the whole time -- because
premarital sexuality was offensive, but
child marriage not so much?



why do we think
of *Lolita* as a girl
who willingly takes
older men
as lovers?



when we filter through the narration,
the beautiful prose that decorates and obscures

Humbert's lies,
what we know of Lolita is this:

her name is Dolores Haze.
she is 12 years old.
she is 4 foot 10, with auburn hair
and gray eyes.

Humbert marries her mother
under false pretenses,
and does not inform Dolores
of her mother's death
until he's already raped her.

she is trafficked across the country
by her only legal guardian

and endures his abuse
for years.

her family and friends
call her Lola,
or Dolly, or Lo.

Humbert is the only person
who ever calls her "Lolita."



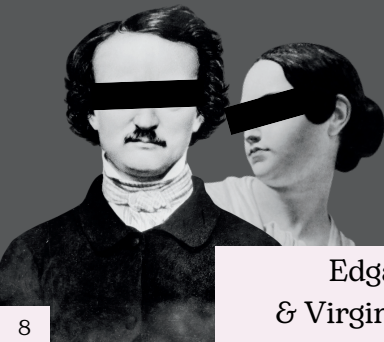
to write his infamous story,
Nabokov took inspiration from real-life
examples of abuse and power imbalances:



Lewis Carroll & Alice Liddell,



Frank La Salle
& Sally Horner,



Edgar Allan Poe
& Virginia Eliza Clemm.

Humbert's tragic backstory
is based upon Poe's "Annabel Lee" poem,



general inspiration was taken
from newspaper clippings
on Sally Horner's kidnapping,

and of Lewis Carroll, Nabokov said in 1966:



*"I always call him
Lewis Carroll Carroll,
because he was the first
Humbert Humbert."*

Lolita was dark from its inception.



(though, of course, with nuances
too lengthy for my 20-page zine.)

why, then,
do we think of it erotically?



why does a novel
about child sexual abuse

serve as a punchline
when purity-shaming young girls?

Lolita presented a problem
too complex for its 20th century audience:

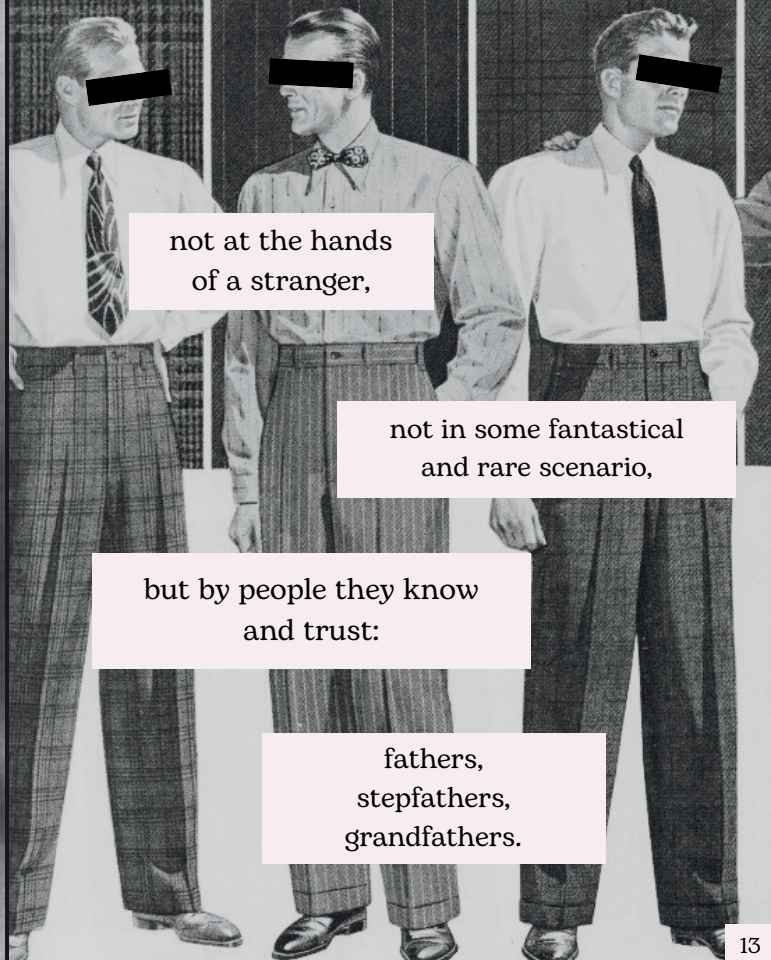


the truth that any child,

anywhere,

in the most picturesque parts
of the country,

may be experiencing abuse.



not at the hands of
a stranger,

not in some fantastical
and rare scenario,

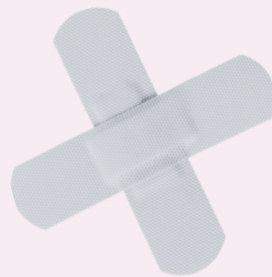
but by people they know
and trust:

fathers,
stepfathers,
grandfathers.

predictably, this proved problematic for the pro-nuclear family agenda of the '50s,



as well as the entertainment industry,
which relies on us to be ravenous
for the next child star in the cultural zeitgeist
to show us how “grown-up” she is.



the solution, then,
came easily:



victim-blame

the most famous victim
in all of contemporary
fiction.

demonize her.

sexualize her.

completely decontextualize her.

make her name synonymous
with something she never was.



it's easier
to blame girls
for not crossing
their ankles,

for wearing skirts
too short,
sweaters too tight,

for having a pubescent body
"too tempting" to resist;

to believe a young girl
is a willing participant,
a seductress,
a happy little
"nymphet"

than it is to investigate a culture
so constructed by men;
with male senators and presidents,
male judges and prosecutors,
male directors and executives,
admen
and salesmen
and mailmen,
and men at the head
of every household.



(never mind, of course, that this is exactly the system Nabokov sought to critique throughout his story, as time and time again, authority figures fail Dolores, or even enable Humbert.)

thus, much like Sisyphus,

the mythical image of Lolita
bears a burden she must continue to hold,

as the idea of her is imbued
with new meanings by
those who think nothing of
her suffering.

the weight will keep building

and she will keep pushing it

so long as little girls

are sold by men

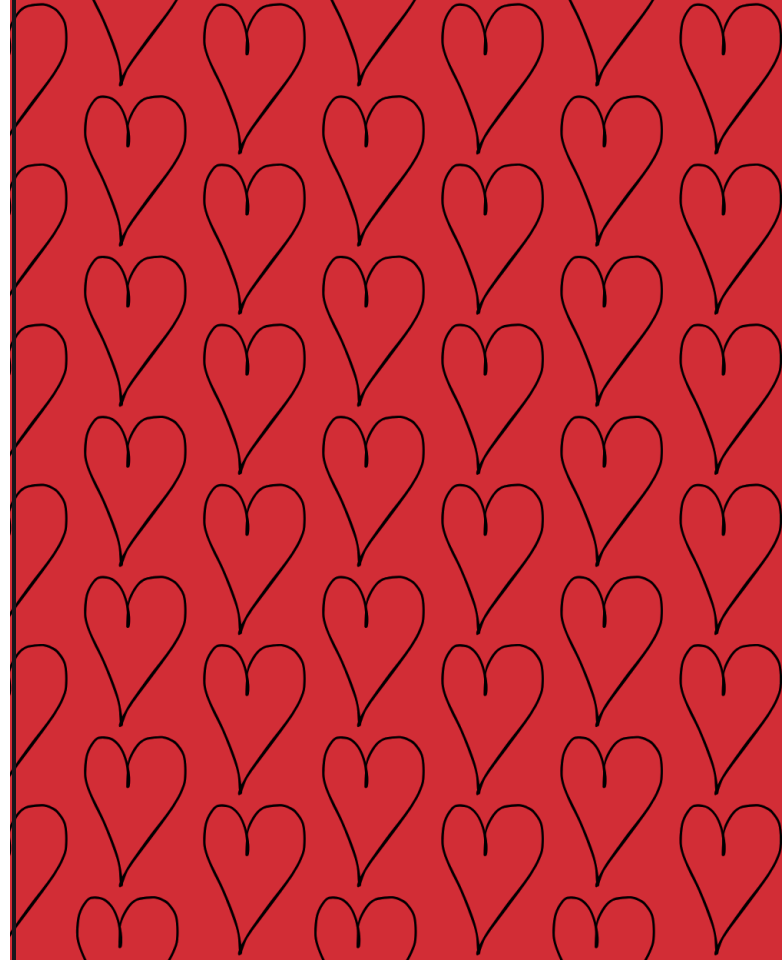
to the masses.



I fear our solution
has buried her further:



"one must imagine
Lolita is happy."





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