**Remorse and Nabokov’s Women**

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Probably the most difficult year in the lives of Vera and Vladimir Nabokov was 1937, when Nabokov had an affair with a woman named Irina Guadanini, whom he met a year earlier in Paris. The affair was so emotionally powerful that he was on the verge of leaving Vera and Dimitri for her. When it was over, he saw a landscape filled with the pain he had caused the two women he loved most in the world.

Nabokov began his short story “Spring in Fialta” two months after meeting Irina. He completed chapter five of *The Gift*, immediately after ending the affair. In these works, and others, Nabokov considered what the love affair, with its horrendous emotional upheavals, meant to him. They reveal that the experience impelled him to reevaluate the importance of his life with Vera and his life in art.

**The Facts**

**1936**

The Russian émigré community in Nabokov’s Berlin was in decline in the mid-thirties. The majority of his readership was now in Paris, and at its center was Ilya Fondaminsky, editor of the journal *Sovremennye Zapiski*. At the end of January 1936, Nabokov travelled to Paris to give readings of his work and stayed with the Fondaminskys at their large and comfortable apartment. Vera and two year old Dimitri remained in Berlin.

Among Fondaminsky’s many friends was a woman named Vera Kokoshkin and her thirty-one year old divorced daughter, Irina Guadanini. Irina was an aspiring poet, and her late step-father hailed from a background similar to that of Nabokov’s father. Her step-father’s brother, like V. D. Nabokov, had been a leader in the liberal Kadet party, and was arrested by the Bolsheviks when V.D. Nabokov escaped to the Crimea. V. D. Nabokov was stunned to learn that his colleague was murdered by the Bolsheviks in their first political execution.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Vladimir gave a much regaled reading on February 8, 1936, the first of many in a hectic schedule of readings, dealings with publishers and translators, and networking with contacts and friends. Irina and her mother attended the reading. Brian Boyd writes: “Knowing that Irina was strongly attracted to Sirin, her mother had approached him […] complimented him assiduously, and invited him back for tea. He had accepted and been amused by Madame Kokoshkin’s acting the procuress for her daughter.”[[2]](#footnote-2) He never mentions meeting them in writing home although he assiduously list his many other activities. Nabokov merely writes that the reading was “rather pleasant,” and that afterwards “[a] great crowd of us” went out together until 3 am.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Before this reading, Nabokov wrote home, setting his return for February 20th after a stop in Brussels for a reading.[[4]](#footnote-4) But afterwards, in a letter of February 10, he writes that instead of going to Berlin from Brussels, he will return to Paris for two more readings, one in French, on the 20th or 21st. After that, he will “return to Berlin at once.” [[5]](#footnote-5) After returning from Brussels, Nabokov gave his French reading (which was moved to the 25th-- the other reading folded) and was back in Berlin on February 28th , having spent an extra week in Paris.

Nabokov never tells Vera about meeting these ladies until his letter of February 24, when he mention “the Kokoshkins” for the first time, but he does not give Irina’s name. “I have met outstanding readers at the Kokoshkins’—*there* are people worth writing for.”[[6]](#footnote-6) Excitedly, in the same letter he suggests that they immediately move to Paris. “My sweetheart, what if you wrapped our boy up and came here with him? We’ll have enough to begin with, and then work will turn up. Well? I think such things should be decided at once […]”[[7]](#footnote-7)

These facts suggest that already in 1936, Nabokov was so taken with Irina that he allowed himself an extra week in Paris, albeit a profitable one in terms of career and receipts from a reading, and suddenly wanted to move to Paris as soon as possible. Moreover, he avoided giving Irina’s name for weeks, and failed to tell Vera about his initial contacts with her (or any other probable meetings when he reports going out to bars and restaurants with various groups of writers.)

**1937**

At the start of 1937, the man who murdered Nabokov’s father was released from prison and appointed to head an authority charged with registering the whereabouts of Russian emigres in Germany. Dachau concentration camp, and others, had been busily taking in new occupants since Adolph Hitler became chancellor in January 1933. Things were definitely bending sinister, particularly for Jews, who were stripped of citizenship and other civic protections, beginning in 1933, and suffered constant vilification and indiscriminate beatings and attacks. Although the Nabokovs had been fairly indolent about leaving Germany, with these new developments, Vera insisted that Vladimir leave immediately, while she stayed behind to close take care of the details of emigrating to France. She expected to join him there around March 15, but that was to change drastically. The threat to her own safety (she was Jewish) and that of her toddler, “appeared to have made no impression on her at all.”[[8]](#footnote-8)

Nabokov returned to Paris and stayed with the Fondaminskys. His plan was to try to find a professorial position in an English speaking country, to earn money from various readings, and to network. By now Vera knew something of Irina because he remarked in the very first letter home about a dinner invitation with the Kokoshkins and joked that “Irina has lost her good looks.”[[9]](#footnote-9) A few days later he reports having “dinner at the Kokoshkin-Guadaninis”, and returning home along the gloomy and empty boulevards at 2 a.m.”[[10]](#footnote-10)

Nabokov wrote newsy, affectionate letters almost daily to Vera. In general, Nabokov’s letters burst with literary news and gossip, tender endearments, and exclamations that he cannot do without her. On February 8 he writes that he is expecting her arrival on March 15, but also grumbles that he has not heard from her “for some reason.”[[11]](#footnote-11) Two days later, on the eve of a trip to London, he remarks on Vera’s dragging her feet about leaving Berlin: “Tell yourself our Berlin life is over—and, please, get ready.”[[12]](#footnote-12) The cat is partly out of the bag. Vera has heard rumors that he has been seeing a woman named Irina. He responds to this on February 15, when he breezily, and somewhat defensively, writes “I see thousands of people, the Kokoshkin-Guadaninis *(don’t you dare be jealous.*)” [[13]](#footnote-13) Also his psoriasis has flared up and is becoming unbearable: “the ichiness doesn’t let me sleep and all the linen is covered in blood—terrible.”[[14]](#footnote-14) The skin ailment, probably a symptom of his nervousness about the affair, has also become somewhat of a cover-- suggesting the unlikelihood of romance with such a problem. From now on there will be obfuscation and deceit in the guise of humor, while he pretends to be open with Vera. He writes that he is giving “Irina G” English lessons.[[15]](#footnote-15) Since they have a close friend in Paris named Irina, he later jokes that “both my Irinas are also very nice.”[[16]](#footnote-16) But Vera continued to be mistrustful. On March 20 he objects to her attitude and reassures her that “All the Irinas are powerless.” He chides her: “*You should not let yourself go like that*. The eastern side of my every minute is already coloured by the light of our meeting soon. All the rest is dark, boring, you-less. *I want to hold you and kiss you*, I adore you.”[[17]](#footnote-17) (Emphasis in original)

In the meantime, the date Vera was supposed to leave Berlin has come and gone, and now she attempts to persuade Nabokov to move to Prague rather than Paris, where he had worked so hard and so successfully to establish himself. Later on she suggests Brussels.[[18]](#footnote-18) She wants him far away from Paris.

Nabokov survived this initial artillery from the rumor mill. But now came something far worse. In mid-April Vera received a four page detailed, unsigned letter about the affair.[[19]](#footnote-19) Nabokov denied the accusation.[[20]](#footnote-20)

Vera and Vladimir finally reunited in Prague on May 22, to visit with his mother, and for Vera to take rheumatism treatments at a spa, before moving to their new residence in Cannes, via a short stop in Paris to allow Nabokov to meet with a publisher.

Once Nabokov is in Prague we suddenly see the other half of the equation--he is no longer writing to Vera, but to Irina.[[21]](#footnote-21) Nabokov arranged for Irina to write him under an alias. Stacy Schiff ruefully notes that Nabokov’s letters to Irina “sound painfully like those he had written his wife fourteen years earlier.[[22]](#footnote-22) But this is to be expected, as he appears to have been passionately in love with Irina.

Nabokov’s letters of love to Irina are strewn with feelings of guilt about Vera. On June 14 he writes Irina that his fourteen years with Vera had been “utterly cloudless.”[[23]](#footnote-23) He is pained by the “inevitable vulgarity of deceit”: “suddenly your conscience puts its foot down and you see yourself a scoundrel.”[[24]](#footnote-24) Moreover, Vera was a hard person to fool. “You always have something derisive to say about everyone else,” Nabokov reports her saying, “why not about Irina?”[[25]](#footnote-25) A week later, according to Schiff, Nabokov wrote Irina that he could not live without her and that it was beyond his strength to swear her off. It seemed impossible to make any decision, especially with regard to Dimitri. He felt he was losing his mind.[[26]](#footnote-26)

Although his conscience was hurting, Nabokov’s love for Irina was paramount. On June 14 he writes her that his longing for her was, in Schiff’s paraphrase, “unlike anything he had ever known.”[[27]](#footnote-27) A week later he describes his longing for her as “indescribable, unprecedented.”[[28]](#footnote-28)

The Nabokovs returned to Paris the week of July 1, on the way from Prague to Cannes. Vera and Dimitri stayed with relatives, and Nabokov was back at the Fondaminsky’s. Schiff notes that he stopped by Irina’s apartment, but she was out. “Nabokov felt that he had never waited for anyone as he waited for her on July 1. He had been paralyzed by fear that she might not appear at their late night rendezvous. ‘I love you more than anything on earth,’ he wrote in her notebook.”[[29]](#footnote-29) Boyd describes their time together as “four days of snatched meetings, and a last farewell in front of the metro.”[[30]](#footnote-30)

The Nabokovs arrived in Cannes on July 7 and within a few days Vladimir finally confessed the affair to Vera. Nabokov wrote Irina that the evening he confessed to Vera had been, in Schiff’s paraphrase, “save for the evening of his father’s murder, the most horrible night of his life.”[[31]](#footnote-31) He told her Vera was not going to release him from the marriage, but that he could not think of living without her. He begged Irina to be faithful to him and to write him longer letters, and he promised to see her in the fall.[[32]](#footnote-32)

In the meantime, Vera decided to put the affair behind her, and no longer mentioned Irina. Her calm and solicitousness was unnerving. “Her smile kills me” Nabokov wrote Irina on July 28. “She is convincing herself and me (without words) that you are a hallucination.” [[33]](#footnote-33) But he reassures Irina that he cannot shake his love for her and would have to leave Vera.[[34]](#footnote-34)

Nabokov had promised Vera that he would stop writing to Irina.[[35]](#footnote-35) To Irina he explained that he concealed the fact that he was writing because “he felt so madly sorry” for Vera.[[36]](#footnote-36)

When Vera found out that Nabokov was still writing to Irina, everything came to a climax. There were scenes that made Nabokov feel he would end in a madhouse.[[37]](#footnote-37) Clearly Nabokov had to come to a decision. Like many with magical thinking, he may have hoped that the two opposing desires could somehow coexist.[[38]](#footnote-38) Stacy Schiff, who read the letters, concludes that Nabokov would have left Vera had it not been for the fact that Vera threatened to take Dimitri from his father. In the end, Nabokov wrote Irina that he was forced to end the affair and he would not be writing again.[[39]](#footnote-39) Irina replied that she would come to Cannes, but Nabokov asked her not to. Irina did make the journey to Cannes, although not right away, but it was fruitless.[[40]](#footnote-40) Vladimir later wrote Irina to ask her to return of his letters. She did not return them. Thereafter, Irina attended one of his readings, but they never saw each other again. She wrote a novel based on the affair, quoting liberally from their letters, at the end of which the bereft heroine commits suicide.[[41]](#footnote-41) All her life Irina diligently kept a scrapbook of articles about Nabokov.

**The Fictions**

**“Spring in Fialta”**

“Spring in Fialta”, perhaps Nabokov’s greatest short story, was written in Russian in April 1936, two months after Nabokov got to know Irina, but before the affair became torrid. The subject matter of a wandering husband, impels the shadow of Irina on its heroine, Nina. Nina’s correspondence with Irina is sealed with the detail that Nina had been married to and divorced from “a successful if somewhat lonesome engineer in a most distant tropical country.”[[42]](#footnote-42) Irina had married and divorced a Russian engineer working in the Congo. The portrait of Nina is created with tenderness, and her death effectively achieves a feeling of pity for her.

It is 1932. The narrator, Victor, returns to misty Fialta, an imaginary location in the Crimea which borrows its geography from Yalta. He has “left my wife and children at home” where they are “an island of happiness always present in the clear north of my being, always floating beside me, and even through me, I dare say, but yet keeping on the outside of me most of the time.”[[43]](#footnote-43) As he begins his day in Fialta, he happens upon an old flame, Nina, who is visiting with her husband and a friend, who go off on errands of their own. This will be Victor’s and Nina’s last meeting, and he is confronted with little hints of her impending death as they meander through the town, in the form of four circus posters and then a little circus parade.[[44]](#footnote-44) Nabokov manages to increase the pathos and suspense with each additional sign. Nina will later die when her car, named Icarus, crashes into the approaching circus van.

The story is gorgeously constructed. It spirals round and round through space and time as the couple amble, and Victor intermittently recollects earlier chance meetings with Nina. “Back into the past, back into the past, as I did every time I met her, repeating the whole accumulation of the plot from the very beginning up to the last increment—thus in Russian fairy tales the already told bunched up again at every new turn of the story. The hours, and the telling, are turning, turning, and back again, like the hands of a clock.”[[45]](#footnote-45) He asks himself “what exactly she meant to me” and admits that he cannot understand “the purpose of fate in bringing us constantly together.” [[46]](#footnote-46)

Victor describes Nina with cheeriness, water, and sunshine. At their first youthful meeting “she clasped my shoulder, and with the candor so peculiar to her gently fitted her generous, dutiful lips to mine.” He is affected by the “ nnocent naturalness of her inattention” to him. “I did not yet know that had I said a word it would have changed at once into a wonderful sunburst of kindness, a cheerful, compassionate attitude with all possible cooperation, as if woman’s love were springwater containing salubrious salts which at the least notice she ever so willingly gave anyone to drink.”[[47]](#footnote-47)

But Nina dispenses her love to all with little regard for the individual, indeed he writes that at each meeting in “the fifteen years of our—well, I fail to find the precise term for our kind of relationship—she had not seemed to recognize me at once.”[[48]](#footnote-48) His feelings intensify, in spite of his doubts about her casualness and her “casual affairs.”[[49]](#footnote-49) He has a kind of pity for her-- she appears in a dream sleeping on a trunk in the lobby of his building, “as miserable refugees sleep in godforsaken railway stations”.[[50]](#footnote-50) He recalls her looking like “a lost child” when he happens to see her at a train station, and how “a sobbing ballad” came to him as her train pulled away.[[51]](#footnote-51) *On dit que tu te maries, Tu sais que j’en vais mourir*.[[52]](#footnote-52) The phrase links marriage with death, but Victor makes a different association. He remarks that the “melody, the pain, the offense, the link between hymen and death evoked by the rhythm [...] gave me no rest.”[[53]](#footnote-53) The change from “marriage” to “hymen” alludes to Stephene Mallarme’s poem “L’Apres-midi d’un Faune”: where the faun reproaches himself for desiring “too much hymen”-- *“Too much of hymen desired by one who seeks there the natural A”.*

Victor’s feelings of lust are mixed with feelings of pity. He grows “apprehensive because something lovely, delicate and unrepeatable was being wasted: something which I abused by snapping off pure bright bits in gross haste while neglecting the modest but true core that perhaps it kept offering me in a pitiful whisper.” [[54]](#footnote-54) But there is a moral reason for apprehension as well: “because, in the long run, I was somehow accepting Nina’s life, the lies, the futility, the gibberish of that life.”[[55]](#footnote-55) […] Although Victor feels that with Nina “we lived in another, lighter time-medium” he feels “bound to seek for a rational, if not moral interpretation of my existence, and this meant choosing between the world in which I sat for my portrait, with my wife, my young daughters, the Doberman pinscher […]between the happy, wise, and good world…and what? Was there any practical chance of life together with Nina, life I could barely imagine, for it would be penetrated, I knew, with a passionate, intolerable bitterness and every moment of it would be aware of a past, teeming with protean partners. No, the thing was absurd.”[[56]](#footnote-56) And “hopeless”: “how should I have disposed of the store of sadness that had gradually accumulated as a result of our seemingly carefree, but really hopeless meetings?”[[57]](#footnote-57)

At the end of the story, just before he is to lose her forever, Victor makes a small attempt to make her his: he says, “Look here—what if I love you?” But she is repulsed. “Never mind I was only joking” he hastens to say, feeling that “our romance was even more hopeless than it had ever been.”[[58]](#footnote-58) And just before she goes to join her husband in the Icarus, she is (magically) holding “a firm bouquet of small, dark, unselfishly smelling violets.”[[59]](#footnote-59)

In a different town, beyond Fialta, Victor waits at a train station with a newly bought newspaper in hand, and suddenly understands “something I had been seeing without understanding—why a piece of tinfoil had sparkled so on the pavement, why the gleam of a glass had trembled on a tablecloth, why the sea was ashimmer: somehow, by imperceptible degrees, the white sky above Fialta had got saturated with sunshine, and now it was sunshine pervaded throughout […].”[[60]](#footnote-60) It was her light that made everything glow. And then he sees the article reporting her death.

With Nina’s death, Victor no longer needed to weigh his rational life, a still-life with wife and daughters, against what might be with Nina. But for Nabokov, as we have seen, things did not resolve so easily.

***The Gift***

Nabokov deliberately returned to “Spring in Fialta” when he sat down to write the fifth chapter of *The Gift* after the difficult summer of 1937.

The protagonist, Fyodor, heads out for his usual walk in the forest of the Grunewald in the summer sunshine while Zina, his love, who is modeled on Vera, is hard at work “in the stinking heat from the office.”[[61]](#footnote-61) He sees himself “in a new light” as he thinks of “the approach of complete happiness with Zina” (the following day will be the first time the couple will sleep together as they will have her apartment to themselves.)[[62]](#footnote-62) With these thoughts the text quietly shifts to the first person (like “Spring in Fialta”) and we see the world with Fyodor.

As Fyodor proceeds, Nabokov deals us the first allusion to “Spring in Fialta.” During their walk through town, Victor and Nina had passed “a half-built white villa, full of litter.”[[63]](#footnote-63) That villa was plastered with one of the circus posters that foreshadow her death. Fyodor also sees a small, partially built villa: “the sky was looking in through the gaps of future windows.” Its “unfinished white walls, […] had acquired the pensive cast of ruins, like the word “sometime,” which serves both the past and the future.”[[64]](#footnote-64) Just then, the past materializes in the form of a girl who bears “a particle of that fascination, both special and vague, which he found in many girls, but with particular fullness in Zina.”[[65]](#footnote-65) It is Irina. After she passes, he turns around and catches “her long familiar, golden, fugitive outline that promptly vanished forever.”[[66]](#footnote-66) But she evokes the same feeling of hopelessness that Victor described with respect to Nina in “Spring.” Fyodor suddenly feels “the impact of a hopeless desire, whose whole charm and richness was in its unquenchability.”[[67]](#footnote-67) Fyodor attempts to explain it. It is not simply that she is “my type”. It is “something beyond that;” beyond the “barricades (of words, of senses of the world)” to that place at infinity where “all the lines meet.”[[68]](#footnote-68) In other words, he’s unable to figure it out.

As Fyodor approaches the Gruenewald forest he makes a “mental jump back again: f3 to g1” –it is a jump backward by the chess knight to its starting place. [[69]](#footnote-69) Nabokov is going back to the start, to try again—to reconsider his life post the devastation wrought by the adventure with Irina. In a nod to the animal origins which influence our actions, he notes the changes in the forest since medieval days—the forest, “like us, in our own departure from hairy ancestors, [has] kept only a marginal vegetation”.[[70]](#footnote-70) If we are to understand passion, we must start with our animal origins, and bypass all the romantic, courtly mythology.

Fyodor notices a grasshopper, and admires its “bewitchingly divine” protective coloration--an “ingenious deception.”[[71]](#footnote-71) This leads him to recall a warning from his lost father, a naturalist who disappeared in a northern wilderness. No matter how closely and carefully we observe nature, “we must, in the very process of observation, beware of letting our reason—that garrulous dragoman who always runs ahead—prompt us with explanations which then begin imperceptibly to influence the very course of observation and distort it: thus the shadow of the instrument falls upon the truth.”[[72]](#footnote-72) Nabokov must keep this in mind in understanding the pursuit of Irina.

As we walk further into the woods with Fyodor (“Give me your hand, dear reader, and let’s go into the forest together”) he points out things we’d rather not see.[[73]](#footnote-73) “[A]ll kinds of junk: even a ragged mattress with rusty, broken springs; don’t disdain it,” he says.[[74]](#footnote-74) It will all serve you. As we shall see, Nabokov’s disaster with Irina will also serve his art.

Next he shows us a hole dug by “a young, slender-muzzled dog of wolf ancestry” who, it seems, defied his muzzling master and ran off, dug his own grave, and died, undoubtedly because it was unable to eat. But the dog lies folded into the hole in “a wonderfully graceful curve, paws to paws.”[[75]](#footnote-75)

We arrive at a scene of damage from a recent crash of a small airplane in the park. Fyodor tells us that a man “taking his girl out for a morning ride in the blue got overexuberant, lost control of his joystick, and plunged,” leaving “the imprint of the daring death.”[[76]](#footnote-76) Here is the fallen Icarus of “Spring.” Nabokov’s own overexuberance also prefigured disaster.[[77]](#footnote-77)

In a grove of oaks, Fyodor sees an Angle Wing butterfly and as it suddenly takes off and alights on his bare chest, the world begins to coalesce with the watery primeval world of Mallarme’s poem about the faun. Fyodor looks up at the summits of waving foliage and is reminded of “algae swaying in transparent water.” In his mind he bends so far backward as to see the grass behind “inexpressibly, primevally green [which seems] to be growing downward into empty, transparent light” and he experiences “something similar to what must strike a man who has flown to another planet […] especially when a family [Nabokov’s family?] out for a stroll went by upside down […] and a lobbed ball seemed to be falling—ever more slowly—into a dizzy abyss.”[[78]](#footnote-78) It is the vertigo, the emotional displacement of family love, caused by the affair.

Beyond a “coppice of young birches, freshly and childishly smelling of Russia” we arrive at his wild, secret retreat—his “primeval paradise.” Fyodor strips to the skin and lies down supine. “I felt myself an athlete, a Tarzan, an Adam, anything you like, only not a naked town-dweller.”[[79]](#footnote-79) He feels transformed by the sun which “licks” him “all over”: and gradually feels “moltenly transparent.” His identity begins to melt away: “My personal I, the one that wrote books, the one that loved words, colors, mental fireworks, Russia, chocolate and Zina—had somehow disintegrated and dissolved; after being made transparent by the strength of the light, it was now assimilated to the shimmering of the summer forest with its satiny pine needles and heavenly-green leaves, with its ants running over the transfigured, most radiant-hued wool of the laprobe, with its birds, smells, hot breath of nettles and spermy odor of the sun-warmed grass, with its blue sky where droned a high-flying plane, that seemed filmed over with blue dust, the blue essence of the firmament: the plane was bluish, as a fish is wet in water.”[[80]](#footnote-80) This climax, both mental and physical, gives us a glimpse of the enormous strength of sexual passion. He is as much a sexual being as the dreamer-- he is the dog with the wolf ancestry that won’t, can’t and shouldn’t be muzzled and tamed.

Suddenly, we are back in the third person. Fyodor sits up. “[O]ver the glistening black ringlets of his pubic hair a lost ant scrambled nervously.”[[81]](#footnote-81) For a while Fyodor walks around naked which gives him a feeling of “astonishing bliss.” Faunlike, Fyodor is “tantalized by the possibility of sylvan encounters, mythical abductions. He repeats Mallarme’s words--“*Le sanglot don’t j’etais encore ivre*”-- the faun’s complaint that the nymphs did not pity “the sob with which I was still drunk.”[[82]](#footnote-82) But if we look at the poem, we see that the faun was not too disturbed by the loss of the nymphs: “No matter! Others will lead me towards happiness.” Losing the nymphs is not important. “I go to see the shadow you have become,” says the faun, returning to his far more important art.

The faun selfishly faults the nymphs for having no pity for his desire, but Fyodor is a man and has a more complex world. No longer Adam before the fall, he now clothes himself in his bathing trunks. He has gone back to the primeval beginning, to get his bearings—like his father to find true north. Now he goes off to wander through the woods and around the lake. A seductively posed schoolgirl, a “lone nymph,” her bicycle nearby, is being watched by three “hunters.” Fyodor walks on. Earlier, as he left the house, before seeing the Zina and Irina-like girl, he had noticed a black hearse rolling out of a gate onto the street with a bicycle instead of a coffin in its interior. “Whose, why?” he had asked. [[83]](#footnote-83)The bicycle in a hearse is a perfect reminder of the death of childhood. Yet childhood is the fount of art, and Fyodor knows that although he is no longer the innocent Adam before the fall, one need not kill or muzzle the gifts of childhood.

The upside-down family with its child’s ball headed for an “abyss”, the bicycle in the hearse, the starvation of a muzzled dog who achieves a kind of art in its death, the physical freedom of nature, the sunshine (redolent of Irina), all relate to the problems raised by Fyodor’s change of status from bachelor to committed husband, and also Nabokov’s decision to give up his mistress to honor the love and artistic motivations of a wife he loves.

Fyodor’s thoughts, like the faun’s, now turn to his art. But Fyodor will find a human gift unknown to the faun. Fyodor comes upon a little creek, and goes for a swim. Time seems to stop. “Finally on the 28th of June around 3:00 P.M., he came out on the other shore.”[[84]](#footnote-84) After this purifying, baptismal bath, he is flooded with thoughts of the quiet suffering of a widowed friend, the mother of a young man who committed suicide in these woods. She had pitifully come to this very spot, prodding the vegetation in search of something to remind her of her son. He imagines her “lips trembling with sobs,” sobs much different from those of the faun. A caring supporter of the art community, she has moved away, and is all but forgotten. In a panic Fyodor wants to honor her, to “apply all this to himself, to his eternity, to his truth, so as to enable it to sprout up in a new way. There is a way—the only way.”[[85]](#footnote-85) Unlike the faun, Fyodor’s dedication to art will be married to a “piercing pity—for the tin box in a waste patch, for the cigarette card […]trampled in the mud, for the poor, stray word repeated by the kind-hearted, weak, loving creature who has just been scolded for nothing—for all the trash of life which by means of a momentary alchemic distillation” will be “turned into something valuable and eternal.”[[86]](#footnote-86) His art will soar in proportion to his ability to capture the emotion of pity –and its sister, remorse.[[87]](#footnote-87)

Fyodor now imagines he is having a conversation with a fellow poet and critic whom he respects. The critic admonishes Fyodor to retain seriousness in his art: “Sunlight is good to the degree that it heightens the value of shade.” But Fyodor understands that he must not darken his art with too much shadow, (too much guilt, for Nabokov) and this return home is drawn comically, as Fyodor makes his way back home wearing nothing but a swimsuit because his clothing have been stolen. But there is one last sideways nod to Irina on the last page of the book. As Fyodor and Zina lovingly make their way home, eager to begin their lives together, they pass a poodle, and hear its unclipped claws tapping on the flagstones.”[[88]](#footnote-88) Irina made her living as a poodle trimmer.

The heart of chapter five is not simply about fidelity, or an homage to the faithful love of Vera. It is more about looking hard in the watery mirror of life, seeing an unwelcomed reflection, and reaching a renewed vision for and commitment to his art, his gift, and to the only person who can help him with that art, Vera. It may also suggest the role played by Vera in stabilizing and reinvigorating Nabokov’s commitments after the affair. Nabokov’s next book will underscore the role that Vera plays in his life, and how much Nabokov would have regretted letting her go.

***The Real Life of Sebastian Knight—*Violets Galore**

Nabokov began writing *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (*RLSK*) by December 1938, a few months after finishing *The Gift.* Here he transforms the memory of Irina into the stock figure of the *femme fatale.* There is a tragic, heroic version of this figure --the fallen woman—such as Violetta of Verdi’s *La Traviata*, who sacrifices herself for the good of another. Nabokov had already used this figure in his 1926 *University Poem* about a student who abandons a regularly jilted town girl named Violet, suffering only fleeting pangs of pity.[[89]](#footnote-89) Violets were also associated with Nina in “Spring.” Indeed, the “Fialta” of the story is a combination of Yalta and *fialka,* Russian for the violet. But in *RLSK*, violets are mostly associated with the mother who abandon’s the hero, and, less so, with the predatory womanwho, like Carmen in Prosper Merimee’s book, leads him to ruin.[[90]](#footnote-90)

*RLSK* purports to be a biography of the late, famous English author, Sebastian Knight, whose life often mime’s Nabokov’s own. It is written by his admiring half-brother “V”, who tries to understand the tragic events that led up to his death. Sebastian had abandoned his true love, Clare, a heroic and true helpmeet, to pursue a woman of his mother’s type. After abandoning him and his father, the mother visited the child briefly, only once, leaving him with a bag of sugar coated violets and a broken heart. (Later we learn that she died in a *pension* named *Les Violettes*.)

As in the *noir* detective fiction of the day, V. sets out to discover the identity of this *femme fatale*, and eventually succeeds, by means of a hackneyed detective novel ploy. Her name, of course, is Nina—Nina Rechnoy.[[91]](#footnote-91) Appropriately for a parody of the *noir* genre, Nina is portrayed as totally captivating and totally *blasé* about the emotional destruction she leaves in her wake—which is reminiscent of the casual Nina of “Spring.” V. visits a number of women on his list of possible suspects. He rejects one candidate, a Jewish girl, saying “Girls of her type do not smash a man’s life—they build it.”[[92]](#footnote-92)

True blue Clare Bishop, whom Sebastian has run out on, has Vera’s attributes.[[93]](#footnote-93) “[S]he was one of those rare, very rare women who do not take the world for granted and who see everyday things not merely as familiar mirrors of their own femininity. She had imagination, the muscle of the soul [....] And finally she was blest with a keen sense of humour.”[[94]](#footnote-94) V. writes that Clare “understood so well (and that was her private miracle) every detail of Sebastian’s struggle.”[[95]](#footnote-95) The link between Vera’s truthful name and the brightness and clarity of “Clare” are self- evident. Less so is the fact that Vera Nabokov's maiden name, Slonim, comes from *Slon*, Russian for "elephant." The elephant was the predecessor of the bishop chess piece in medieval days. The name Sebastian Knight has an antecedent in the fifth chapter of *The Gift*. (Fyodor thinks of himself as a kind of knight who moves “f3 to g1”.)[[96]](#footnote-96) Rechnoy is Russian for river, and like the apparition of Irina in *The Gift*, she is part of a stream of any number of women who resemble the original model, in this case, the mother.[[97]](#footnote-97) To quote from one of Sebastian’s books regarding a romance, “The only real number is one, the rest are mere repetition.”[[98]](#footnote-98)

Unlike Victor, who suspected what life would be like with his Nina, Sebastian is a sucker for violets. Clare begins to sense his distancing from her when, on the way home from a medical spa, he spends an additional week in Paris, just as Nabokov had added a week in Paris to his 1936 trip.[[99]](#footnote-99) He stops talking to her, and their relationship ends. But the woman for whom he leaves Clare, cuckold’s him in short order.[[100]](#footnote-100) V. finds and interviews the man for whom she left Sebastian. He detests her, and has remarried. Exactly like Nabokov, he recalls thinking that she never existed, while his wife tells him it was a bad dream.[[101]](#footnote-101)

We are meant to learn Sebastian’s feelings about Clare and Nina from his novel, *Lost Property.* A love letter is found at the scene of an airplane crash. It is addressed to the woman who has been deserted by the writer, for another woman. He tells her that he is “desperately unhappy” with his new lover, but he was happy with her. But he also writes an analysis that is probably the closest thing we have to Nabokov’s own feelings. He tells her “it would be absurd of me to try and persuade you that you were the pure love, and that this other passion is but a comedy of the flesh. All is flesh and all is purity.” He loves her in a different way: “I have not stopped loving you, but because I cannot go on kissing your dim dear face, we must part, we must part.” Love insists on exclusiveness: “One may have a thousand friends, but only one love-mate.” How many wives would accept this kind of love? Vera did. As Zina says in *The Gift* : “A ‘kind of’ [love] is not enough. You know at times I shall probably be wildly unhappy with you. But on the whole it does not matter. I’m ready to face it.”[[102]](#footnote-102)

After a few years living alone, Sebastian dies of a heart ailment in 1936.[[103]](#footnote-103) As for Clare, not only is she plunged into despair when Sebastian walks out on her, her marriage to another man is not blessed. She dies in childbirth delivering a stillborn child, a shocking turn of events in this frequently comic novel that hits the reader forcibly. It is the deadliest kind of delivery—like an arrow straight to the heart, and it becomes one of Nabokov’s key signature devices, especially in *Lolita*, whose heroine suffers an identical fate.

***Lolita***

*Lolita* was written many years after the affair with Irina, and one would think that its connection is tenuous. However, Irina Guadanini, herself, “On reading the first half of Lolita …reported that it was all about her and America.”[[104]](#footnote-104) Was she on to something?

Like Irina, Lolita has lost her father and she lives alone with her widowed mother. Lolita is fun and slightly naughty, and at least one witness has described Irina in similar terms. The connections are more significant when we turn to Humbert Humbert. From the moment he meets Lolita, HH describes his love for her with the same key term used by Victor in “Spring”, and by Fyodor about the apparition of Irina in *The Gift*: “hopeless.” In fact HH uses it fourteen times, and even after he gains possession of her.

Humbert’s crime is a double one—he violated both Lolita and her mother, and as the book progresses, he begins to feels remorse on both counts, but love makes him feel the most remorse for his treatment of Lolita. HH rightly refuses to justify his crimes. In his confession (which is both an attempt to explain what he has done, and an act of self-condemnation) HH points to both nurture and nature. During adolescence he was in love with a girl who died of typhoid. As a result, his sexuality became imprinted on nymphets. He cannot become aroused by more mature women. HH is also cursed with overwhelming passion, or conversely, a weak will. His sexual passion for Lolita is so strong that he cannot contain it. He does not possess love, he is by love possessed, and he describes it as a kind of an enchantment. It is “*beyond happiness*. For there is no other bliss on earth comparable.”[[105]](#footnote-105) Nabokov may have felt that way with Irina.

Once Lolita makes her escape, the book changes dramatically. His pain at her loss leads him to self-discovery, and remorse. “Dying, dying, Lolita Haze,/Of hate and remorse I am dying.”[[106]](#footnote-106)

The *Carmen* theme is invoked throughout *Lolita*, but not with the humor of *RLSK*. HH calls Lolita “Carmen” and “Carmencita” throughout.[[107]](#footnote-107) Near the end of the book, when he finds her married, worn out at 17, pregnant, impoverished, and with “only the faint violet whiff and dead leaf echo of the nymphet,” he tearfully begs her to return, all the while remembering Don Jose’s lines begging Carmen to return to him. It is the moment in the book when HH experiences a “moral apotheosis.”[[108]](#footnote-108) All masks are dropped, and he realizes what he’s done and that he is beyond redemption.

Rejecting the balm of religious forgiveness, he says: “Unless it can be proven to me—to me as I am now, today, with my heart, and my beard, and my putrefaction—that in the infinite run, it does not matter a jot that a North American girl-child named Dolores Haze had been deprived of her childhood by a maniac, unless this can be proven (and if it can, then life is a joke), I see nothing for the treatment of my misery but the melancholy and very local palliative of articulate art.”[[109]](#footnote-109)

Only a small part of such guilt and remorse can have arisen from the events of 1937. An extramarital affair is not of the same moral turpitude as the repeated rape of a child. HH compares his crime to that of “the tenth or twentieth soldier in the raping queue who throws the girls shawl over her white face so as not to see those impossible eyes while taking his military pleasure in the sad, sacked town.” While writing *Lolita*, Nabokov was simultaneously writing *Pnin.* We are reminded of gentleTimofey Pnin’s week end in the country, and his recollection of his young Jewish sweetheart. “And since the exact form of her death had not been recorded, Mira kept dying a great number of deaths in one’s mind, and undergoing a great number of resurrections, only to die again and again, led away by a trained nurse, inoculated with filth, tetanus bacilli, broken glass, gassed in a sham shower bath with prussic acid, burned alive in a pit on a gasoline-soaked pile of beechwood.”[[110]](#footnote-110) Pnin knows that “if one were quite sincere with oneself, no conscience and hence no consciousness, could be expected to subsist in a world where such things as Mira’s death could be possible. One had to forget […]”[[111]](#footnote-111) (But we know Pnin will never forget.) There is some justice in the fact that HH cannot forget his crime. And there is more than a little justice in the fact that Nabokov refused to let the world forget such crimes.

Irina Guadanini may have correctly sensed a whiff of her violet presence in HH’s passion for Lolita in the first half of that book. But the terrible pity of the final half, transformed into Humbert’s remorse, has more to do with the horrible crimes of that era. [[112]](#footnote-112)

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1. Boyd, p. 141. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Ibid.,* p. 433. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *LTV*, Letter of February 10, 1936, p.254 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *LTV*, p.250, February 6, 1936, also p. 244, February 3, 1936. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *LTV,* February 16, 1936. Nabokov, who regularly wrote every day or every other day, allowed a three day gap (February 10 -13) and then another three day gap (February 13-16) between letters. The February at letter is merely one paragraph long, very unusual for him. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *LTV*, p.266. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *LTV*, p.267. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Schiff, p. 78. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *LTV*, p. 281, January 25, 1937. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *LTV*, p. 286, Feb 1, 1937. He implies that Ilya Fondaminsky had been with them, but it is ambiguous. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. *LTV,* p. 292, 291. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. *LTV*, p.293. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. *LTV*, p. 297. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. *Ibid*. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. *LTV,* p. 319, March 10, 1937. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. *LTV*, P. 324, March 15, 1937. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. L*TV*, p. 329, March 20, 1937. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. *LTV*, p. 344, April 7, 1937. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Schiff, p.86. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Boyd, p.438. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. The letters are privately held, but have been seen by Brian Boyd, Stacy Schiff, and, apparently, Andrew Field. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Schiff, p. 89. Schiff adds that “[h]e wrote of preordained compatability; he marveled over the commonality of their impressions; he felt his lover’s handling of him flawless.” [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Schiff, p. 87. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Schiff, p. 87, Boyd, p. 438. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Schiff, p. 88. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Schiff, p. 87. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Schiff, p. 87. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Schiff, p. 88. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Schiff, p. 89. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Boyd: p.440. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Schiff, p. 85. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Schiff, p. 85, July 15, 1937 letter. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Schiff, p. 89. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Schiff, p. 85, July 28, letter. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Schiff, p. 89. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Schiff, p. 89, August 2 letter. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Boyd, p. 441, August 7, 1937 letter. Also Schiff, p. 90. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. For example, there is the often quoted paragraph in *Speak Memory*, p.139 that begins "I confess I do not believe in time.” [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Schiff, p. 90. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. The visit is described somewhat differently by Schiff and Boyd. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Boyd, p.443, footnote 48. Guadanini’s novel is *The Tunnel*, by Aletrus [Irina Guadanini], *Sovremennik 3* (1961). [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. “Spring in Fialta”, p.411. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. *Ibid.,* p. 410. The confused description of his physical relation to his family demonstrates his own confusion about them. Nabokov often referred to himself as Victor when writing to Vera. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. As the parade passes with its trumpets and zithers, Nabokov gives four year old Dimitri a special gift: “behind them by special permission a tourist’s small son in a sailor suit sat reverently on a tiny pony.” *Ibid*., p.424 . [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. *Ibid*., p. 411. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. *Ibid*., p. 419. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. *Ibid.,* p. 412. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. *Ibid.,* p. 410. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. *Ibid.,* p 421 [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. *Ibid*. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. *Ibid*., p. 414. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. They say that are getting married, you know that I am going to die. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. *Ibid.* p.415. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. *Ibid.,* p. 421 [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. *Ibid*. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. *Ibid*. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. *Ibid*., p. 421 [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. *Ibid. p. 425.* [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. *Ibid.* [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. *Ibid.* [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. *The Gift*, p. 339. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. *Ibid.,* p. 339. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. “Spring in Fialta”, p.422. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. *The Gift,* p. 341. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. *Ibid.* [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. *Ibid*. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. *Ibid*. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. *Ibid.* [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. *Ibid*., p.342. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. *Ibid.* [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. *Ibid.* [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. *Ibid.,* p. 342-343. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. *Ibid.,* p. 343. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. *Ibid.* [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. *Ibid.* [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. *Ibid.* [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. Nabokov uses the crashed airplane again in *RLSK,* p. 112. [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. *The Gift,* p. 344. [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
79. *Ibid*., p.345. [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
80. *Ibid.* pp.345-46. [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
81. Unlike the creative grasshopper, this practical ant is uncomfortable in such feral surroundings. [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
82. *Ibid.,* p. 347. [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
83. *Ibid.,* p. 340. [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
84. The only thing of significance I could find for this date was Vera’s father’s death on June 28, 1928. [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
85. *Ibid*., p. 349. [↑](#footnote-ref-85)
86. *Ibid.,* p.176. [↑](#footnote-ref-86)
87. Boyd at p. 74 quotes Nabokov: “Beauty plus pity—that is the closest we can get to a definition of art.” Fn 30 [referring to *Lectures on Literature*, p.251]. [↑](#footnote-ref-87)
88. *Ibid.,* p.378. [↑](#footnote-ref-88)
89. *Selected Poems*, p. 26. [↑](#footnote-ref-89)
90. *E.g.* Note the pun of Darn Hose. [↑](#footnote-ref-90)
91. Nee Nina Toorovetz. [↑](#footnote-ref-91)
92. *RLSK*, p. 137. [↑](#footnote-ref-92)
93. For their linkages between Clare and Vera see Boyd, p. 496 and Schiff, p. 99. [↑](#footnote-ref-93)
94. *RLSK*, p. 83. [↑](#footnote-ref-94)
95. *RLSK* 84, 87. Indeed, Schiff notes at p. 82 that on the May 8, 1937 the anniversary of their meeting, Vera had written a poem—“helpmeet on the poetic path.” [↑](#footnote-ref-95)
96. The name Sebastian may recalls the saint who, after being nursed back to health by the adoring St. Irena, leaves her. Why Clare Quilty should bear this noble first name is anybody’s guess. [↑](#footnote-ref-96)
97. At *RLSK* p. 137, V. comes across a reference to Sebastian’s very first love, whom he takes out on a boat on the river near their country home. At p. 139 he mentions another girl whom Sebastian took boating at Cambridge. The first instance is echoed in *Speak Memory,* the second by the *University Poem*. [↑](#footnote-ref-97)
98. *RLSK*, p. 105. [↑](#footnote-ref-98)
99. *Ibid.,* p. 107. [↑](#footnote-ref-99)
100. *Ibid.,* p. 146. [↑](#footnote-ref-100)
101. As in Nabokov’s letter to Irina of July 28, 1937 according to Schiff, p. 89. [↑](#footnote-ref-101)
102. The Gift, p. 377. [↑](#footnote-ref-102)
103. Brian Boyd points out that this is the year Nabokov met Irina. [↑](#footnote-ref-103)
104. Schiff, p.162. [↑](#footnote-ref-104)
105. *Lolita*, p. 166. [↑](#footnote-ref-105)
106. *Ibid*., p.255. [↑](#footnote-ref-106)
107. See also Alfred Appel Jr.’s note, *Lolita*, p. 358-59, regarding 45/3. [↑](#footnote-ref-107)
108. *Ibid.,* p. 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-108)
109. *Ibid.,* 283. [↑](#footnote-ref-109)
110. *Pnin,* 113. [↑](#footnote-ref-110)
111. *Pnin,* 112 [↑](#footnote-ref-111)
112. Those crimes became personal with the murders of Ilya Fondaminsky, a Jew, and Nabokov’s brother Sergei, a homosexual. [↑](#footnote-ref-112)