

PLAYBOY

ENTERTAINMENT FOR

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GALA
CHRISTMAS
ISSUE

HO! HO! HO!
CHELSEA
HANDLER
SCREWS UP A
XMAS PARTY

BOOGIE NIGHTS!
JOANNA
KRUPA
DANCES WITH
THE STARS

WORLD EXCLUSIVE
VLADIMIR
NABOKOV
THE ORIGINAL
OF LAURA

R. CRUMB
SLAYS THE BOOK
OF GENESIS

GORE
VIDAL
BROTHERS
IN ARMS

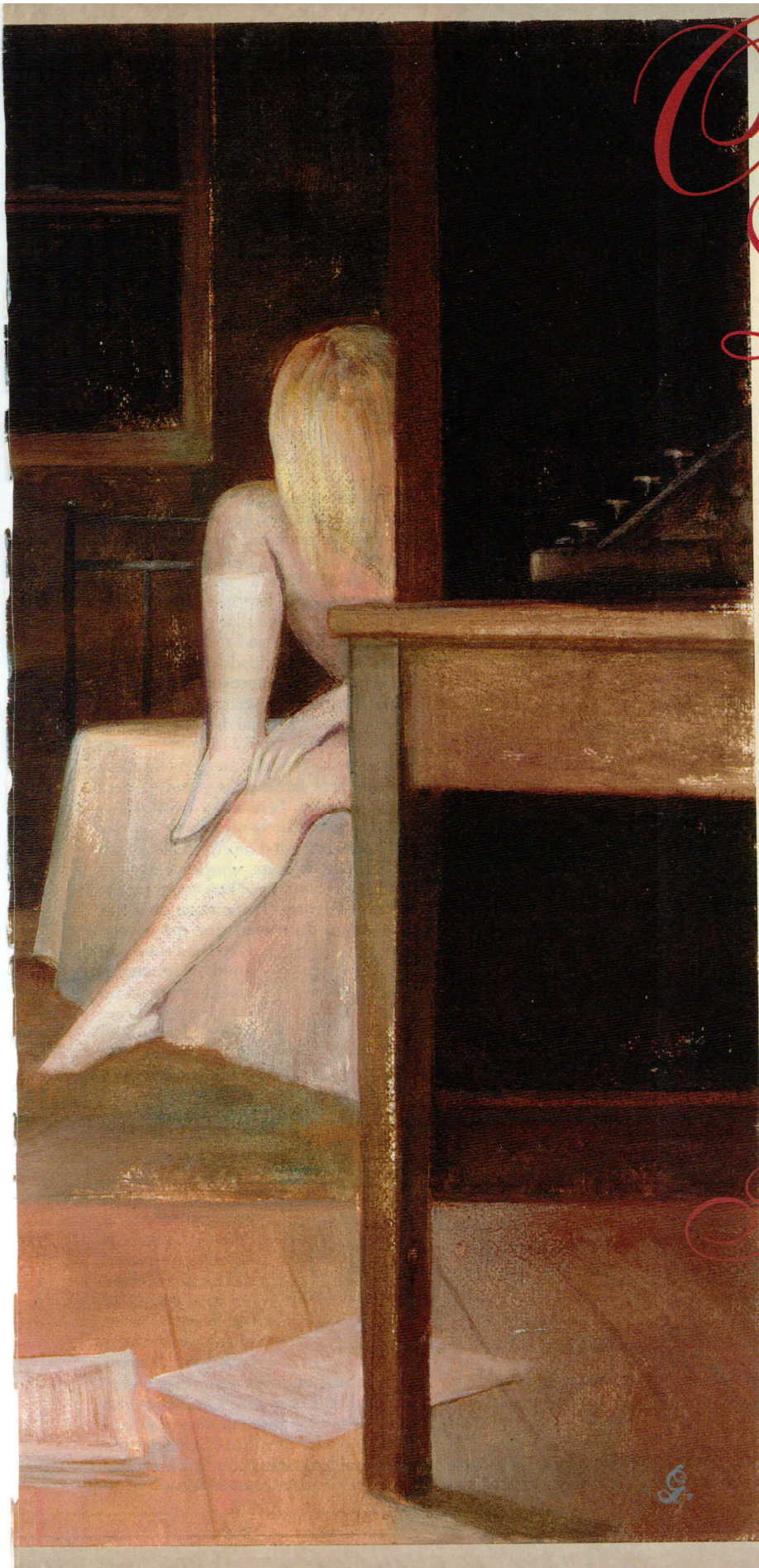
SASHA
GREY
UNLEASHES HER
INNER LOLITA

RAMPAGE
JACKSON
IS READY TO
RUMBLE

THE
INTERVIEW **JAMES**
CAMERON

GLENN
BECK
TAKEDOWN BY
THOMAS
FRANK





the
ORIGINAL
of
L A U R A
by
Vladimir Nabokov

**The Final
Work by
the Modern
Era's Most
Ingenious
Writer**

For 32 years the heirs of Vladimir Nabokov safeguarded the literary giant's last novel in a vault in Switzerland while they wrestled with his request to destroy the unfinished manuscript. The decision was ultimately left to son Dmitri and deferred till now: This month Alfred A. Knopf will publish *The Original of Laura* (or *Dying Is Fun*), an event for readers the world over. *PLAYBOY* is proud to publish an exclusive excerpt and introduce another of Nabokov's mystifying and mythic heroines, *Flora*, the subject of a novel within the novel.

*F*lora's] husband...was a writer...—at least, after a fashion. Fat men beat their wives, it is said, and he certainly looked fierce when he caught her riffling through his papers. He pretended to slam down a marble paperweight and crush this weak little hand (displaying the little hand in febrile motion). Actually she was searching for a silly business letter—and not in the least trying to decipher his mysterious manuscript. Oh no, it was not a work of fiction which one dashes off, you know, to make money; it was a mad neurologist's testament, a kind of *Poisonous Opus*.... It had cost him, and would still cost him, years of toil, but the thing was, of course, an absolute

ILLUSTRATION BY GÉRARD DUBOIS

THE ORIGINS OF LAURA

Nabokov's 18th novel began, we can assume, as his other works did, with his particular and powerful alchemy. He started writing it in 1975 and persisted while hospitalized the few months before his death in 1977. He relied on his signature creative approach (the note cards included here are testament to that), but the book was never finished. In this event, he asked that the draft be destroyed. That we are able to publish a portion of it today is a privilege and a relief to admirers, biographers and readers of every stripe, but that it would survive was never a certainty.

Rarely has an author's dying request been so contested and concerned so many. Since the manuscript's existence became known, wife Véra Nabokov and son Dmitri have been subject to pleas and pieces in the press debating the matter. Among those leading the charge to preserve the novel was journalist Ron Rosenbaum. In a 2005 column in *The New York Observer* he describes "a terrible literary tragedy in the making"; in 2008 he is more conversant in all sides of the issue, querying on the one hand, "Does it matter what V.N. would feel, since he's long dead?" And on the other, "Do we owe no respect to his last wishes because we greedily want some 'key' to his work...? Does the greatness



of an artist diminish his right to dispose of his own unfinished work?" Véra was never able to answer these questions in her lifetime and left them to her son. As recently as 2005, at the age of 75, the opera singer, writer and translator of his father's work let it be known that he was prepared to fulfill his father's wishes. But, as he writes in his introduction to the forthcoming *The Original of Laura*, he first had to open the precious index-card box: "I needed to traverse a stifling barrier of pain before touching the cards he had lovingly arranged and shuffled. After several tries... I first read what, despite its incompleteness, was unprecedented in structure and style, written in a new 'softest of tongues' that English had become for Nabokov. I attacked the task of ordering and preparing, and then dictating, a preliminary transcript.... *Laura* lived on in a penumbra.... Very gradually I became accustomed to this disturbing specter that seemed to be living a simultaneous twin life of its own in the stillness of a strongbox and the meanders of my mind. I could no longer even think of burning *Laura*."

his landscapes, either unsold or loaned to him by kind friends and ignorant institutions—pictures that were said to be the glory of Russia, the pride of the people. How many times art albums had reproduced those meticulous masterpieces—clearings in pine woods, with a bear cub or two, and brown brooks between thawing snow-banks, and the vastness of purple heaths!

Native "decadents" had been calling them "calendar tripe" for the last three decades; yet Linde had always had an army of stout admirers; mighty few of them turned up at his exhibitions in America. Very soon a number of inconsolable oils found themselves being shipped back to Moscow, while another batch moped in rented flats before tramping up to the attic or creeping down to the market stall.

What can be sadder than a discouraged artist dying not from his own commonplace maladies, but from the cancer of oblivion invading his once famous pictures such as "April in Yalta" or "The Old Bridge"? Let us not dwell on the choice of the wrong place of exile. Let us not linger at that pitiful bedside.

His son Adam Lind (he dropped the last letter on the tacit advice of a misprint in a catalogue) was more successful. By the age of thirty he had become a fashionable photographer. He married the ballerina Lanskaya, a delightful dancer, though with something fragile and gauche about her that kept her teetering on a narrow ledge between benevolent recognition and the rave reviews of nonentities. Her first lovers belonged mostly to the Union of Property Movers, simple fellows of Polish extraction; but Flora was probably Adam's daughter. Three years after her birth Adam discovered that the boy he

loved had strangled another, unattainable, boy whom he loved even more. Adam Lind had always had an inclination for trick photography and this time, before shooting himself in a Montecarlo hotel (on the night, sad to relate, of his wife's very real success in Piker's *Narcisse et Narcette*), he geared and focused his camera in a corner of the drawing room so as to record the event from different

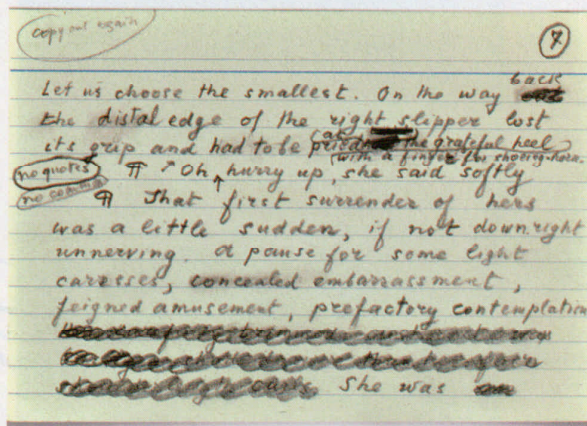
angles. These automatic pictures of his last moments and of a table's lion-paws did not come out too well; but his widow easily sold them for the price of a flat in Paris to the local magazine *Pitch*, which specialized in soccer and diabolical *faits-divers*.

secret. If she mentioned it at all, she added, it was because she was drunk.

She was an extravagantly slender girl. Her ribs showed. The conspicuous knobs of her hipbones framed a hollowed abdomen so flat as to belie the notion of "belly." Her exquisite bone structure immediately slipped into a novel—became in fact the secret structure of that novel, besides supporting a number of poems. The cup-sized breasts of that twenty-four-year-old impatient beauty seemed a dozen years younger than she, with those pale squinty nipples and firm form.

Her frail, docile frame when turned over by hand revealed new marvels—the mobile omoplates of a child being tubbed, the incurvation of a ballerina's spine, narrow nates of an ambiguous irresistible charm (nature's beastliest bluff, said Paul de C watching a dour old don watching boys bathing).

Only by identifying her with an unwritten, half-written, rewritten difficult book could one hope to render at last what contemporary descriptions of intercourse so seldom convey, because newborn and thus generalized, in the sense of primitive organisms of art as opposed to the personal achievement of great English poets dealing with an evening in the country, a bit of sky in a river, the nostalgia of remote sounds—things utterly beyond the reach of Homer or Horace.



INDEX CARD #7, CHAPTER ONE: THE FITS AND STARTS OF A FIRST DRAFT.

[Flora's] grandfather, the painter Lev Linde, emigrated in 1920 from Moscow to New York with his wife Eva and his son Adam. He also brought over a large collection of

With her little daughter, an English governess, a Russian nanny and a cosmopolitan lover, she settled in Paris, then moved to Florence, sojourned in London and returned to France. Her art was not strong enough to survive the loss of good looks as well as a certain worsening flaw in her pretty but too prominent right omoplate, and by the age of forty or so we find her reduced to giving dancing lessons at a not quite first-rate school in Paris.

SHE WAS OFTEN ALONE IN THE HOUSE WITH MR. HUBERT, WHO CONSTANTLY "PROWLED" AROUND HER.

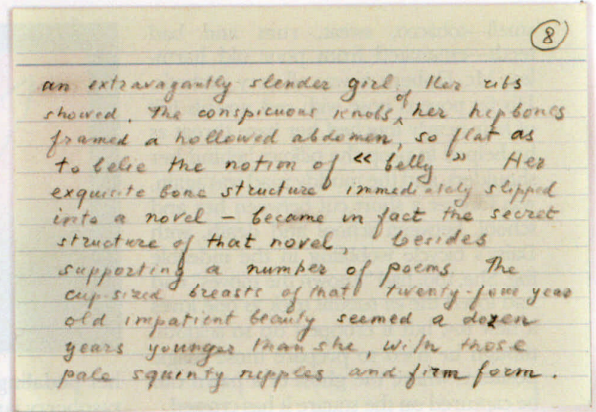
Her glamorous lovers were now replaced by an elderly but still vigorous Englishman who sought abroad a refuge from taxes and a convenient place to conduct his not quite legal transactions in the traffic of wines. He was what used to be termed a *charmeur*. His name, no doubt assumed, was Hubert H. Hubert.

Flora, a lovely child, as she said herself with a slight shake (dreamy? Incredulous?) of her head every time she spoke of those prepubescent years, had a gray home life marked by ill health, and boredom. Only some very expensive, super-Oriental doctor with long gentle fingers could have analyzed her nightly dreams of erotic torture in so-called "labs," major and minor laboratories with red curtains. She did not remember her father and rather disliked her mother. She was often alone in the house with Mr. Hubert, who constantly "prowled" (*rôdaît*) around her, humming a monotonous tune and sort of mesmerizing her, enveloping her, so to speak, in some sticky invisible substance and coming closer and closer no matter what way she turned. For instance she did not dare to let her arms hang aimlessly lest her knuckles came into contact with some horrible part of that kindly but smelly and "pushing" old male.

He told her stories about his sad life, he told her about his daughter who was just like her, same age—twelve—same eyelashes—darker than the dark blue of the iris, same hair, blondish or rather palomino, and so silky—if he could be allowed to stroke it, or *l'effleurer des lèvres*, like this, that's all, thank you. Poor Daisy had been crushed to death by a backing lorry on a country road—short cut home from school—through a muddy construction site—abominable tragedy—her mother died of a broken heart. Mr. Hubert sat on Flora's bed and nodded his bald head acknowledging all the offences of life, and wiped his eyes with a violet handkerchief which turned orange—a little parlor trick—when he stuffed it back into his

heart-pocket, and continued to nod as he tried to adjust his thick outsole to a pattern of the carpet. He looked now like a not too successful conjuror paid to tell fairy tales to a sleepy child at bedtime, but he sat a little too close. Flora wore a nightgown with short sleeves copied from that of the Montglas de Sancerre girl, a very sweet and depraved schoolmate, who taught her where to kick an enterprising gentleman.

A week or so later Flora happened to be laid up with a chest cold. The mercury went up to 38° in the late afternoon and she complained of a dull buzz in the temples. Mrs. Lind cursed the old housemaid for buying asparagus instead of aspirin and hurried to the pharmacy herself. Mr. Hubert had brought his pet a thoughtful present: a miniature chess set ("she knew the moves") with tickly-looking little holes bored in the squares to admit and grip the red and white pieces; the pin-sized pawns penetrated easily, but the slightly larger noblemen had to be forced in with an enervating joggle. The pharmacy was perhaps closed and she had to go to the one next to the church or else she had met some friend of hers in the street and would never return. A fourfold



INDEX CARD #8, CHAPTER ONE: NABOKOV CONCEIVES FLORA'S APPEARANCE. FABER PENCILS USED BY NABOKOV TO WRITE ADA.



Dear Mr. Hefner

TO: HUGH M. HEFNER

CC, 1 p.

TO: HUGH M. HEFNER

CC, 1 p.

Montreux, Palace Hotel
 January 27, 1967

Montreux Palace Hotel
 Montreux, Switzerland
 December 28, 1968

Dear Mr. Hefner,
 After receiving your bonus I now receive your prize.* I want to tell you how very much touched I am.

Dear Mr. Hefner,
 I wish to thank you, Mr. Sectorsky and *The Playboy* for your letter, charming cards and gifts and the bonus.

This is the first time that any magazine—or in fact any kind of publication—has awarded me a prize. But then *PLAYBOY* can be always depended upon to provide brilliant surprises.

It pleases me very much to know that "One Summer in Ardis"* (an excellent title suggested by Mr. Macauley) will appear in *PLAYBOY*.

Cordially,
 Vladimir Nabokov

Have you ever noticed how the head and ears of your Bunny resemble a butterfly in shape, with an eyespot on one hindwing?

* The editors of *PLAYBOY* had awarded the \$1,000 Best Fiction Award for 1966 to *Despair*.

Happy New Year.

Yours sincerely,
 Vladimir Nabokov

* Excerpt from *Ada*.



THE NOVELS THE EYE AND DESPAIR RAN IN INSTALLMENTS IN OUR PAGES FROM 1965 THROUGH 1966.



PLAYBOY WAS THE FIRST TO EXCERPT ADA, OR ADOA: A FAMILY CHRONICLE, IN APRIL 1969.

smell—tobacco, sweat, rum and bad teeth—emanated from poor old harmless Mr. Hubert; it was all very pathetic. His fat porous nose with red nostrils full of hair nearly touched her bare throat as he helped to prop the pillows behind her shoulders, and the muddy road was again, was forever a short cut between her and school, between school and death, with Daisy's bicycle wobbling in the indelible fog. She, too, had "known the moves" and had loved the *en passant* trick as one loves a new toy, but it cropped up so seldom, though he tried to prepare those magic positions where the ghost of a pawn can be captured on the square it has crossed.

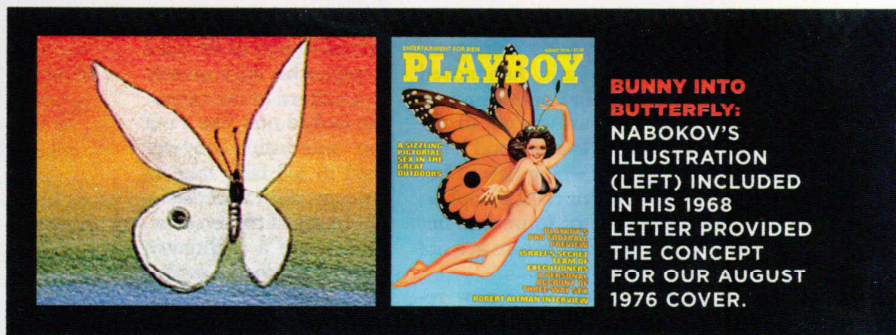
Fever, however, turns games of skill into the stuff of nightmares. After a few minutes of play Flora grew tired of it, put a rook in her mouth, ejected it, clowning dully. She pushed the board away and Mr. Hubert carefully removed it to the chair that supported the tea things. Then, with a father's sudden concern, he said "I'm afraid you are chilly, my love," and plunging a hand under the bedclothes from his vantage point at the footboard, he felt her shins.

Flora uttered a yelp and then a few screams. Freeing themselves from the tumbled sheets



scents—which you had enjoyed for more than 30 years—to both acclaim and abuse as the world-renowned author of a sensational best-seller. In the aftermath of this cause célèbre, do you ever regret having written *Lolita*?

NABOKOV: On the contrary, I shudder retrospectively when I recall that there was a moment, in 1950 and again in 1951, when I was on the point of burning Humbert Humbert's little black diary. No, I shall never regret *Lolita*. She was like the composition of a beautiful puzzle—its composition and its solution



BUNNY INTO BUTTERFLY: NABOKOV'S ILLUSTRATION (LEFT) INCLUDED IN HIS 1968 LETTER PROVIDED THE CONCEPT FOR OUR AUGUST 1976 COVER.

her pedaling legs hit him in the crotch. As he lurched aside, the teapot, a saucer of raspberry jam and several tiny chessmen joined in the silly fray. Mrs. Lind, who had just returned and was sampling some grapes she had bought, heard the screams and the crash and arrived at a dancer's run. She soothed the absolutely furious, deeply insulted Mr. Hubert before scolding her daughter. He was a dear man, and his life lay in ruins all around him. He wanted [her] to marry him, saying she was the image of the young actress who had been his wife, and indeed to judge by the photographs she, Madame Lanskaya, did resemble poor Daisy's mother.

There is little to add about the incidental but not unattractive Mr. Hubert H. Hubert. He lodged for another happy year in that cosy house and died of a stroke in a hotel lift after a business dinner. Going up, one would like to surmise.

Flora was barely fourteen when she lost her virginity to a coeval, a handsome ballboy at the Carlton Courts in Cannes. Three or four broken porch steps—which was all that remained of an ornate public toilet or some ancient temple—smothered in mints and campanulas and surrounded by junipers, formed the site of a duty she had resolved to perform rather than a casual pleasure she was now learning to taste. She observed with quiet interest the difficulty Jules had of drawing a junior-size sheath over an organ that looked abnormally stout and at full erection had a head (concluded on page 164)

SPEAK, NABOKOV

IN 1964 THE AUTHOR, NOTORIOUSLY PUBLICITY AVERSE, GRANTED A RARE INTERVIEW TO *PLAYBOY*. IN THE SELECTIONS BELOW HE DESCRIBES HOW HE NEARLY CONSIGNED HIS MOST POPULAR (AND DERIDED) NOVEL TO FLAMES AND DETAILS THE IDIOSYNCRASIES OF HIS CREATIVE PROCESS

PLAYBOY: With the American publication of *Lolita* in 1958, your fame and fortune mushroomed almost overnight from high repute among the literary cognoscenti

at the same time, since one is a mirror view of the other, depending on the way you look. Of course she completely eclipsed my other works—at least those I wrote in English: *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, *Bend Sinister*, my short stories, my book of recollections; but I cannot grudge her this. There is a queer, tender charm about that mythical nymphet.

PLAYBOY: Can you tell us something about the actual creative process involved in the germination of a book?

NABOKOV: After the first shock of recognition—a sudden sense of "this is what I'm going to write"—the novel starts to breed by itself. The process goes on solely in the mind, not on paper, and to be aware of the stage it has reached at any given moment, I do not have to be conscious of every exact phrase. I feel a kind of gentle development, an uncurling inside, and I know that the details are there already, that in fact I would see them plainly if I looked closer... but I prefer to wait until what is loosely

called inspiration has completed the task for me. There comes a moment when I am informed from within that the entire structure is finished. All I have to do now is take it down in pencil or pen. Since this entire structure, dimly illuminated in one's mind, can be compared to a painting, and since you do not have to work gradually from left to right for its proper perception, I may direct my flashlight at any part or particle of the picture when setting it down in writing. I do not begin my novel at the beginning.... I pick out a bit here and a bit there, till I have filled all the gaps on paper. This is why I like writing my stories and novels on index cards, numbering them later when the whole set is complete. Every card is rewritten many times. About three cards make one type-written page, and when finally I feel that the conceived picture has been copied by me as faithfully as physically possible—a few vacant lots always remain, alas—then I dictate the novel to my wife, who types it out in triplicate.... Art is never simple.

LAURA

(continued from page 48)

turned somewhat askew as if wary of receiving a backhand slap at the decisive moment. Flora let Jules do everything he desired except kiss her on the mouth, and the only words said referred to the next assignment.

One evening after a hard day picking up and tossing balls and pattering in a crouch across court between the rallies of a long tournament, the poor boy, stinking more than usual, pleaded utter exhaustion and suggested going to a movie instead of making love; whereupon she walked away through the high heather and never saw Jules again—except when taking her tennis lessons with the stodgy old Basque in uncreased white trousers who had coached players in Odessa before World War One and still retained his effortless exquisite style.

Back in Paris Flora found new lovers. With a gifted youngster from the [Lanskaya] school and another eager, more or less interchangeable couple she would bicycle through the Blue Fountain Forest to a romantic refuge where a sparkle of broken glass or a lace-edged rag on the moss were the only signs of an earlier period of literature. A cloudless September maddened the crickets. The girls would compare the dimensions of their companions. Exchanges would be enjoyed with giggles and cries of surprise. Games of blindman's buff would be played in the buff. Sometimes a voyeur would be shaken out of a tree by the vigilant police.

This is Flora of the close-set dark-blue eyes and cruel mouth recollecting in her midtwenties fragments of her past, with details lost or put back in the wrong order, TAIL between DELTA and SLIT, on dusty dim shelves, this is she. Everything about her is bound to remain blurry, even her name, which seems to have been made expressly to have another one modeled upon it by a fantastically lucky artist. Of art, of love, of the difference between dreaming and waking she knew nothing but would have darted at you like a flatheaded blue serpent if you questioned her.

She returned with her mother and Mr. Fspensshade to Sutton, Mass., where she was born and now went to college in that town.

At eleven she had read *A quoi rêvent les enfants*, by a certain Dr. Freud, a madman.

The extracts came in a St. Leger d'Exuperse series of *Les [grands] représentants de notre époque*,

though why great representatives wrote so badly remained a mystery.

Mrs. Lanskaya died on the day her daughter graduated from Sutton College. A new fountain had just been bequeathed to its campus by a former student, the widow of a shah. Generally speaking, one should carefully preserve in transliteration the feminine ending of a Russian surname (such as *-ya*, instead of the masculine *-iy* or *-oy*) when the woman in question is an artistic celebrity. So let it be "Lanskaya"—land and sky and the melancholy echo of her dancing name. The fountain took quite a time to get correctly erected after an initial series of unevenly spaced spasms. The potentate had been potent till the absurd age of eighty. It was a very hot day with its blue somewhat veiled. A few photographers moved among the crowd, as indifferent to it as specters doing their spectral job. And certainly for no earthly reason does this passage resemble in rhythm another novel, *My Laura*, where the mother appears as "Maya Umanskaya," a fabricated film actress.

Anyway, she suddenly collapsed on the lawn in the middle of the beautiful ceremony. A remarkable picture commemorated the event in *File*. It showed Flora kneeling belatedly in the act of taking her mother's nonexistent pulse, and it also showed a man of great corpulence and fame, still unacquainted with Flora: he stood just behind her, head bared and bowed, staring at the white of her legs under her black gown and at the fair hair under her academic cap.

A brilliant neurologist, a renowned lecturer [and] a gentleman of independent means, Dr. Philip Wild had everything save an attractive exterior. However, one soon got over the shock of seeing that enormously fat creature mince toward the lectern on ridiculously small feet and of hearing the cock-a-doodle sound with which he cleared his throat before starting to enchant one with his wit. Laura disregarded the wit but was mesmerized by his fame and fortune.

Fans were back that summer—the summer she made up her mind that the eminent Philip Wild, PH, would marry her. She had just opened a *boutique d'éventails* with another Sutton coed and the Polish artist Rawitch, pronounced by some Raw Itch, by him Rah

Witch. Black fans and violet ones, fans like orange sunbursts, painted fans with clubtailed Chinese butterflies, oh they were a great hit, and one day Wild came and bought five (*five* spreading out her own fingers like pleats) for "two aunts and three nieces" who did not really exist, but never mind, it was an unusual extravagance on his part. His shyness surprised and amused FLaura [Flora].

Less amusing surprises awaited her. Today after three years of marriage she had [had] enough of his fortune and fame. He was a domestic miser. His New Jersey house was absurdly understaffed. The ranchito in Arizona had not been redecorated for years. The villa on the Riviera had no swimming pool and only one bathroom. When she started to change all that, he would emit a kind of mild creak or squeak, and his brown eyes brimmed with sudden tears.

She saw their travels in terms of adverts and a long talcum-white beach with the tropical breeze tossing the palms and her hair; he saw it in terms of forbidden foods, frittered-away time and ghastly expenses.

The novel *My Laura* was begun very soon after the end of the love affair it depicts, was completed in one year, published three months later and promptly torn apart by a book reviewer in a leading newspaper. It grimly survived and to the accompaniment of muffled grunts on the part of the librarians, its invisible hoisters, it wriggled up to the top of the bestsellers list then started to slip, but stopped at a midway step in the vertical ice. A dozen Sundays passed and one had the impression that *Laura* had somehow got stuck on the seventh step (the last respectable one) or that, perhaps, some anonymous agent working for the author was [buying] up every week just enough copies to keep *Laura* there; but a day came when the climber above lost his foothold and toppled down, [dislodging] number seven and eight and nine in a general collapse beyond any hope of recovery.

The "I" of the book is a neurotic and hesitant man of letters who destroys his mistress in the act of portraying her. Statically—if one can put it that way—the portrait is a faithful one. Such fixed details as her trick of opening her mouth when toweling her inguen or of closing her eyes when smelling an inodorous rose are absolutely true to the original.

