

## Lo. Lee. Ta.

Aubrey Roemmich

### **Runner-up for the 2022 John Little Fiction Scholarship**

The Creative Writing Scholarship Committee had this to say on Aubrey Roemmich's "Lo. Lee. Ta.": *"With her controlled use of multiple points of view, her deft hand at creating interiority, and her sharp dialogue, Aubrey Roemmich's story depicts in stark detail the consequences of texts, rhetoric, and language."*

I.

She's ushered in with the breeze. Her hair is windblown, and her cheeks are flushed a brilliant, innocent pink. She looks fresh and nymphlike while adjusting her tote bag over her right shoulder. She is the epitome of class dressed in tan wide-legged slacks, delicate low heels, and what appears to be a Michelangelo graphic tee tucked into her pants with a belt accentuating her slim waistline. She digs around in her bag before depositing it in an open chair. She grabs her wallet and approaches the barista and begins to order her coffee.

The man watching her from the corner with thick, round-framed glasses is too far away to hear what must be a delicate, and musical, voice. *Her shirt is a little basic, but she seems like the type to drink her coffee black*, the man thinks. He finds this revelation refreshing and appealing. He believes too many women these days are focused on luxury, especially luxury in food. *The hyper sugary drinks are making them all fat. Women should never exceed 120 pounds. They should be*

*small and dainty. All the internet discussion over “body positivity” is nonsense. There’s nothing positive about an ugly woman.*

He’s still watching her as she sits down with her drink and brings out a journal and novel. From his angle he can’t see what she’s reading, but he can see her slowly sip her coffee as she quickly works through the pages. Stopping every five minutes to make notes in her journal. *She needs to work on her posture. Her curved back is doing nothing for her breasts, and it grossly exposes her stomach rolls. She doesn’t look like she weighs much, but it would be much easier to hide her imperfections if she would sit up.*

The sunlight is gentle behind her. It softly lights her face, but also casts shadows over her furrowed brow and slight frown that indicates a deep concentration. The man rolls his eyes at her expression. *Women should always be smiling. Any other expression is simply unattractive. It’s a pity society no longer teaches women how to act properly, especially in public or in the view of men. She’s going to get premature wrinkles and be completely undesirable if she spends any more time frowning. There’s nothing that important in her little book that could cause that type of concentration.* The man chuckles as he imagines being so worked up over a woman’s novel. *She is no doubt reading about fashion or “female empowerment,”* he concludes.

She goes to take a sip, but soon realizes it’s empty. She sets the cup down before marking her page in the novel. She moves the black journal in front of her and writes continuously for the next twenty minutes. After a while her hand cramps and she sits back, flexing it several times. She looks around the coffee shop and makes eye contact with the man sitting in a corner. He leans back in his chair, with his legs spread to an extreme degree. Huffing and rolling her eyes at his overly masculine display, she stands to order another coffee.

After sitting back down with her second drink, the woman places the end of her pen between her lips. The man is completely infatuated with her mouth. *I wonder what else her beautiful mouth can do. It’s stupid of her to be chewing on her pen. She’s going to bite through the end and get covered in ink.* He shifts in his seat and thinks about what

else he could imagine dripping from her mouth. He looks around for the nearest napkin dispenser, preparing for the inevitable when he has to go save her.

*Women are always needing to be saved. They are completely incapable of functioning without a man and that's how it should be. Men are obviously superior in every aspect. Women are the secondary gender. They should be small, quiet, and submissive. Anything else is simply acting outside the natural order. All of these progressive women are going to ruin the world. They're misinformed, uneducated. They just need a strong hand to guide them. She seems moldable. With a little discipline I'm sure she would bend to the will of any man.*

The woman is unaware of the man watching her and drawing his conclusions about her existence. Little does she know that he has decided he wants her. He'll move slowly for her sake. He doesn't want to scare her off, but he has no intention of letting her leave until he has at least her number. Preferably, he would be leaving the coffee shop with her on his arm, but he's in no rush.

*This beautiful, mysterious woman will be the death of me. Or maybe if I'm lucky, I'll be the death of her.*

II.

"Lo. Lee. Ta? What could a beautiful nymphet like you possibly be doing reading such a large novel all alone?"

"Who says I'm here alone?"

"I've been watching you for quite some time and no one has even spoken to you."

"Fine, but being alone does not equate to loneliness. I assure you that, if I wanted, I could have all the company in the world. I purposely came to this coffee shop to not be disturbed."

"Are you always so catty? Don't you realize you owe men more respect than that?"

"I don't owe anyone anything, especially not intrusive men."

"Come on, sweetheart. Don't be like that. Just give me a smile and accept the compliment of my attention. There's no reason to resist my

company.”

“I’d prefer if you would leave me alone.”

“That’s not an option. We’re going to have a nice conversation about that fascinating little book you’re reading. Now what is it called?”

“*Lolita*. By Vladimir Nabokov.”

“I haven’t read it. Is it any good?”

“It’s adequately terrifying. I’d prefer if you leave now.”

“From now on, you should only paint your nails red. It’s a much sexier color and it keeps up your magical allure. That green color is for grandmas and ugly women.”

“Fortunately, my appearance is not dictated by obscene men, but rather my own preferences.”

“That must be why you have such a basic artist on your shirt.”

“Since you insist on bothering me, would you like to explain that ridiculous statement?”

“That art on your shirt is a piece by Michelangelo, obviously. Every basic white girl is obsessed with his work, especially because they believe it somehow makes them appear intelligent.”

“First, that’s an absurd generalization of women. They are capable of enjoying art just like everyone else, whether that’s simply because it is beautiful or for deeper purposes. Both of those are equally important endeavors. Second, Michelangelo is universally enjoyed. There’s no shame in liking something that is popular. It’s popular for a reason. It’s popular because it is amazing, awe-inspiring art, not because liking it makes one appear sophisticated. Finally, the piece on my shirt wasn’t even painted by Michelangelo. This piece is *Judith Slaying Holofernes*. It’s based off the story from the Bible where the brave Judith saved Israel from its enemies when the *men* were too cowardly. She beheaded the enemy’s leader in his tent. It was painted by one of the most influential and talented female artists of the Renaissance in 1612. Which if you were so educated about art history like you make yourself out to be you will remember that Michelangelo died in 1564. Therefore, these two people never met nor collaborated... ever.”

“You must think very highly of yourself, considering how much

you seem to know about literature and art. What are you trying to be a professor?"

"Actually, I already am a professor. I have degrees in literature and art. I'm also a published author who has guest lectured all over the world. So yes, I am in fact very knowledgeable in these fields as my livelihood depends on it."

"You wouldn't have to worry about a livelihood if you would let a man provide for you."

"A man like you? A man who is obviously small-minded, ignorant, and completely incapable of empathy?"

"I don't appreciate your tone. I came over here to have a nice conversation with a beautiful woman and damnit that's what I'm going to get."

"I would like you to leave now. I didn't want to talk to you originally and I especially don't want to talk to you now."

"One day someone will tame you and you will realize how much easier your life would be if you accepted your role, Lo. Lee. Ta."

III.

*Lo. Lee. Ta.*

Those words echo in her mind as she walk back to her office. The way he enunciated each syllable makes her skin crawl. It feels dark, ominous... evil. She spends the last few blocks looking over her shoulder to make sure that man wasn't following her. She has half a mind to call someone to come meet her just to feel safer. Despite it being broad daylight, she has no doubt the man with the thick, round framed glasses would attempt something. Regardless of the risk. Daylight no longer equates to safety for a lone woman.

Eventually, she reaches the university building that houses the English department. She lets herself in with the key faculty were given so they could access the building on the weekends. She quickly enters and pushes the door shut with all her strength. Once the door is locked, she finally takes a deep breath and lets herself relax. She ascends the stairs to the fourth floor, where her office is situated.

She loves her office. It's not overly large but she has an entire wall of windows and the remaining three walls are covered in bookshelves. It's comfortable and intimate. Her students enjoy the overstuffed armchairs she's collected over the years, and she enjoys her students visiting even if it's just to tell her about their morning coffee and the rain they got caught in on the way to class.

She sits down at her desk and takes a deep breath before rubbing her eyes a little too aggressively. She doesn't want to admit it, but the interaction in the coffee shop has shaken her. Her nerves feel raw, and she has the desire to scream at the universe for the stupidity of men. But the thing she can't seem to shake is how casually the man had mentioned *Lolita*. He claimed he had never read it, but he kept calling her a "nymphet." Even the way he spoke seemed reminiscent of the novel. How deeply were these misogynistic ideals embedded in our culture? More concerning is the fact that it comes from a book explicitly condemning the objectification of women and girls. Yet somehow "Lolita" and "nymphet" have made their way into everyday vocabulary.

The professor is perplexed by this. She's spent many years dodging overbearing men, but what were the chances that the most terrifying experience in her life was colored by the language of a character far too similar to the infamous Quilty? The language, the attitude, all of it made her feel like she was falling through a much darker and dangerous looking glass than Alice ever found herself in.

The professor sits down at her desk and unpacks her bag. As she sets her copy of *Lolita* on her desk, it falls open to page nine. Her own annotations recapture her attention. Picking up the book, she reads, "*Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, exhibit number one is what the seraphs, the misinformed, simple, noble-winged seraphs, envied. Look at this tangle of thorns.*"

...

*Look at this tangle of thorns. Look at this tangle of thorns. Look at this tangle of horns. Look... at this... tangle... of thorns. Thorns. Thorns. Tangle... of... thorns...*

...

“The relationship between Humbert and Lolita and the rest of the world was exactly as Humbert himself described it: ‘a tangle of thorns.’ So much so that this tangle of thorns is now so prevalent within our own society, our own vernacular that men and women alike throw around the vocabulary of depraved pedophiles to justify their own misogynistic tendencies. I usually do not like instituting a call to action in my presentations because I prefer my audience use their own critical analysis skills to form their opinions, but I am going to implore you all now to remember the name Lolita. Lo. Lee. Ta. It is not the name of forbidden love. It is not the name of a seductress. It is not the romanticization of child-grooming, abuse, and the destruction of lives. It is the name of a child, a victim. It is the name of a young girl who was failed by everyone in her life. Humbert does not deserve sympathy. Humbert does not deserve understanding. Never forget who Lolita is.

“Remember her name in honor of the little girls we once knew, the ones we know now, and all that will follow. The language of misogyny and objectification will only continue to normalize the predatory behavior all girls and women experience throughout their lives. Don’t let the tangle of thorns confuse you, the Lolita’s of the world are innocent.”

With that the professor steps away from the podium and the audience applauds. She feels proud of herself and her work. This presentation is the beginning of many she hopes to give on this topic around the world. What was supposed to be a routine academic article meant to be published and forgotten quickly had become her life’s passion.

As she leaves the lecture hall hours later, she notices a man with thick, round-framed glasses leering at her from his place, leaned against the wall. A deep, strangling fear clutches her chest. She walks quicker and tries to calm the panicked thrumming of her heart. It’s been months. There is no way that man is the same man from the coffee shop. She never told him her name.

*But I told him I was a professor of English and art. There’s only one large university. I shouldn’t be walking alone right now. I should have left with everyone else. Okay, just don’t panic. All you have to do is get*

*back to your office and you'll be safe. Then tomorrow you can go to the police and file for a restraining order. Everything will be okay.*

As she turns the corner onto the street where her beloved university office is located, she feels a large presence drag her into the alleyway. Immediately she struggles against the strong arms. Opening her mouth to scream, her head is slammed against the brick wall. Dizzy and disoriented, she tries to focus her eyes on the man in front of her. All she can discern is thick, round-framed glasses.

His hand clamps over her mouth and his breath is foul in her face. "It really is a beautiful tangle of thorns, Lo. Lee. Ta."

**Aubrey Roemmich** is currently a sophomore at UND. She is majoring in English and minoring in political science while working towards a certificate in creative writing and a certificate in writing and editing. She enjoys spending her time reading, writing, and going on walks.