

NOVEL 2: (TITLE TO COME)  
CHAPTER ONE - SMELL OF ART

*(Vancouver, April 1970)*

The ventilation system was acting up again tonight. The windows had been left shut all day because of the rain, and Room 303's eternal solvent smell was even stronger than usual. Even with a stuffy nose Leo could smell it, a dizzying brew of paint thinner, acetone, gesso, oil paint and other noxious vapours that presently approximated the atmosphere of Jupiter.

The smell of Art. It would give you a nasty headache if you weren't careful, and a queasy stomach. Just like some of the Art itself lying about this big, cluttered studio in which his sketch class convened each Thursday night.

For example: That disquieting assemblage to his left over by the windows giving on Hamilton Street, next to the articulated skeleton. Which, if you go take a close look, as Leo did before class tonight, you will find to be a big old 1950s vintage Philco console television set that some bourgeois-epatéing day-student has upholstered with rubber patches of startlingly lifelike imitation vomit, the sort you can buy over on Granville Street at Krak-A-Joke Novelties -- dozens of them, cut and trimmed and painstakingly fitted together into a sort of repellent patchwork cabinet cosy covering the console on four of its five visible sides, all except the big 24" screen, to which instead has been affixed a blurry, out-of-register photo-silkscreen of a South Vietnamese policeman blowing the brains out of a Viet Cong prisoner on a Saigon street with a snubnose .38 -- this superimposed upon another image, equally brutal, of the slaughtered villagers at My Lai.

Little American flags garnished the thing, and five life-size Day-glo-Orange plastic rats and dozens of calcified dogturds, snow-white and apparently authentic though possibly also Krak-A-Joke counterfeits.

A black banner festooned the rusty rabbit ears. Across it, stencilled in dripping crimson letters, a message or title: SICK AMERIKA DEATH BOX NO.4 (HOT DAM [sic.] VIETNAM).

Leo's eye kept returning to the thing all night, as tongue returns to an aching tooth, but at the moment his gaze was directed straight ahead to a low platform in the middle of the room beneath the skylights upon which, flanked by space heaters and encircled by sketchers, were posed tonight's models. Two of them, man and woman, their coldly fluoresced flesh steadfastly scrutinized from eighteen different angles by the eighteen constituents of 'Introduction to Drawing - B'.

Rain pelted down against the wire-gridded safety glass above their heads, and slanted into the tall windows lining the west side of the room, distorting the view outside into a semi-abstract cityscape of coloured lights streaked across a shining black field.

A joss stick burned at the edge of the platform. Nearby, an LP -- John Fahey solo guitar -- was spinning on the turntable of the portable record-player brought in each week by Melanie, their

instructress, a great believer in the power of music to unlock the creative potential within each and every last one of us.

Leo, hunched over a drafting table in the southwest corner, peered through his bangs at the female model, resisting an urge to look down at his sketch -- they had been asked to try not to -- as he struggled to coordinate the unsteady tracings of his 3B pencil with his visual journey round the perimeter of her slender body.

She was young and tall and pale, with limp blonde hair and fine features and not much in the way of breasts, though her areolas, as if in compensation, were large, the nipples long and thick. Presently erect, whether from exhibitionistic excitement or, more likely, the room's damp chill (even with the windows shut it was freezing) they were umber in colour, rather than pink; the colour of the child that would result from her union with the big, bushy-Afroed Jamaican guy beside her on the platform.

Such a child was certainly within the realm of possibility. The pair were a couple and, professionally, a team; often to be seen wheeling their red Kawasaki in or out of the art school's courtyard off Hamilton Street; an exotic pair, armoured in leathers and mirror-shades against the curious stares of the mainly white citizenry of this tolerant but Negro-less Canuck metropolis...

Leo's pencil -- fitfully in synch with his eye -- curved out to one side with the swell of a hip, then back in with the nip of the waist; then straightened and climbed the page a short distance and stopped just below the model's meagre right breast, his point of departure, hence arrival and completion.

He leaned back and shook the hair out of his eyes and lifted his pencil from the page and looked down at his sketch -- and winced.

Realism had been his ambition -- insofar at least as such was possible with a 'blind' contour drawing -- but the sketch before him on the table was wildly expressionist. Abstract expressionist almost.

The male figure was a tubby hominoid with stunted, flipper-like arms -- the Pillsbury Thalidomide Doughboy -- and the female an even worse mess: hands like baseball mitts; face like one of those Picasso African-mask hookers; a giraffe neck that even whatshisname, the Italian guy, might have thought a bit much; and elephantine legs like those fatsos by that South American painter Melanie thought so 'amazing!', the Colombian.

Overall the effect was of something produced in the clinical trial of some potent psychotropic drug by a severely tripped-out subject with minimal drafting skills, and a hand tremor to boot.

Leo wiped graphite off his fingertips on the threadbare thigh of his bluejeans. He sighed heavily, then sneezed. The smoke from the joss stick was getting up his nose and the solvent fumes seemed to be worsening. His head was light, his visual field bright and depthless, as cartoonish almost as last weekend behind the acid.

Now the music subsided, the volume dropping off. Looking up, he saw Melanie by the models' platform, squatting next to her record player, now rising. "Pee-yew!" She flapped a hand in front of her wrinkled nose. "It is so polluted in here!" Turning to the models: "Do you folks mind if we open a window?"

The pair on the platform looked doubtful. Both had gooseflesh and the girl's lips were tinged blue.

"Just for a minute? Pretty please? I'll get you another heater," Melanie offered. She looked Leo's way. "Can someone back there open a couple windows, please? Leo? Can you?" She beamed at him expectantly then turned and strode out of the room.

Surprised that she knew his name, maybe a little flattered, Leo turned his sketch pad facedown, then got up and walked past the articulated skeleton (Twiggy by name) and the disquieting assemblage -- a nice pair -- over to the windows in the far corner and threw one open.

Outside it was dark and wet and dismal. Weather to match his mood, which since the weekend had cooled gradually from rage to depression. Driving rain stippled the puddles three floors below at the side of the street. Fog swirled down Hamilton toward the waterfront.

He breathed in the chill, dank air and opened another window, then returned to his table and turned his pad back over and, without revisiting his botched sketch, flipped over a fresh page, wondering -- not for the first time -- what he was doing here, and what Mr. Bamberger, his high school art teacher, possibly could have been thinking when he so egregiously mistook him for a potentially 'promising young artist' worthy of 'enriched supplementary instruction' and recommended him, together with a couple classmates who declined the honour, for this extracurricular non-credit evening extension class.

Certain hard truths had been revealed since he embarked upon 'Introduction To Drawing - B' fourteen Thursdays ago in a hopeful mood following his completion before Christmas of 'Introduction to Drawing - A', which course of instruction had managed with some modest success to upgrade his drafting skills from rudimentary at best -- virtually non-existent -- to the level of crude cartooning at which he was presently stuck. Permanently, it seemed. His progress since January had been minimal, imperceptible, and at this point it was plain -- as plain as the sun-scorched nose on his face -- that he was not blessed with talent to burn when it came to drawing.

Even Melanie, their promiscuously praiseful instructress tended to fall silent when confronted by his efforts -- clearly a case of someone finding herself unable, despite her strong inclinations and best efforts, to say something nice, and therefore, as per the bunny mama of Bambi's pal Thumper, saying nothin' at all. All she had managed all term in fact were a few noncommittal 'Hmms'; the occasional subdued 'A-ha'; and a single, half-hearted 'Interesting' way back in the second week -- this, mind you, from a teacher fanatically convinced of the importance of 'positive feedback' in nurturing the fragile creative impulse; a teacher whose abhorrence of 'negative energy' and 'elitism' ordinarily precluded the slightest hint of misgivings regarding her students' work, and who was in fact prepared at all times to heap the most extravagant praise upon virtually any mark or set of marks inflicted by one of her students (or anyone else) upon any surface whatsoever -- graphite or charcoal on paper, paint on canvas, feces on the walls... anything -- and as a result had half the class, the younger ones at least, convinced they were budding geniuses...

Leo reached for his pencil, thinking to begin another sketch, but then hesitated, let it lie. Why bother? What was the point? It was time to face facts, time to cut his losses and move on to the next thing,

whatever that might be. Movies maybe. That seemed to be what was happening these days anyway, trend-wise. And in fact if he could believe what his brother told him the only people interested in sketching anymore were amateurs and hobbyists: Sunday painters, suburban dabblers, out-if-it oldsters – the hopelessly unhip. (Which category in fact quite a few of his classmates appeared to fit -- with some exceptions, notably his witchy neighbour).

Real artists today, he was given to understand -- those who hadn't just chucked the whole visual thing and joined a rock-'n'-roll band or The Revolution -- were busy making movies ('film' was the preferred term in these parts) of people sleeping in real-time or getting a haircut or head or some such; or if not making movies, then wrapping public monuments in vast sheets of polypropylene or arranging Plexiglas boxes in obscurely significant configurations or organizing their own nude crucifixions and documenting such on videotape or Super 8 or 16 mm -- anything but pushing paint around a canvas or a pencil across paper, at least for purposes of rendering a likeness of something or someone.

So, at least, according to Russ. Who, treacherous shithead though he indubitably was, often seemed to be in the know about these sorts of things; and who, had he thought it worth his while to sign up for the classes with Leo, would probably have had his first one-man show by now.

(Just last month in fact his brother, who to the best of his knowledge hadn't had occasion to draw anything since the stick men and Kilroys of his grade-school days, had picked up Leo's Rapidograph in an idle moment and whipped off a sketch of the family cat asleep atop the television set that was equal or superior to anything Leo had managed in eight months of 'enriched' instruction.)

His gut twisted with anger and distress as the scene at the top of the ladder last weekend flashed up in his mind's eye for the thousandth time in the past five days. Then twisted again when he remembered that Russ might be at the house when he got back. Julie had said he would likely come by tonight to drop off a dodger -- the latest of many such to be put up by the family in recent years -- and that there was some chance too of his staying the night.

Which meant that besides having to share the place for the next week or so with yet another just-arrived, up-in-the-air young American (the last guy, Tim, a motormouth deserter from Scranton, PA had talked a manic blue streak the whole length of his stay, driving everyone nuts) he might also have to share it tonight with his brother. Step-brother, that is, and a piss-poor excuse for one at that, as the weekend had so clearly demonstrated. He just hoped they didn't expect him to share his room tonight with the treacherous, backstabbing bastard. There was no goddamn way.

Now Melanie re-entered the room with the space heater she had promised, flourishing it above her head and beaming triumphantly, as if it were the Stanley Cup.

Leo lowered his head and massaged the bridge of his nose with thumb and forefinger. When he looked up again he saw that a flake of dead skin half the size of his thumbnail had sloughed off. Four days since his Whistler bumper and his nose was peeling like a coat of cheap paint.

He brushed the flake off his fingertip and looked down at his sketch pad, again considering and again rejecting the idea of beginning another drawing. There were only a few minutes left and this was his last session, the end of the line. Hell with it.

Still, although he was ready to give up on the specific activity (drawing was kind of boring, in truth) he wasn't at all prepared to put aside his yearning for the exalted calling of Artist, and for the glamorous, intensely-experienced life -- an heroic, daily celebration of Freedom, Imagination, Spontaneity, Risk-taking, Uncompromising Integrity, World Travel, Sexual Variety, and Serial Model Seduction -- that he imagined went with it.

And then, too: Where else, aside from Isy's Strip City or The Penthouse, neither of which could you get into if you weren't of age --where else could an interested party behold at point-blank range the unclothed living female form divine? With no cover charge, no two-drink minimum, no pasties or G-strings -- and a pretty good excuse for looking?

He peered round the circle of sketchers, wondering how many of them honestly could say that when regarding the naked pair on the platform they experienced primarily the 'incredible formal challenge' that Melanie proposed as the proper artistic response.

The tiny elderly lady three tables over maybe, or her wizened friend at the adjoining table. Possibly some of the others as well -- who could say? Not himself though. After fourteen sessions drawing from life, what he still saw before him first and foremost when he raised his eyes was a naked man and a naked woman. The latter especially -- a thrilling, hair-raising sight that overwhelmed and banished all formal concerns: Line, weight, and texture put to route by breast, belly, and pubic thatch...

Fluorescent lighting though, was NOT the most flattering, especially with the model frozen in her pose and the gaze of the beholder steady. He had been surprised, shocked even, to discover that even the most alluring models (and in fact Melanie tended to favour septuagenarians and three-hundred-pounders as often as not) were afflicted with certain bodily imperfections, revealed and emphasized by the cold, harsh light falling from the trays of fluorescents overhead: bruises and rashes and blemishes, appendectomy and Caesarean scars, stretch and vaccination marks, unsightly body hair and cellulitic thighs, varicose veins and saggy breasts -- all the frailties to which flesh is subject -- hitherto little suspected by Leo, whose conception of the female body was based upon a limited number of first-hand encounters under conditions of low illumination, supplemented by reports from Russ and close study of the airbrushed ideal found in the pages of Bob Macdonald's dad's near-complete leatherette-bound run of Playboy magazine.

Even the girl tonight, the most fetching to date, was sickly pale under the toxic light, drained and anemic-looking, as if vampires had been at her. And in fact Leo's gaze and the needle of his libidinal compass had been drifting away from her all evening over to the sketcher at the table next to his, a fully, albeit snugly clothed girl of about eighteen or nineteen, dark and striking in denim hipuggers and a wine-coloured tank top, with hip-gypsy accessories -- leather and beads; Navajo jewelry; a delicate gold ring in her left nostril -- and a conspicuous absence of bra.

She was a late addition to the class, having shown up just two Thursdays ago, introduced by Melanie as Cindy or Cynthia or something like that, an 'incredibly talented young artist'.

Yet another one.

Though she sat beside him each session, she had paid him no attention whatsoever, ignoring his frequent gaze and trepid smile -- but tonight before class came up behind him as he was hunkered down eyeballing DEATH BOX NO.4 and, having gained his attention by tapping him ungently on the shoulder, inquired (it sounded like an accusation) if it was true that he lived in West Van and was driving back after class, and when he admitted that he did and he was, requesting -- demanding -- a ride. Her own vehicle -- that is, her boyfriend's -- had it seemed blown a head gasket and was 'totally fucked' -- as, Leo gathered, was her relationship with the owner.

Now he cut his eyes over her way and stole another look. She was perched on a tall backless stool at the table to his immediate right, just slightly in front of him. One huarache-clad foot rested on the bottom rung, the other was planted on the floor next to an unravelling Cowichan Indian sweater and a beat-up portfolio bearing the Expo 67 logo. The portfolio's zipper was broken and several books had slipped halfway out on to the action-painted linoleum: THE NATURAL WAY TO DRAW by Nicolaides, STEPPENWOLF by Hesse, something by Fritz Perls -- he couldn't make out the title.

Her head was up, and a shining mane of chestnut hair spilled down her back almost to her waist. Tensed forward over her sketch, pencil poised, she stared fixedly at the male model, looking herself with her exotic Mediterranean beauty as if she were modelling for a portrait of wild and witchy gypsy pulchritude.

The object of her intense gaze was a muscular mahogany-coloured guy in his mid or late twenties, broad of shoulder, thick of neck, narrow of waist, and large of virile endowment.

Very large. It was a bit unsettling, Leo having been given to understand somewhere along the line that the 'myth' of a jumbo black endowment was a hateful and demeaning fiction of racial stereotyping. Be that as it may, there it was, impossible to overlook, and he sensed from its owner's smug expression and self-assured body language that he did not feel particularly demeaned by or in fact unproud of the monstrous thing.

Now the girl pushed back a little and, contrary to Melanie's instructions, looked down at her sketch as she resumed work. Her proximity and the tilt of her table afforded Leo a good view, and he could see right away that she was good. Her line was strong and confident and graceful, the figure proportionate, the likeness excellent -- Melanie's praise justified for once.

She had concentrated exclusively on the male figure, particularly the torso. Head and limbs were merely suggested with a few artful, economic strokes, while careful attention had been paid to pecs and abdominal musculature and (especially) the loins.

She had not given the jumbo endowment short shrift, he observed, nor shrunk it to more acceptable dimensions, as he had noticed some of the others had a tendency to -- or as Michelangelo shrunk David, for that matter.

This was intriguing and also a bit troubling. What might it mean? Was it simply an example of the open, relaxed, healthy acceptance of human sexuality that was said to characterize his generation, if not himself? Or could it be something darker? Unhealthy preoccupations? Nympho depravity? Erotic sophistication and obsessions beyond his ken?

Uneasy, he shifted his eye from sketch to sketcher. Who was this girl anyway? How did she know he was from West Van? And if she lived in his neighbourhood, as she said she did, why hadn't he seen her around? Or at school? The way she looked, he'd surely have remembered her if he had laid eyes on her even once. With her witchy dark beauty she was nothing if not memorable; her big liquid eyes and sculpted cheekbones, her glowing olive skin and chestnut mane...

Not to mention her body, which was compact and curvy and in fact spectacular, as had become apparent since she pulled her sweater over her head a few minutes ago.

His gaze passed down her back to her waist, lingered on the silky ellipse of tan olive flesh that had appeared between the bottom hem of her tank top and the waistband of her hiphuggers as she bent over her sketch.

Now she bent closer still and the hem rode higher up her back as the waistband slipped lower and the ellipse widened and a tiny vertical cleft came into view at the base of her spine.

He contemplated this zone and her narrow waist and dramatically swelling hips with a racing heart and a dramatic swelling of his own -- a bit odd, perhaps even perverse of him, he fretted, given his proximity to Full Frontal Nudity on the models' platform, but so it was. He wondered if maybe there was something after all to his father's conviction, oft reiterated in the years since, say, 1963 that the young women of today would be well-advised to 'leave something to the imagination for God's sake'.

Now, she suddenly sat bolt upright -- the ellipse vanished -- and let out a curse and slashed at her sketch with her pencil, the point snapping as she ripped a big X across the page.

Grimacing, she muttered something and tossed back her hair, then flipped over a fresh page and picked up another pencil from the tabletop and leaned forward and started in on a new sketch.

Leo watched her warily out of the corner of his eye. After a moment he relaxed and his attention returned to the ellipse of tawny flesh that had opened up again. Resting his elbow on the table, he propped his chin on the palm of his right hand and gazed longingly at this region as he drifted into reverie, a waking dream starring an heroic version of himself opposite his provocative neighbour, set in a fanciful, wildly romantic version of Paris confectioned by his movie-stoked imagination from dubious Hollywood renderings of the lore and legends of the Lost Generation and la vie bohème...

*A rainy April night in the City of Light... a smoky bôte in the Latin Quarter... Eyes meet down the zinc bar --the expat painter, the sultry fille de joie... Pulses quicken, young hearts soar...*

*Smiling and holding her eye, the painter picks up his glass of Pernod and crosses the crowded room toward her, but a burly apache-dancer type beats him there. Scowling, the man rushes up and seizes the*

girl's wrist and pulls her roughly to her feet from her barstool and slaps her hard across the face. She cries out, struggles to break free. The brute (he looks a bit like Russ) slaps her again then backhands her across the mouth. She reels, sinks to her knees, covering her face with her hands.

The painter steps forward into the space that has opened up around them, his eyes blazing: "Say, pal. You took care of her real good there. Pretty damn impressive. Looks like you might be ready to go a round or two with someone your own size -- maybe even a guy?"

The lowlife's piggy little eyes narrow to slits. He whisks a bottle from a nearby table, brushes it against the edge of the bar and a jagged green flower blooms in his fist.

Fortunately, the painter has studied jujitsu. In a heartbeat his enemy is flat on his back on the floor, dazed and disarmed. As he picks himself up and scurries toward the exit, mademoiselle turns to her champion with shining eyes. "Merci, m'sieu! Merci beaucoup!"

"Are you alright, miss?" asks the painter. Her lip is puffy, her cheek fiery red.

She looks away, troubled. "'M'sieu, such shame for you to see moi comme ci... wo-man wit'out honneur, wo-man degradée. But m'sieu, I quit thees life in un minute -- in a ZECOND! She -- 'ow you zay? -- she zicken my zoul! But nowhere to go 'av I, m'sieu, no one to turn!"

Gently, he brushes a tear from her cheek, then takes her hand and leads her through the rain-swept streets to his garret atelier by the Seine. There, he gives her ice for her lip and prepares a simple, nourishing meal -- a baguette and a tasty paté; a wedge of Brie; a sweet, red apple. She wolfs it down -- poor thing is famished. When she is done she looks at him with shining eyes: "M'sieu, you are bon homme... good man... you are dif'ren', not animal... pas comme les autres." Her eyes search his face as he fills her glass with vin ordinaire. "But m'sieu, 'ow I can repay you?"

His brow knits thoughtfully, then a hopeful expression lights up his sensitive, ruggedly handsome features. Eagerly, with mounting excitement, he tells her of the vision he yearns to capture on canvas, a boldly modern BIRTH OF VENUS, Botticelli updated for the 20th century on Cubist and abstract expressionist principles. His unborn creation weighs him down, he confides, as a late-term fetus weighs down the expectant mother. But, alas, he is penniless, living hand to mouth on the pittance he earns as a dishwasher and sidewalk portraitist. There is no money for rent, much less a model. He looks at her imploringly. Could she possibly... that is, would she perhaps...?

She touches his hand, smiling: "Mais certainement, m'sieu! Gladly I do for you thees thing. But when weesh you to--?"

"Now! Tonight! Maintenant!" He leaps to his feet, strides across the room and begins preparing his palette forthwith.

She follows, smiling bemusedly as she casually unbuttons her blouse...

DISSOLVE TO: The painter at his easel, his Venus of the Quarter posed gloriously before him. Her nude majesty takes his breath away, stirs his soul, inspires his hand. By the light of a bare overhead bulb he works feverishly through the night, a man possessed.



*Finally, as dawn's first light sifts through the casements, he sets down his brush and goes to the window to watch the sun come up over the red slate roofs of the city. Then turns away and walks slowly across the room to his cot in the corner... and collapses, exhausted.*

*Pulling on a big paint-spattered shirt belonging to the painter the fille pads barefoot over to the easel. A sharp intake of breath. Her sensual features are transfigured as she beholds the canvas: "M'sieu! C'est magnifique! C'est un... chef d'oeuvre! 'Ow you zay? Master-bees! Genius! You 'av redeem me, m'sieu. You 'av immortalisé moi."*

*She runs to him, her eyes bright, the shirt flapping open as she sinks down beside him on the cot, covering his face with passionate kisses and pressing her perfect, trembling body up against his weary but responsive form...*

At this point the fantasy veered off in a new direction, leaving behind the innocently romantic realm of AN AMERICAN IN PARIS and crossing the Tropic of Cancer into grittier territory. Plot faltered and stalled. The artist-and-model personae fell away. Likewise the Paris setting and all redeeming social and artistic values as the production slipped through some loose seam in the space-time continuum and resituated itself in the back seat of Leo's dad's Volvo.

The time: later tonight.

The place: a lonely lover's lane.

The action: hot, heavy and X-plicit... he avid, masterful; she insatiable...

This new hardcore segment had barely gotten underway before the sound of a pointedly cleared throat alerted him to the fact that the real-life inspiration of his salacious imaginings had put down her pencil and swung round and was glaring back over her shoulder at him, having caught him looking.

He started violently. The look she was giving him was just like the one he had been subjected to recently by his cat Mungo when he had the nerve to rescue from his clutches a young robin, badly roughed up but still alive, that he had been batting around the front lawn, practicing jungle moves on.

She stared deep into his eyes for an endless, excruciating moment -- a ferocious look that plunged like an ice pick through his lust-glazed pupils down into the sleazy adult cinema of his mind; then finally she reached back and, holding his eye, grasped the bottom hem of her tank top between thumb and middle finger, and slowly, provocatively, tugged the garment down just a little, the golden filament in her nostril glinting as her left eye drooped shut -- a lazy wink -- and a mocking smile spread across her face.

Leo nearly fell off his stool. His gaze leapt clear of hers and darted round the studio like a panicked bird, skittering blindly past the shivering models over to the wall of windows, up to the ceiling and over to the skylights then down again, settling finally on the sketch pad before him on the table.

Ducking his head, he put his hand to his brow and stared down at the blank page, pretending to study the non-existent sketch on the tilted laminate surface; then picked up his pencil as if to resume work, his face meanwhile turning brick-red.

"Okay, people!" Two sharp handclaps over by the models' platform. Leo looked up, welcoming the sound of Melanie's voice for once. She had stepped into the middle of the circle, was rubbing her hands together briskly and beaming at her flock. "Quittin' time. Time to punch the clock."

The models broke their poses, stretched and yawned and scratched; pulled on their matching dragon kimonos as they were thanked and praised and thanked again; then headed for a pair of Japanese screens at the back of the room to dress.

Upcoming screenings of THE CABINET OF DR. CALIGIRI ("wonderful cinema") and BLOOD OF A POET ("a fabulous film, just amazing") were announced. Likewise a colleague's opening across the street at the Bau-Xi ("gorgeous paintings, such an incredible talent!"); after which their perpetually positive instructress exhorted them to draw each day without fail and assured them they were all 'fabulous' without exception and wished them an 'incredible' week and turned her attention to unplugging and packing up her Stac-O-Matic.

Leo shut his sketchpad and stuffed it into his knapsack and, without looking at Cindy or Cynthia or whatever she was called -- he could feel her derisive gaze upon him still -- got up and went again to the windows and stood looking down into the street, trying to recover a little of his shattered composure.

The rain had eased off, the day's last light faded and the neon was on now in the window of the greasy-spoon restaurant across the street, the red cursive lettering ('Savoy Grill') blurred by the steamed plateglass, the reflected light hemorrhaging across the adjoining sidewalk and the shining black street, blood red.

He lingered at the window awhile with his back to the room, hoping that in the meantime the girl might have changed her mind or found another ride and left.

And in fact when he turned round again she was not in sight, though her sweater and portfolio were still on the floor beneath her table, and her sketch pad atop it.

He hurried back to his own table and fetched his knapsack and coat and made haste for the exit at the front of the room. As he did so, the blonde model emerged from behind her screen, and started for the same door, a little ahead of him. She was fully dressed now in a black leather jacket and magenta mini-skirt -- very short, very tight -- with black leggings and biker boots. A gold crash-helmet tucked was under her arm and she looked willowy and sexy and awfully good.

Leo followed her as she made her way toward the front of the room, mesmerized by the miniskirt and what it covered (barely) and indeed wishing, now that she was dressed again, that she weren't...

As she approached the exit she stepped slightly to one side and turned her shoulder and slipped through sideways so as to let another person enter the room simultaneously from the other direction.

Guess who.

Leo pulled up short as his disconcerting neighbour strode toward him. She was smiling but it was not what you would call a friendly smile. "Tryin' to split on me huh? You gotta lotta nerve tryin' to pull that shit."

Leo winced and denied it.

The male model brushed past now, looking like a Rastafarian Wild One. He shot Leo a challenging look as he went by, eyebrows up high.

Leo looked back at her, his face starting to warm again.

Her smile was gone now and he had no idea whether she serious or kidding him.

Not a clue.