# Still Life

# John Updike

LEONARD HARTZ, a slender and earnest American with a rather comically round head, came to the Constable School because it was one of three British art schools approved by the Veterans Administration under the new, pruned GI Bill. He could not imagine what the VA had seen in the place. Constable—“Connie” to the bird-tongued, red-legged girls who composed half its student body—was at once pedantic and frivolous. The vast university museum which, with a gesture perhaps less motherly than absent-mindedly inclusive, sheltered the school in its left wing, was primarily archaeological in interest. Upstairs, room after room was packed with glass cases of Anglo-Saxon rubble; downstairs, a remarkably complete set of plaster casts taken from classical statuary swarmed down corridors and gestured under high archways in a kind of petrified riot. This counterfeit wealth of statues, many of them still decorated with the seams of the casting process and quite swarthy with dust, was only roughly ordered. Beginning in the East with wasp-waisted *kouroi* whose Asiatic faces wore the first faint smile of the Attic dawn, one passed through the jumbled poignance and grandeur of Greece’s golden age and ended in a neglected, westerly room where some large, coarse monuments of the Roman-Christian degeneracy rested their hypnotized stares in the shadows. Masterpieces lurked like spies in this mob. His first week, Leonard spent a morning and two afternoons sketching a blackened Amazon leaning half clad from a dark corner, and only at the end of the second day, struck by a resemblance between his sketch and the trademark of an American pencil manufacturer, did he realize that his silent companion had been the Venus de Milo.

For freshmen at the Constable School were to start off banished from the school itself, with its bright chatter and gay smocks, and sent into these dim galleries to “draw from the antique.” The newcomers—Leonard and four other resentful American veterans and one wispy English boy and a dozen sturdy English teen-age girls—straggled each morning into the museum, gripping a drawing board under one arm and a bench called a “horse” under the other, and at dusk, which came early to the interior of the museum, returned with their burdens, increased by the weight of a deity pinned to their boards, in time to see the advanced students jostle at the brush-cleaning sink and the nude model, incongruously dressed in street clothes, emerge from her closet. The school always smelled of turpentine at this hour.

Its disconsolate scent lingering in his head, Leonard left the school alone, hurrying down the three ranks of shallow steps just in time to miss his bus. Everywhere he turned, those first weeks, he had this sensation of things evading him. When he did board his bus, and climbed to the second deck, the store fronts below sped backwards as if from pursuit—the chemist’s shops that were not exactly drugstores, the tea parlors that were by no means luncheonettes. The walls of the college buildings, crusty and impregnable, swept past like an armada of great gray sails, and the little river sung by Drayton and Milton and Matthew Arnold slipped from under him, and, at right angles to the curving road, red suburban streets plunged down steep perspectives, bristling with hedges and spiked walls and padlocked chains. Sometimes, suspended between the retreating brick rows like puffs of flak, a flock of six or so birds was turning and flying, invariably away. The melancholy of the late English afternoon was seldom qualified for Leonard by any expectation of the night. Of the four other Americans, three were married, and although each of these couples in turn had him over for supper and Scrabble, these meals quickly vanished within his evenings’ recurrent, thankless appetite. The American movies so readily available reaffirmed rather than relieved his fear that he was out of contact with anything that might give him strength. Even at the school, where he had decided to place himself at least provisionally under the influence of Professor Seabright’s musty aesthetic, he began to feel that indeed there was, in the precise contour of a shoulder and the unique shape of space framed between Apollo’s legs, something intensely important, which, too—though he erased until the paper tore and squinted till his eyes burned—evaded him.

Seabright tried to visit the students among the casts once a day. Footsteps would sound briskly, marking the instructor off from any of the rare sightseers, often a pair of nuns, who wandered, with whispers and a soft slithering step, into this section of the museum. Seabright’s voice, its lisp buried in the general indistinctness, would rumble from far away, as if the gods were thinking of thundering. In stages of five minutes each, it would draw nearer, and eventually addressed distinctly the student on the other side of the pedestals, a tall English girl named, with a pertness that sat somewhat askew on her mature body, Robin.

“Here, here,” Seabright said. “We’re not doing silhouettes.”

“I thought, you know,” Robin replied in an eager voice that to Leonard’s American ears sounded also haughty, “if the outline came right, the rest could be fitted in.”

“Oh no. Oh no. We don’t fit *in;* we build *across* the large form. Otherwise all the little pieces will never read. You see, there, we don’t even know where the center of your chest is. Ah—may I?” From the grunts and sighs Leonard pictured Robin rising from straddling her horse and Seabright seating himself. “Dear me,” he said, “you’ve got the outlines so black they rather take my eye. However …”

To Leonard it was one of Seabright’s charms that, faced with any problem of drawing, he became so engrossed he forgot to teach. He had had to train himself to keep glancing at his watch; else he would sit the whole afternoon attacking a beginner’s exercise, frowning like a cat at a mouse hole, while the forgotten student stood by on aching legs.

“There,” Seabright sighed reluctantly. “I’m afraid I’ve spent my time with you. It’s just one passage, but you can see here, across the thorax, how the little elements already are turning the large surface. And then, as you’d pass into the rib cage, with these two shadows just touched in at first, you see … Perhaps I should do a *bit* more.… There, you see. And then we could pass on to the throat.… It’s a good idea, actually, on these figgers to start with the pit of the throat, and then work the shoulders outwards and go up for the head.…”

“Yes, sir,” Robin said, a shade impatiently.

“The whole thrust of the pose is in those angles, you see? *Do* you see?”

“Yes, sir, I hope so.”

But her hopes were not enough for him; he came around the pedestals and his plump, solemn, slightly feline figure was in Leonard’s view when he turned and said apprehensively to the hidden girl, “You understand to use the pencil as lightly as you can? Work up the whole form gradually?”

“Oh, yes. Quite,” Robin’s pert voice insisted.

Seabright twitched his head and came and stood behind Leonard. “I don’t think,” he said at last, “we need draw in the casting seams; we can idealize to that extent.”

“It seemed to help in getting the intervals,” Leonard explained.

“Even though these are exercises, you know, there’s no advantage in having them, uh, positively ugly.” Leonard glanced around at his teacher, who was not usually sarcastic, and Seabright continued with some embarrassment; his speech impediment was less audible than visible, a fitful effortfulness of the lips. “I must confess you’re not given much help by your subject matter.” His eyes had lifted to the statue Leonard had chosen to draw, for the reason that it had all four limbs. Completeness was the crude token by which Leonard preferred one statue to another; he was puzzled by Seabright’s offended murmur of “Wretched thing.”

“Beg pardon, sir?”

“Look here, Hartz,” Seabright exclaimed, and with startling aggressiveness trotted forward, stretched up on tiptoe, and slapped the plaster giant’s side. “The Roman who copied this didn’t even understand how the side here is constricted by this leg taking the weight!” Seabright himself constricted, then blinked abashedly and returned to Leonard’s side with a more cautious voice. “Nevertheless, you’ve carried out parts of it with admirable intensity. Per, uh, perhaps you’ve been rather *too* intense; relax a bit at first and aim for the swing of the figger—how that little curve here, you see, sets up against this long lean one.” Leonard expected him to ask for the pencil, but instead he asked, “Why don’t you get yourself a new statue? That charming girl Miss Cox is doing—Diana, really, I suppose she is. At least there you do get some echoes of the Greek grace. I should think you’ve done your duty by this one.”

“O.K. It *was* starting to feel like mechanical drawing.” To dramatize his obedience, Leonard began prying out his thumbtacks, but Seabright, his five minutes not used up, lingered.

“You do see some sense in drawing these at the outset, don’t you?” Seabright was troubled by his American students; of the five, Leonard knew he must seem the least rebellious.

“Sure. It’s quite challenging, once you get into one.”

The Englishman was not totally reassured. He hovered apologetically, and confided this anecdote: “Picasso, you know, had a woman come to him for advice about learning to draw, and he told her right off, *‘Dessinez antiques.’* Draw from the antique. There’s nothing like it, for getting the big forms.”

Then Seabright left, pattering past threatening athletes and emperors, through the archway, out of the section altogether, into the brighter room where medieval armor, spurs, rings, spoons, and chalices were displayed. The sound of his shoes died. From behind the hedge of pedestals, quite close to Leonard’s ear, Robin’s clear voice piped, “Well, isn’t Puss in a snorty mood?”

To attack the statue Seabright assigned him, Leonard moved his horse several yards forward, without abandoning the precious light that filtered through a window high behind him. From this new position Robin was in part visible. A plinth still concealed her bulk, but around the plinth’s corner her propped drawing board showed, and her hand when it stabbed at the paper, and even her whole head, massive with floppy fair hair, when she bent forward into a detail. He was at first too shy to risk meeting her eyes, so her foot, cut off at the ankle and thus isolated in its blue ballet slipper on the shadowy marble floor, received the brunt of his attention. It was a long foot, with the division of the toes just beginning at the rim of the slipper’s blue arc, and the smooth pallor of the exposed oval yielding, above the instep, to the mist-reddened roughness of an Englishwoman’s leg. These national legs, thick at the ankles and glazed up to the knees with a kind of weatherproofing, on Robin were not homely; like a piece of fine pink ceramic her ankle kept taking, in Seabright’s phrase, his eye.

After an hour Leonard brought out, “Aren’t your feet cold, in just those slippers?”

“Rather,” she promptly responded and, with the quick skip that proved to be her custom, went beyond the question: “Gives me the shivers all over, being in this rotten place.”

It was too quick for him. “You mean the school?”

“Oh, the school’s all right; it’s these wretched antiques.”

“Don’t you like them? Don’t you find them sort of stable, and timeless?”

“If these old things are timeless, I’d rather be timely by a long shot.”

“No, seriously. Think of them as angels.”

“Seriously my foot. You Americans are never serious. Everything you say’s a variety of joke; honestly, it’s like conversing in a monkey-house.”

On this severe note Leonard feared they had concluded; but a minute later she showed him his silence was too careful by lucidly announcing, “I have a friend who’s an atheist and hopes World War Three blows everything to bits. He doesn’t care. He’s an atheist.”

Their subsequent conversations sustained this discouraging quality, of two creatures thrown together in the same language exchanging, across a distance wider than it seemed, miscalculated signals. He felt she quite misjudged his seriousness and would have been astonished to learn how deeply and solidly she had been placed in his heart, affording a fulcrum by which he lifted the great dead mass of his spare time, which now seemed almost lighter than air, a haze of quixotic expectations, imagined murmurs, easy undressings, and tourist delights. He believed he was coming to love England. He went to a tailor and bought for four guineas a typical jacket of stiff green wool, only to discover, before the smeary mirror in his digs, that it made his head look absurdly small, like one berry on top of a bush; and he kept wearing his little zippered khaki windbreaker to the Constable School.

As an alien, he could not estimate how silly she truly was. She was eighteen, and described looking up as a child and seeing bombs floatingly fall from the belly of a German bomber, yet there was something flat and smooth behind her large eyes that repelled closeness. She seemed to be empty of the ragged, absorbent wisdom of girls at home whose war experiences stopped short at scrap drives. Across Robin’s incongruities—between her name and her body, her experiences and her innocence—was braced a determined erectness of carriage, as if she were Britannia in the cartoons; her contours contained nothing erotic but limned a necessarily female symbol of ancient militance. Robin was tall, and her figure, crossing back and forth through the shadows of the casts and the patchy light between, seemed to Leonard to stalk. She was always in and out now. In at nine-thirty, breathless; out at ten for a coffee break; back at eleven; lunch at eleven-thirty; back by one; at two-thirty, out for a smoke; in by three; gone by four. Since the days of their joint attack on that chaste archer the moon goddess, Robin’s work habits had grown blithe. She had moved away to another area, to analyze another figure, and he had not been bold enough to follow with his horse, though his next statue took him in her direction. So at least once an hour she appeared before his eyes, and, though the coffee breaks and long lunches forced him to deduce a lively native society, he, accustomed by the dragged-out days of Army life to patience, still thought of her as partly his. It seemed natural when, three weeks before the Michaelmas term ended, Puss—Leonard had fallen in with mocking Seabright—promoted them to still life together.

At the greengrocer’s on Monday morning they purchased still-life ingredients. The Constable School owned a great bin of inanimate objects, from which Leonard had selected an old mortar and pestle. His idea was then to buy, to make a logical picture, some vegetables that could be ground, and to arrange them in a Chardinesque tumble. But what, really, *was* ground, except nuts? The grocer did have some Jamaican walnuts.

“Don’t be funny, Leonard,” Robin said. “All those horrid little wrinkles, we’d be at it forever.”

“Well, what else could you grind?”

“We’re not going to *grind* anything; we’re going to paint it. What we want is something *smooth*.”

“Oranges, miss?” the lad in charge offered.

“Oh, oranges. Everyone’s doing oranges—looks like a pack of advertisements for vitamin C. What we want …” Frowning, she surveyed the produce, and Leonard’s heart, plunged in the novel intimacy of shopping with a woman, beat excitedly. “Onions,” Robin declared. “Onions are what we want.”

“Onions, miss?”

“Yes, three, and a cabbage.”

“One cabbage?”

“Here, may I pick it out?”

“But, Robin,” Leonard said, having never before called her by name, “onions and cabbages don’t go together.”

“Really, Leonard, you keep talking as if we’re going to *eat* them.”

“They’re both so round.”

“I dare say. You won’t get me doing any globby squashes. Besides, Leonard, ours won’t get rotten.”

“Our globby squashes?”

“Our *still* life, love. Haven’t you seen Melissa’s pears? Really, if I had to look at those brown spots all day I think I’d go sick.”

The lad, in his gray apron and muddy boots, gently pushed a paper bag against her arm. “Tenpence, miss. Five for the onions and four for the head and the bag’s a penny.”

“Here,” Leonard said hoarsely, and the action of handing over the money was so husbandly he blushed.

Robin asked, “Are the onions attractive?”

“Oh yes,” the boy said in a level uncomprehending tone that defended him against any intention she might have, including that of “having him on.”

“Did you give us attractive onions?” she repeated. “I mean, we’re not going to eat them.”

“Oh yes. They’re good-looking, miss.”

The boy’s referring to the cabbage simply as “the head” haunted Leonard, and he started as if at a ghost when, emerging with Robin into the narrow street, the head of a passerby looked vividly familiar; it was the handsomely sculpted head alone, for otherwise Jack Fredericks had quite blended in. He was dressed completely in leather and wool, and even the haircut framing his amazed gape of recognition had the heavy British form. Eerie reunions are common among Americans abroad, but Leonard had never before been hailed from this far in the past. It offended him to have his privacy, built during so many painful weeks of loneliness, unceremoniously crashed; yet he was pleased to be discovered with a companion so handsome. “Jack, this is Miss Robin Cox; Robin, Jack Fredericks. Jack is from my home town, Wheeling.”

“Wheeling, in what state?” the girl asked.

“West Virginia.” Jack smiled. “It’s rather like your Black Country.”

“More green than black,” Leonard said.

Jack guffawed. “Good old literal Len,” he told Robin. His small moist eyes sought in vain to join hers in a joke over their mutual friend. He and Leonard had never been on a “Len” basis. Had they been on the streets of Wheeling, neither one would have stopped walking.

“What are you doing here?” Leonard asked him.

“Reading ec at Jesus; but you’re the one who baffles me. You’re *not* at the university surely?”

“Sort of. We’re both at the Constable School of Art. It’s affiliated.”

“I’ve never *heard* of it!” Jack laughed out loud, for which Leonard was grateful, since Robin further stiffened.

She said, “It’s in a wing of the Ash. It’s a very serious place.”

“Is it *really?* Well, I must come over sometime and see this remarkable institution. I’m rather interested in painting right now.”

Leonard said, feeling safe, “Sure. Come on over. Any time. We have to get back now and make a still life out of these onions.”

“Well, aren’t you full of tricks? You know,” Jack said to the girl, “Len was a year older than I in public school and I’m used to looking up at him.”

To this preposterous lie Robin coolly replied with another: “Oh, at Connie we all look up to him.”

The Constable School could not afford to waste its precious space on still lifes, and imposed upon the museum’s good nature by setting them up in the Well, a kind of basement with a skylight. Here hard-to-classify casts were stashed. Here a great naturalistic boar reclined on his narrow tufted bottom, the Dying Gaul sunned himself in the soft light sifting from above like dust, Winged Victory hoisted her battered feathers; and a tall hermaphrodite, mutilated by Byzantine piety, posed behind a row of brutal Roman portrait busts. The walls were a strange gay blue; even more strangely gay were the five or six students, foreshortened into chipper, quick shapes, chirping around tables of brilliant fruit. As he followed his friend’s blond hair down the reverberating iron of the spiral stairs, Leonard felt he had at last arrived at the radiant heart of the school.

Nowhere in the museum was there as much light as in the Well. Their intimacy in the grocer’s shop seemed clarified and enhanced here, and pointed by artistic purpose. With minute care they arranged the elements upon a yellow cloth. Robin’s white hands fussed imperiously with the cabbage, tearing off leaf after leaf until she had reduced it to a roundness she imagined would be simple to draw. After lunch they began to mark with charcoal their newly bought canvases, which smelled of glue and fresh wood. To have her, some distance from his side, echoing his task, and to know that her eyes concentrated into the same set of shapes, which after a little concentration took on an unnatural intensity, like fruit in Paradise, curiously enlarged his sense of his physical size; he seemed to tower above the flagstones, and his voice, in responding to her erratic exclamations and complaints, resonated in the bright Well. The other students on still life also worked solemnly, and in the afternoon there were few of them. The sounds of museum traffic drifted down from a comparatively dark and cluttered world.

Jack Fredericks paid his visit the very next day. He thumped down the stairs in his little scholar’s gown and stared at the still life over Robin’s shoulder and asked, “Why are you going to grind onions in a mortar?”

“We’re not,” she replied in the haughty voice Leonard had first heard.

Jack sauntered over to the hermaphrodite and said, “Good Lord. What happened to *him?*”

Leonard made no earnest effort to put him at his ease. Embarrassed and hence stubborn, Jack lay down on the shallow ledge designed to set off the exhibits, in a place just behind the table supporting the still life, and smiled up quizzically at the faces of the painters. He meant to look debonair, but in the lambent atmosphere he looked ponderous, with all that leather and wool. The impression of mass was so intense Leonard feared he might move and break one of the casts. Leonard had not noticed on the street how big his fellow West Virginian had grown. The weight was mostly in flesh—broad beefy hands folded on his vest, corpulent legs uneasily crossed on the cold stone floor.

Seabright made no pretense of not being startled at finding him there. “What, uh, what are you doing?”

“I guess I’m auditing.”

The telltale “guess” put the Puss’s back up higher. “We don’t generally set aside space for spectators.”

“Oh, I’ve been very unobtrusive, sir. We haven’t been saying a word to each other.”

“Be that as it may, you’re right in these people’s vision. If you didn’t come down here to look at the statues, I’m really afraid there’s nothing here for you.”

“Oh. Well. Certainly.” Jack, grimacing with the effort, raised his body to his feet. “I didn’t know there were all these regulations.”

Leonard did not strenuously follow up this victory. His courtship of Robin continued as subtly as before, though twice he did dare ask her to the movies. The second time, she accepted. The delicately tinted Japanese love tale, so queerly stained with murders, seemed to offer a mutually foreign ground where they might meet as equals, but the strict rules of the girls’ house where she stayed, requiring them to scamper directly into a jammed bus, made the whole outing, in the end, seem awkward and foolish. He much preferred the days, full of light and time, when their proximity had the grace of the accidental and before their eyes a constant topic of intercourse was poised. He even wondered if through their one date he hadn’t lost some dignity in her eyes. The tone of her talk to him in the Well was respectful; the more so since his painting was coming excellently. Something in those spherical shapes and mild colors spoke to him. Seabright was plainly flattered by his progress. “Mmm,” he would purr, “delicious tones on the shadow side here. But I believe you’re shading a bit too much towards red. It’s really a very distinct violet, you know. If I could have your palette a moment … And a clean brush?” Lesson by lesson, Leonard was drawn into Seabright’s world, a tender, subdued world founded on violet, and where violet—pronounced “vaalet”—at the faintest touch of a shadow, at the slightest hesitation of red or blue, rose to the surface, shyly vibrant. Robin’s bluntly polychrome vision caused him to complain, “Really, Miss Cox, I wish you had got the drawing correct before you began filling in the spaces.” When Puss had gone back up the spiral stair, Robin would transfer his vexation to Leonard as “Honestly, Len, I can’t see all this rotten purple. You’d think my onions were grapes, to see what he’s done to them. Tell me, should I scrape his paint right off?”

Leonard walked around to her easel and suggested, “Why don’t you try keying in the rest of it around them?”

“Key it in? Key it in!” She seemed to relish the shrill syllables.

“Sure. Make your cabbage kind of greeny-purple, and the yellow cloth browny-purple, and for the mortar, well, try pure turps.”

“No,” she pouted. “It’s not a joke. You’re just being a disgusting silly American. You think I’m stupid at paints.”

Each day he sank deeper into a fatherly role; he welcomed any secure relationship with her, yet wondered if he wasn’t being, perhaps, neutralized. Except on technical matters, she never sought his advice until the day near the end of term when, conceding him in this sense a great stride forward, she asked, “How well do you know your friend Jack Fredericks?”

“Not well at all. I wouldn’t call him my friend. He was a year younger in high school, and we weren’t really in the same social class either.”

“The social classes in America—are they very strong?”

“Well—the divisions aren’t as great as here, but there’re more of them.”

“And he comes from a good class?”

“Fair.” He thought reticence was his best tactic, but when she joined him in silence he was compelled to prod. “What makes you ask?”

“Now, Leonard. You mustn’t breathe a word; if you do, I’ll absolutely shrivel. You see, he’s asked me to model for him.”

“*Model* for him? He can’t paint.”

“Yes he can. He’s shown me some of his things and they’re rather good.”

“How does he mean ‘model’? Model in what condition?”

“Yes. In the nude.” High color burned evenly in her face; she dabbed at the canvas.

“That’s ridiculous. He doesn’t paint at all.”

“But he *does*, Leonard. He’s taken it up very seriously. I’ve *seen* his things.”

“What do they look like?”

“Oh, rather abstract.”

“I bet.”

“*All* you Americans paint in the abstract.”

“I don’t.” He didn’t feel this was much of a point to score.

“He says I have a lovely body—”

“Well, *I* could have told you *that*.” But he hadn’t.

“—and *swears*, absolutely, there would be nothing to it. He’s even offered a model’s fee.”

“Well, I never heard of such an embarrassing, awful scheme.”

“Really, Leonard, it’s embarrassing only when you talk of it. I *know* he’s perfectly serious as a painter.”

Leonard added a fleck of black to a mixture on his palette and sighed. “Well, Robin. You do whatever you want. It’s your life.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t *dream* of *do*ing it. Mummy and Daddy would *die*.”

His relief was overwhelmed by a sudden fierce sense of being wronged. He said, “Don’t let *them* stand in your way. Why, this may be the start of a whole career for you.”

“I mean, I never con*sid*ered it. I was just interested in your opinion of the man.”

“My opinion is, he’s a *horrible* man. He’s a silly spoiled snob and about to get hog fat and I don’t see what attracts you in him. Terrible person. Terrible.”

“Well, as you say, you don’t know him very well.”

Leonard and the other unmarried veteran went to Europe during the Michaelmas vacation. On the Channel boat, his thoughts, free for the first time from the bustle of departure, returned to Robin, and the certainty of her turning Fredericks down warmed him on the cold, briny deck. In Paris the idea that she even toyed with such a proposition excited him; it suggested an area of willingness, of loneliness, that Leonard could feasibly invade. In Frankfurt he wondered if actually she would turn his fellow-countryman down—she was staying around the university during vacation, Leonard knew—and by Hamburg he was certain that she had not; she had succumbed. He grew accustomed to this conviction as he and his companion (who was devoting himself to a survey of all the beers of Europe) slowly circled back through the Lowlands. By the time he disembarked at Dover he was quite indifferent to her nakedness.

The school had grown chillier in four weeks. In the Well, the arrangements of fruit had decayed; in case some of the students continued to work during the vacation, the things had not been disturbed. Their own still life was least affected by time. The onions were as immutable as the statues; but the cabbage, peeled by Robin to its solid pale heart, had relaxed in wilting, and its outer leaves, gray and almost transparent, rested on the yellow cloth. His painting, still standing in its easel, preserved the original appearance of the cabbage, but the pigments had dulled, sinking into the canvas; their hardness made the painting seem finished, though there were several uncovered corners and numerous contrasts his fresh eye saw the need of adjusting. He loaded his palette and touched paint to the canvas reluctantly. The Well was so empty on this Monday morning of resumption, he wondered if he had made a mistake, misreading the schedule or taking it too seriously. At the far end, the wispy English boy, who had established himself as the teachers’ pet, noisily dismantled groups, crashing vegetable elements into a paper sack.

After eleven o’clock, Robin appeared on the balcony of the spiral stair. She overlooked the Well with her serene Britannia stance—her bosom a brave chest, her hips and legs a firm foundation—and then descended in a flurry. “Leonard. Where have you *been?*”

“I told you, I was going to Europe with Max. We went as far east as Hamburg, and came back through Holland and Belgium.”

“You went to *Germany?* Whatever for?”

“Well, I am German, eventually.”

Her attention went sideways. “I say, the cabbage has taken it hard, hasn’t it?” She lifted her own painting off the easel. “Are you still going at it? Puss has put me back in antique.”

“Of all the *crust*.”

“Oh, well. He said to me, ‘You’re pretty rotten at this, aren’t you?’ and I agreed. It’s the truth.”

Leonard resented the implication in this blitheness that he, too, the companion of her futile labors, was easy to give up. His mouth stiff with injury, he sarcastically asked, “How’s your posing for Jack Fredericks coming?”

Her blue eyes squared. “Posing for *him?* I did nothing of the sort.” Her words might have been “I love you”; his heart felt a sudden draft and he started to say, “I’m glad.”

But she went on with surprising vehemence, “Really, Leonard, you refuse to take me *seriously*. I could see all along he was a dreadful bore.” Her arm held her canvas captive against her side and with her free hand she impatiently pushed floppy hair back from her forehead—a rigid, aristocratic gesture that swept his stir of hope quite away. He had been stupid. He had been stupid to think that if Fredericks were eliminated he, Leonard Hartz, was left. Over here, he and Jack were two of a kind, and by his own admission he was Jack’s social inferior. She was done with the silly strange lot. After all, boyfriends are a serious bit.

Like those flocks of birds seen from the bus window, she had exploded as he watched. Even before she took a backward step, her receding from him seemed so swift he raised his voice in claiming, less in apology than as a fresh basis, “All Americans are bores, I guess.”