



Life Class by Leslie Herman

Surprised, on arriving in San Diego, that so many streets had Spanish names, I arranged to attend a community college course to get some basic knowledge of the language.

Opening the classroom door, I was amazed to see a group of about fourteen or fifteen people gathered around a low raised platform unpacking drawing books and paint brushes. As I stood there, a young woman taking center stage threw off her light cotton gown and, without a stitch on, moved unconcerned into a set pose.

I did not have to be Sherlock Homes to know that this was not the Wednesday Beginner's Spanish Class. I had made a mistake with the day. It was Thursday, not Wednesday. How foolish can one be! Seeing me hesitate, the instructor, introducing herself as Amanda, implored me to sign on, saying –'You are heaven sent, we are one student short of the minimum number the college requires us to have. 'Please! Please! Don't go! How could anyone refuse such a plea? With some mental reservation, I diffidently agreed to stay.

Everybody immediately got down to their drawing boards and canvases, but I found that each time I decided to put pencil to paper, Elise had changed her pose.

Amanda came by and ,seeing that I had yet to make a start, took my pencil from me and with one deft movement produced an outline of the curve of the model's neck, shoulder and arm.

'It is as easy as that, 'she said. 'Go ahead and do as many quick sketches of each pose as you have time for'.

I certainly did not find it as easy as that and decided to see how the others in the class were going about it.

Walking around and chatting with this mostly denim and corduroy clad group, I found they included commercial artists, book illustrators and even architects – all of them enthusiastic about having the opportunity of working with professional models.

Over coffee we discussed marketing, Amanda stressing that, from her experience, it was essential to have an agent in New York if one hoped to break into the advertising or publishing world.

After the break, Elise posed for longer periods and the class now using whatever medium they preferred -ranging from charcoal to oils – became thoroughly absorbed in their work. This did not stop Amanda, however, from giving a monologue of her various ‘Adventures in the Wonderland of Madison Avenue’ when she had gone there hoping to get some drawings accepted.

Struggling with the drawing of Elise’s arms and legs , as seen from my very difficult angle, and awash with the even flow of Amanda’s verbal battle against the art world of New York, the time passed all too quickly. I went home tired, but with every intention of carrying on with the course.

In the weeks that followed , we were fortunate that Amanda was able to engage a variety of widely diverse and interesting models. One night, we had two male models who obviously enjoyed displaying their muscular bodies, striking martial poses in exciting adversary -like positions. Another evening, two graceful young Asiatic women used exotic arm and hand movements to give variety to their poses. So the weeks flowed on uneventfully, with the class concentrating on their drawing and painting to the soothing ripple of Amanda’s art world chatter in the background.

That is, until the setback occurred – an impossible situation, at least as far as I was concerned- the evening when the model did not turn up! At first, we pottered around doing this and that for ten minutes or so, until a frowning Amanda came to a frightening decision, one I was horrified that she could ever have entertained.

She announced, in a voice that would allow no contradiction, that we would have to draw bare. I was thunderstruck, my whole conformist background against it. I am a private sort of man who, if the telephone rings while I am in the shower and alone in the house, will put on a dressing- gown before answering it.

I looked despairingly at the blonde lank-haired girl on my left who was in the process of taking off her jacket and then on my right, I watched my other neighbour, the bearded architectural draftsman, bend down to supposedly slip off his shoes. The girl opposite was fingering the zipper in her skirt. This was too much! There must be limits beyond which one cannot be expected to go. I had had enough.

Grasping my belongings, but still facing the room, I edged backwards , hoping to slip out of the door without being noticed. Almost outside, I was knocked sideways by a heavily built woman holding a large carrying bag who rushed past me , crying out-‘ I’m sorry, Amanda, I was held up in a traffic jam.’

I slunk back and had my drawing board ready by the time the model had taken up a position on the dais. I felt like a boxer reeling from a knock-out blow, just saved by the gong.

When the lesson ended, Amanda asked if we would mind clearing up, as she had to rush away. Going to the front door, she gave a shrill whistle and a large black Labrador Retriever came bounding up to her and jumped up, resting his front paws against her breast.

'Down, bear, down!!' she shouted, and lovingly attaching his lead, she waved good bye as the two of them hurried off to the parking lot.

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**A Word about Leslie Herman** (a posthumous dedication and posting of this story with the authorization of Pam Nathan of the SAJAC)

Leslie was born in England in 1910. He came to South Africa in 1926 and lived for many years in Johannesburg, where in time he was the Managing Director of the H.J Henochsberg factory for uniforms which had been established by his uncle at the turn of the century. Leslie worked in the factory from 1939 -1978. His son, Paul, followed his father's footsteps as the director of the factory in later years. After retirement, he settled in San Diego with his wife, Clare.

The above story appeared in 'The Reporter', the magazine of the SAJAC led by Pamela Nathan. It appeared in the Spring Edition of 1993. In addition to this one, there are several others, all very readable and charming.

Leslie enjoyed writing and his stories were compiled in a collection of autobiographical anecdotes called 'By the Way...A lifetime of experiences' available for purchase via the Internet. The short stories are very engaging and reveal the sociable and vibrant man that Leslie was. He viewed life with humour , sensitivity and kindness that shines through the stories.

**Posted on the 'Share Your Stories' section of the CHOL website in October, 2025**