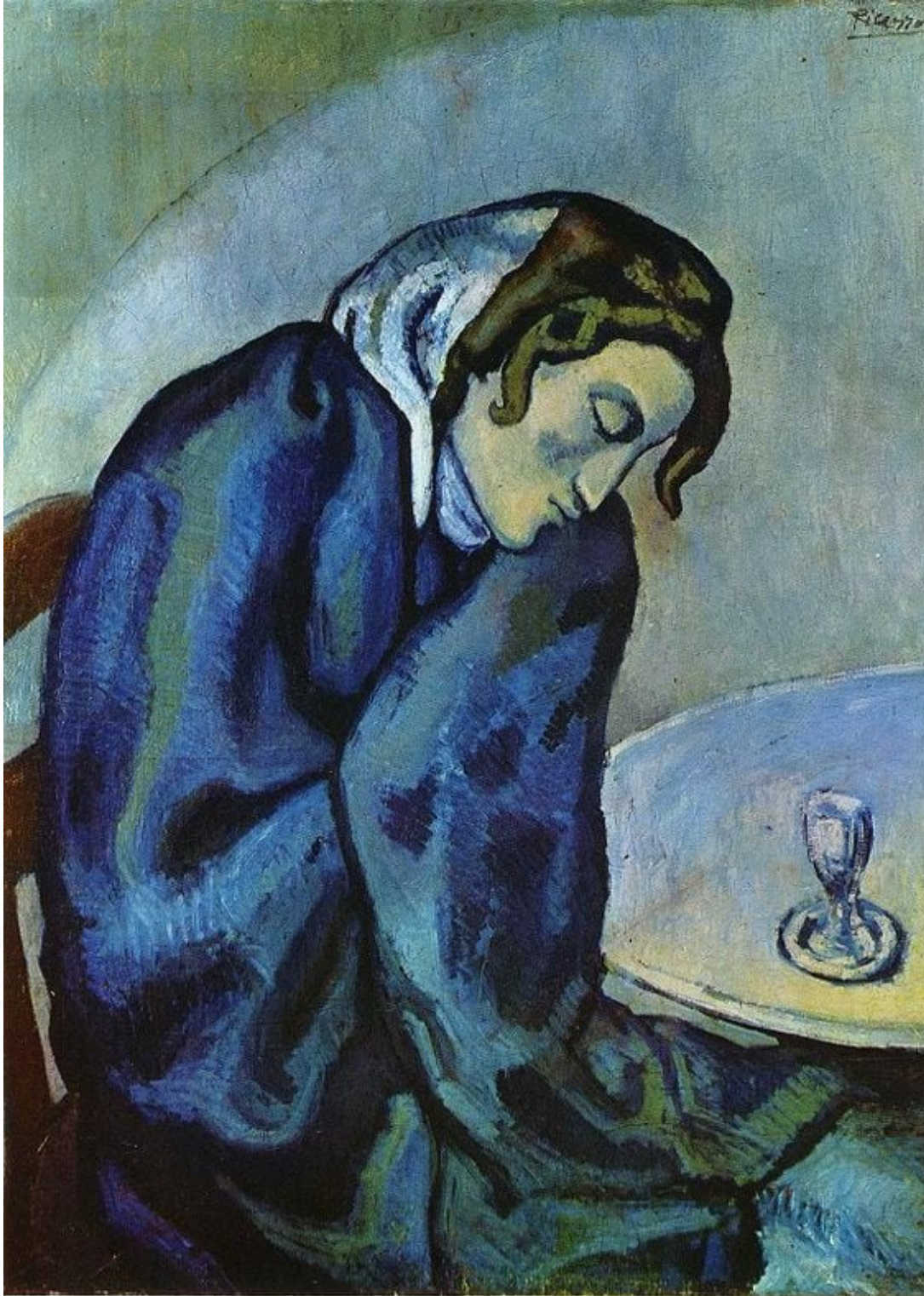


Solly's Story

by [Audrey Churgin](#) (April 2024)



The Drunk Woman is Tired, Pablo Picasso, 1902

Thwack!

"Ouch. Damn door. Solly, I didn't mean to bang your door." Angie rubbed her foot. "I twisted my ankle as I came to the door so I fell into it. I meant to knock real softly, like this..."

Tap tap tap.

"That was nice, right? Please answer the door."

Tap tap tap.

"I've been walking and walking around the block. I must have passed by four times. And it's a big block! I'm still in my high heel boots; it's cold out and my feet are killing me. Can I please come in?"

Angie's face was soaked from her tears and runny nose. The taste of each seeped between her lips blending into a salty slime. She raised her sleeve to her nose and rubbed.

"Oh shit. I shouldn't have done that," she said, looking at the trail of goo on her sleeve. It was a black cashmere sweater with pearls and gold threads sewn onto the front. The sleeves were trimmed with fur. The same trim was across the collar. It was a treasured sweater, the one her grandmother wore on her first date with her grandfather. "I can't keep anything nice." And she started to wail, her tears flowing heavily again and nose stuffing up.

Solly didn't answer. She cried more and tried to say it louder, but not too loud. "Please Solly?"

"I'm sorry for all that stuff I said, I didn't mean to be like that, but once my words started piling up I couldn't stop them from coming out. I know I was awful. Please let me in. I promise I'll speak quietly and gently, and only say good things. I really –"

The door yanked open, stopped abruptly by the chain lock as it strained against the door jamb. Solly put his eye to the open sliver.

"I can smell you from here. How much did you drink? You're swaying and your words are slurred. I don't want to see you. Maybe tomorrow. Not tonight. It's over for tonight. So go away."

Angie tilted her head a bit and put on her most pitiful face. "Please Solly? Please, please? I don't want to be alone tonight."

Solly snapped the door fully closed.

Angie realized this was the end. She put her mouth to the door and asked, "would you please walk me home? I don't feel very steady."

The chain rattled as it was loosened and removed from its channel. "Angie, this is ridiculous. You can manage this." He swung the door widely open and was surprised to fully see her condition. Her face was streaked with tears drawing her makeup down. She stood crookedly; her ankle had collapsed to the floor.

Solly softened and breathed out an exasperated sigh. "All right. Here, take my arm."

He let the door slam behind him as he linked his arm in hers and steered her shoulder. He led her in a wide turn, and then promenaded her home—down the hall. She lived on the other end of the hall.

Solly placed Angie on her bed and helped her take her boots off. They were black patent leather, tight to her leg with spike heels. It was a struggle to remove them. Angie wasn't helping much. She giggled at his ineptitude and used the other boot to poke his hand away from her leg. Her laughter was a

relief to them both.

He brought a large bowl from the kitchen and placed it by her side. "If you need to throw up, use this. You'll never make it to the bathroom on your own."

Angie propped herself up resting her elbows behind her on the pillow. Her face sunk between her shoulders, and she put a slightly twisted pout on her face. "Please take me to it now. I need to pee. I need to pee badly."

Solly groaned. He guided her up from the bed and to the bathroom, steadying her by the arm all the way. He helped her tug her tights down and steered her backward onto the toilet. When she was done, he brought her back to the bed, told her to close her eyes. With a single flutter of her sticky lashes, she fell asleep immediately.

Solly left Angie's apartment letting the door close softly behind him and then walked down the hall to his own.

"Damn, damn door! It's locked. It's fucking locked."

Solly went back to Angie's place and knocked fruitlessly on the door. She wouldn't hear. She had his spare set of keys, and now her door was locked too.

He tried banging harder.

Thwack!

She didn't respond.

Solly quietly banged his head on her door, scolding himself. He spun around and slid down to the floor. He was frustrated. Gathering his legs and arms across him, he'd have to spend the night like this. It was cold out, after all, and without his stuff he couldn't go anywhere. It's not a great idea to wander the streets of New York alone after dark.

"Mary?"

Tap tap tap.

"Mary? It's me, Solly Levine from 402. I'm locked out and need your access key."

Mary removed the chain from its lock, taking a long noisy minute as she did so. As always, she had a handgun at the ready and looked prime to shoot it. "Solly! Good to see you. You don't come around often. Of course I'll get you the key." But she didn't really mean that. Mary kept a master key for all the apartments on a giant ring. She had to open it herself. She'd never trust him with the whole pack of keys.

"Wait there and I'll get it and open her up for you." She dragged out the process. Solly suspected she enjoyed the company.

Mary was genuinely scary. She lumbered with a limp and had a permanent scowl on her face, even when she smiled. Though she was a small woman, she was a large presence. Her apartment was beside the main entrance. All the residents in the building slept better because she kept her gun by the door and they all knew she would use it. But Mary had a deceptively sweet nature too, almost motherly. She wore a plain, rumpled apron over her dress, tied in a bow at the back. The dress was dark, hanging slightly below her bowed knees. She was a throw-back to another time. She had a story to tell. Solly thought it would be good to hear it.

Angie awoke in the mid-afternoon. She dressed and freshened for the day, despite it being half over. She wasn't sure what she wanted to do with it. It occurred to her that Solly might be off work. She threw on her red velvet cape over her

shoulders and put the matching cap on her hair. Her father brought that from China when he was last there. She flipped her long hair over the back of the cape and stared backward at herself in the long mirror. It was a good look for her, and she felt beautiful. Solly would like it. He liked when she dressed up. She smacked a smear of red lipstick on her lips, grabbed her pocketbook and sashayed down the hall to his door.

Tap tap tap.

"Solly it's me," she said singingly, dragging each word out with extra syllables.

There was no response.

She teased him. "Can you come out to play today?"

He unhitched the chain lock and he threw the door wide open.

"Wow. You can just waltz over here as if nothing happened. No apology, no explanation."

He noticed how pretty she looked. He tried to keep his thoughts straight and admonish her properly. But Angie remembered nothing of the evening before—not the argument, or storming away angry. She did not remember falling onto his door or his efforts to get her home and to sleep. She remembered nothing.

"Nothing? How do you do that?" His voice was more harsh than he meant it to be.

"You should have a hangover or something. The bags under your eyes are big enough to pack. The sun should be too bright for you to see; the sound of my voice should be thunder to you. How do you do that? Why are there no consequences for your drunkenness?"

Angie took advantage of the open door and spun past him into the apartment. "Solly, enough of this already. What do you

want to do today? You're not working, right? I do remember you have Fridays off. Today is Friday. Let's go for a walk to the park. We can stop at Cici's for a drink when the shadows get long. Oh! Two drinks. Let's buy a bottle of white wine and sit outside on their patio. We can watch people walk by and gossip about them. The sun is shining, so it is lovely, but still a bit cool..." She was chattering. She rummaged through his vestibule while she spoke and pulled out a long, grey woolen coat and black leather gloves. He looked so sophisticated in that. And all the while she prattled, there was a knot of anxiety gripping her stomach. Something was wrong.

"Angie, you're right, I do have the day off. But I'm not sure I want to spend it with you. You've been extremely difficult lately and I don't know if I have the heart for it right now. And I had an awful night sleeping on the floor." He faintly hoped she'd ask why.

Angie's stomach-knot tightened alarmingly. She didn't remember the details of the night before, but her body responded as if she did. She became fearful. He couldn't be angry with her, could he?

"Oh dear. I've done something awful haven't I?" she asked.

"Give me time. I'll get over it. But let's take today to be alone." Solly wasn't sure he wanted her to go.

She spoke animatedly. "Alone? Be alone with me! You know I'll be good at that."

He led her to the door and opened it motioning for her to leave. But then she started crying again, hard. Before she left she turned to him and said, "I'll come by later just to say goodnight. Ok?"

He said, "that would be fine." He didn't want to end the day without seeing her.

Angie left the building and bounded out onto the street. She headed towards Broadway. She had put on a good show for Solly. Still, the tears were streaming; she was miserable and full of bottled-up anger. Her feelings became more intense with each step. She set out on a long, long walk. Vengefully, she was determined to make Solly worry about her. She'd take her time and walk all the way to Times Square. It'd be dark by then, and she'd go into a coffee shop to sit and sip until it was disturbingly late for her to be out.

The streets were lit up brightly with people milling about everywhere. They were noisy; music escaped from every other door; cars honked and passengers hollered. It was overstimulating. It felt oppressive. Angie was bumped and herded as she walked along, feeling like a shadow in the crowd, unseen, and vulnerable. She was relieved when she came to the coffee shop near the subway at 50th. She took a stool at the coffee bar towards the back, where she could sit alone staring at the window. Broadway was hopping. She could disappear here.

Angie was more conspicuous than she knew. She was very pretty. She was still wearing her red velvet cape and cap. Her spike-heeled boots still shone of patent leather. She ignored the pain from her feet. Nursing her coffee, she suffered her exile intensely. The caffeine kept her buzzing. She asked for a second cup. Her mind laboured over unremembered memories from the day before. She struggled with phantom recollections that flitted by like a mist of memory. Her emotions were teasing her, and she felt guilty. But she could not put anything together that would explain what she said or did to Solly. She had nothing to apologize for since there wasn't a thing she could acknowledge. The guilt and anxiety rose again. She repeated her mantra to herself, she would stay out in the night until it would be terribly worrisome to Solly. He'd forgive her then.

She managed to fuel her feelings well enough to pass the time. Her steely presence ensured no one would dare approach her to talk. The stools around her were vacant and stayed that way. But her anger betrayed her. It slowly softened into regret. Tears started to well up in her eyes again. But as she wiped the wetness from her eyes, a flick of colour caught her eye just beyond the coffee shop window. It was like a rubber band was snapped, sharply drawing her focus out through the window.

A clown was busking just for her on the other side of the window. He was covered in colourful makeup and was juggling red balls. He was doing a silly dance for her too. She realized that in her wrath she was blind to what was in front of her. She laughed. A clown was doing a whole show for her while she stared directly at him. He must've thought she was watching. And now that she was seen to be laughing and clear-eyed, the clown pointed to himself and mimed a question. "Can I come sit with you for a coffee?"

Angie thought this was perfect, a perfect waste of time to extend her outing. It would worry Solly longer. And as if by design, here was someone to look after her and keep her safe.

The clown took a stool next to her along the counter. His name was Cashew. He was smitten with Angie and lavished her with conversation. She was animated in her response. She told him that she was on a quest to walk home, but wanted to delay it for as long as she could. Interrupting her with mime, Cashew excitedly pointed to the next block and gestured for her to follow him. Willingly, she followed. He took her hand and led her to a basement bar. She hesitated a bit, so Cashew pointed to a neon sign indicating it was a pool room. Angie agreed to go there with him. His bright makeup was fading and it became evident that he was dishevelled. His clowning took on an aura of tragedy, but she didn't let herself dwell on the observation.

Cashew bought her a drink. She wanted a glass of white wine. Cashew ordered a beer for himself. They played a couple of games of pool in the back room. Angie lost both badly. She really had no idea of how to play but was happy to be out 'playing' something. That was what she'd asked Solly to do, 'come out and play.' This was a good outcome in her opinion. Her cape and cap still worn confidently, stiletto boots and red lipstick all in place. Unsurprisingly, many of the men in the bar were attentive. But Cashew kept them at bay. Everyone there knew him and were peripherally interested in his playmate. Several of them bought her glasses of wine and she kept drinking and drinking. She was unaware of any threat, even though she was one of the only women there and the men were showering her with attention. It was dark and smelled heavily of sour beer. Some open plates of nuts and chips were on the tables, and everyone dipped their hands into the snacks hungrily. Angie was not noticing her environment with any concern. She felt safe with Cashew. He never left her side, and he still managed to make her laugh with his clowning.

They left the bar together after a couple of hours. Angie was unsteady on her feet again and suddenly unsure she could walk the whole way back to her apartment uptown. Cashew offered to escort her all the way. Somehow having a clown at her side while she walked made her feel protected. It was odd.

They talked the whole time, though some of it was meaningless babble. Cashew explained he was busking on the Staten Island Ferry, just making the money he needed for today. He'd finished his last crossing for the day when he saw her in the coffee shop. He told her he was so enchanted by her when he noticed her through the window and was determined to perform for her. When she finally laughed, he felt as if he'd won the lottery. He told her he wasn't going to blow this chance with her.

Cashew explained he was an ex-con, recently released from prison. He asked Angie if she was ok with that. Angie really

didn't give it much thought, and without prejudice she said it was fine. She didn't even ask him what he'd done. He was her clown, and she couldn't see anything in him that didn't seem funny.

They walked for another 45 minutes, and finally arrived at the door to her building. She thought of asking him up. But she thought that might give him the wrong idea. She decided instead to ask Solly if he would let them both into his apartment. She rattled around in her pocketbook. She'd not taken her keys. She had to buzz Solly for entry.

Buzzzzzz buzzzzzz buzzzzzz....

Solly answered. "Who is it?"

"Solly it's me. I've left my key in the apartment. Would you buzz me in?"

Solly took a moment to think. "I'll let you in, Angie, and I'll give you your key, but please let's keep it short."

Mary was listening to the exchange from behind her door, adjacent to the entrance. It was very late in the night, and she didn't like people showing up then and making a fuss at the door.

"Solly? I've brought someone I met—a clown. He's been sweet to me all night and looked after me. Can I bring him up too?"

Mary did not like what she was hearing. She unchained her lock and opened her door widely. She was dressed in a housecoat. The gun was obvious in her hand. She was threatened with Cashew's presence. Angie barely noticed her behind the double glass doors to the lobby. Mary shot Cashew a menacing glance. He noticed.

"Solly, can we come up?"

Solly said "no. It's not a good idea this late. And I don't

like that you've brought someone strange home. You can come up, but not the clown." It all sounded so silly.

Cashew was watching Mary's gun. Without taking his eyes off it, he said "Angie, I'll go now. You're safe at home. Thanks for the fun night. Maybe we'll see each other another time."

Angie grabbed his billowy clown-sleeve. "Let me give you my phone number. Call me, ok?"

She rummaged through her pocketbook again and found a small envelope. It had her address on it. She didn't have a pen, so she used her lipstick to write her number on the back. It was not a good instrument. The lipstick streaked and smeared and was overly large for the small paper. She put some numbers on the back and the others on the front.

As if by magic, the Buzzer buzzed.

Solly's voice commanded through the intercom, "come up. Alone."

Mary watched Cashew turn cautiously and go down the front steps while Angie entered the building. She was alone. Satisfied with his departure, Mary retreated to her apartment. She was a powerful person. A whirl of wind followed her inside.

Tap tap tap.

"Solly? It's Angie."

The chain rattled as it was loosened and removed from its channel. Solly swung the door widely open for her and was not surprised to see her condition. She was drunk, slurring her words and unsteady on her feet. Again. And again, Solly would promenade her down the hall to her door and help her into bed. Angie giggled at him like she did the night before and spoke proudly of her evening with her friend the clown. Solly wasn't laughing. As she'd hoped, he had worried about her terribly

and was relieved to have her home. He saw that she picked up someone unsavoury and made foolish decisions, so maybe he was right to have been worried. But, of course, he forgave her for all the things that had happened the past couple of days.

Cashew did call Angie the next day. She couldn't remember meeting him.

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Audrey Churgin is a writer, visual and sound artist, who professionally collaborated with children for many years both visually and aurally. She is represented in Ottawa by Galerie St. Laurent+Hill, and has exhibited her collection of drawings and pastels in Ottawa, Montreal, Toronto, Washington and Scottsdale. She has written three plays and has produced the trilogy as 'sound art;' a format not unlike radio plays. Additionally, she has written an unpublished novel, *Linda Melinda*, and is currently working on a new novel, *The Model's Masterpiece*.

Audrey's collaborative audio work is included in several radio collections, and has been sampled on CBC radio, broadcast in North America and Europe, and in Chile, where she exhibited A Valdivian Choral (soundscape). Samples of her work can be seen and heard [here](#) and [here](#) and at the Galerie St.Laurent+Hill [website](#).

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