

The Teacherless Class

by [Audrey Churgin](#) (August 2021)



Woman Getting Dressed, Pierre Bonnard

The light was phosphorescent as it bled into the hall from the classroom studio. It seemed slightly creepy, and I worried about peeking around the corner. My nerves were on edge. When I pulled at the door it stuck with a dry grind, inch by inch, each jerk a betrayal. Looking through, it was like seeing a film strip evolving through the visual staccato. Once the door was open wide enough, floodlights enveloped me. I had to squint, seeing the room for the first time only through the ribs of my eyelashes.

A sudden gust pulled the door from my hands and swung it open wildly—it was like someone tore it from my grip and slapped it against the wall. The window opposite the door had been lifted at the same moment by someone, causing the room to violently inhale, the drapes to snap as if lashed on a clothesline. Everyone turned their heads from their drawing boards, now looking up at me. Even the model's eyes fluttered my way.

There were about fifteen students sitting straddled across wooden stools, low, long and wide. The front leg of the stool was extended higher and supported a plywood board inclined against it and a sketch pad attached with a clip. Each of the students sat straight-backed with one hand pointing a stick at their paper. All their heads were cocked toward me, all their creativity briefly ceased. I was reminded of the geese when they're startled, long necks protruding up from stilted bodies, aware briefly of a possible threat. That, I suppose, was me.

A week ago, before classes started, I visited the school and saw some of the studios. I thought I'd try out a free studio before the regular sessions began, a teacherless class for practice. I knew what to expect, or I thought I did. I'd worked in rooms like this, deeply darkened against the bright spotlights, natural light all but hidden by heavy drapes. I knew the donkeys, the wooden benches the students sat on might be splotched by wet paint. Everyone would be gathered around a large rolling platform with their eyes trained in the same direction, on an artist's model. The spotlights would shed their tapered beams, theatrically cast on the model. And she would likely be nude. At least in a proper art school she would.

Though I knew the model would be nude, it was her nakedness that I did not expect. I admit my prudishness; I immediately recoiled back into the hallway and hid myself behind the door, peeking in. My arms instinctively pulled

themselves tightly across my chest and I felt my own nakedness. My eyes were stuck on the model in the center of the room. Everyone else disappeared into a wavy periphery.

The girl on the stand had lowered eyes. She reclined among a mixed collection of couch cushions gathered under her hips and knees. Her arm was bent with her hand supporting her cheek and her shoulder hung over a stack of smaller pillows. A tasseled velvet cloth covered the podium diagonally, draping it in deep-red cascading folds. The model's blonde hair hung freely from her head, splayed in its glory across the pillows pressing up against her breasts. Her skin gleamed perfectly, cusped by the spotlights. She was breathtakingly beautiful, peacefully reposed. A gentle tinkle of jazz piano music wafted across the room from the corner. All the students were intent on their drawings, with deep, furrowed brows, snapping glances up to the model and back to the drawing.

I know I lingered and stared. I was completely absorbed by the model. She etched herself in my mind, burning a plate I'd consider archetypal, ideal beauty. I thought about all the pictures of paintings I'd seen in books, the models covering themselves demurely with strategically placed drapery, their eyes staring back intently at the reader. Essentially nude. Essentially naked. Seductively challenging me to keep on looking, looking longer until the etching process was fully scored. I was trapped in the model's power. She was seen to be seen, commanding power through her complacent serenity. I realized that only a true master could convey this kind of power through drawing, this kind of magic.

Time dissolved. I discovered that I could feel my eyes sensually touch the model's form from afar. It was embarrassingly intimate. I almost felt ashamed, and to manage that near fear I hid my gaze by facing down.

"Are you going in or what?". There was a youthful, singsong male voice close to my ear. It was close enough that

I could feel his breath on my neck. It gave me goosebumps like a cold breeze on a hot day. I felt caught like a Peeping Tom.

I whispered without turning, "I'm taking my time. Waiting for a moment when I won't disturb the others from their work."

He whispered back. "It's a free studio. There's no rules. Just go in and set up. Leave when you want. No one cares." Then, as if he was throwing it over his shoulder back at me loudly and casually, "Robbie."

He wormed his way past me and set himself up. He took a donkey from the corner where they were vertically nestled. It squealed on the floor as he dragged it to a spot where he could point it towards the model with an unimpeded view. He then unloaded his supplies from his tattered, green military knapsack, spilling some on the floor beneath. He toted a large, black portfolio, which he unzipped in a fast crescendo, pulling out a sketch pad. The zip echoed loudly, but only in my mind, for no one else seemed to notice. His arm bumped the drawing board of the student beside him. She was briefly annoyed and twitched, but she quickly melted back into the drawing coma she shared with all her classmates. I found myself watching Robbie now, like I'd watched the model a moment ago. He was an interruption of noise and commotion that seemed the very opposite of the magic-making from moments earlier. All of it now blended into a colorless background. But, despite the sudden change in tempo he had imposed, I appreciated his coarse instruction.

I followed him and set myself up to draw as he had done, but without the noise, timidly. I selected a donkey, smoothed my hand over the seat checking for wet paint, and chose a spot in the room that was not with a full sight-line to the model. I was close to Robbie. I could see him well enough, in fact he blocked some of the view. But that felt safe, since I believed if I couldn't see the model fully, the

model couldn't fully see me looking. That sense of voyeurism did not disappear as I tried to draw. My eyes still dropped to my lap, where I was busy fingering my charcoals.

That first free studio I attended was a virginal moment. There was an excitement and impropriety to it, where I could view a naked woman in detail with impunity and then, with implicit permission, detail what I saw. The living, breathing, body on display was compellingly real, tangible. When I allowed myself to touch her with my eyes, I felt her tenderly, hyper-aware she was surrounded by students studying her intimately from all directions. But no one else seemed to notice. They were all happily scratching away on their sketch pads. In that first open studio, I could hardly lift my head to look. I certainly wasn't ready to draw. I spent the hour stealing swift glances at the model, glances at the other students' work. I could barely move my own charcoal though.

When time was up, I packed up my art supplies into the old fishing tackle box I'd brought to hold my supplies and stuffed the sketchpad into my portfolio. My hands were blackened from the charcoal even having only handled them briefly. I washed up in the corner laundry sink. There were no towels to dry my hands, so I shook them and wiped the wetness on my jeans, leaving dark stains of ink trailing my fingers. The model shut down the spotlights, and now the only light left in the room came from the hall. I had much to think about. I was terribly self-critical. My drawings were awful. I'd had no idea how or where to start. I'd been unable to get past the model's nakedness and allow myself the luxury to really look. My drawings might as well have been stick figures and I felt they were worthless. I ripped them to shreds before I left the room and stuffed them into the garbage can. A puff of the drawing bits shot up and floated, teasingly flashing black lines on paper shards. I was disappointed in myself, closed my eyes and hung my chin against my chest.

When I looked up, I saw that model was the only person remaining in the studio, sitting on a chair in another corner, pulling up her jeans over her underpants. She was dressing unnoticed. I was embarrassed to watch her, but doubly so when she looked up and caught me looking. We nodded at each other. I blushed.

It seemed to me the only positive result of the day had been meeting Robbie. He irritated me with his comfortable boorishness, his ability to draw without worrying who cared. I wasn't so confident. But Robbie's casualness was in perfect opposition to my anxiety. I wanted to be like him.

I crossed the hall and selected a locker to leave my things in. The lockers were rudimentary chain-link doors over a metal box, three by six by two. I had brought a padlock with me and closed my supplies in the space. The door closed with a rusty screech. When I walked away, I felt the need to glance back at my still-visible art supplies as I walked the hall towards the exit.

Robbie was at the front door with a few other students, loudly planning to meet up across the street at The Guildsman. He caught me by my arm as I tried to slip by and said "Hey, where are you going? We're all heading over to the Guild for a beer. What's your name again?"

I took a big gulp of air, hesitated and asked myself, "Where am I going? Back to a quiet little apartment downtown by myself?" And before I could think more about it, I shook off a smile, grinned, painfully shy, and answered as confidently as I could muster, "Maya. I'm going home now."

Now, that could have gone differently. My thoughts pictured another story in that split-second. Robbie would have packed up his things abruptly once the model broke her pose and wrangled his way out towards the hall. Before he left he turned to me and said "Come over to the Guild with me." I

would have been slightly stunned and stutter a half-answer. Robbie didn't bother waiting for my words to be formed. He answered for himself, "It's across the street. We've got a whole table in the back with a bunch of us coming. See ya."

He belted out a loud "Maisy!, meet us at the Guild".

But, then I heard, rooting through this whimsical story roaming my imagination, the echo of real words with real live sound.

"Maisy! Meet us at the Guild." Robbie blocked my path to the front door. I swirled to see who he was talking to and saw his words were thrown at the model. I blushed. Maisy said she'd be there. Hopping down the hall putting shoes on her feet one at a time, she hadn't even put her bra on yet.

I went home.

The walk back to my apartment toured a long downtown street. The air was cool and I pulled my jacket close. All the buildings were decrepit, low red-brick fronts with wrought-iron balconies above. Windows were dirty and difficult to see through, but each storefront I passed boasted its wares on large signs, making poetry of the cityscape.

Stamps. Milk. Shoe Repair.

Soup and Sandwich.

Grocer. Flowers. Ladies Wear.

Bar and Dancing.

My pace was set by the rhythm of the signage, step by store by store by step.

Pizza. Keys. Laundry Land.

Coke and Pepsi.

Books. Bank. Burger Stand.

Pawn and Lending.

The key turned easily. Inside, I tossed my jacket on the table, dropped my socks and shoes, shirt and jeans to the floor as I walked along shaking off my bra and panties, going straight to bed. Sleep also came easily.

In my dreams, I followed my dreams.

A long group of students were seated in the back of the Guild. It was smoky and smelled of wet wood and beer. Noisy and bustling, the Guild was clearly a popular place. I found my way to Robbie, who shoved the guy sitting next to him off his chair, brushed it clean, patted it and motioned with his other hand for me to sit. Robbie never paused from his deep conversation with Maisy in front of him, voicing loudly his opinion in opposition to hers. I couldn't track the subject. The disagreement was friendly, but the topic was wandering. I wasn't sure they even knew what they were arguing about. The empty beer glasses between them spoke loudly, though. There was some catching up to do. Before long, I understood about as much of their discussion as they did. Which was irrelevant. Chattering now, my thoughts ran rampant. I was thrilled to be in this group of art students, bolstered on one side by Robbie, on the other by another guy. Everyone was engaged in happy conversation, and my own animated dialogue demonstrated approval of my new-found friends, approval of this gateway to art school, and that I was enchanted by my intelligent future.

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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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