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Guitar Lessons

by Roxanne Lynn Doty



“Circus and Guitar,” by Else Berg, 1928.

George, my guitar teacher, says I should be in Beginning Guitar 2 because I already know the letters that go with the strings and the G, C, F and D chords.

“You can play just about any song with those four chords,” he says and strums the first few lines of Teach Your Children and then I Fought the Law.

Beginning Guitar 2 meets an hour later so I have to catch the 9:00 pm bus instead of the 8:00pm. My brother Jimmy says that’s not too late. It’s only a short ride from the community center to the Apache River apartments and there’s lights nearly all the way to my front door, which isn’t true of the other apartments in this neighborhood. He bought me some spray pepper and put it on my key chain.

“Keep them in your back pocket,” he said. “Don’t be fumbling around in your purse.”

If anybody follows me call 911. I live in apartment 12 but don’t go there if somebody stalks me. I should stay in a public place like Taco Bell or Walgreens. I’m not allowed to drive. You pass the test you can drive. That’s just the way it is, Jimmy says. He knows I can’t pass that stupid test.

I learned the strings and chords from Mr. Jeeters who lived two apartments down from me and sat outside his front door every night on a plastic chair, playing guitar. Jimmy said there was something wrong with him. Stay away from that guy. He ain’t right in the head. But, Mr. Jeeters was okay by me. Showed me where to put my fingers to make those chords. And the letters that went with the strings. E A D G B E. I remembered them right off. Mr. Jeeters smiled and shook his head. “Sara girl, you’re a natural,” he said. Like I was smart or something. I never remember things from the first time. Me and Jimmy practiced my bus route three times before I started guitar lessons. Walk from the community center across Jackson Street to the bus stop in front of Big 5 Sports; get on the bus that says Monroe and 10th Street on the front. Don’t get off at the first stop, wait ‘til the next one: Monroe and Wilson. There you are. Apache Rivers.

“Sara, why don’t you take this guitar home for the night so you can practice,” Mr. Jeeters said one afternoon.

He handed it to me like it was a baby. I practiced all night, played the strings and chords and mixed them up in different orders. The next afternoon I didn’t see Mr. Jeeters outside. I knocked on his door so I could give it back to him and no answer. I went back the next day and the next. Then some police cars came to the parking lot and two officers banged and banged on Mr.

Jeeters' door and one of them went to get the apartment manager who had a key. The police officers saw me standing outside my apartment and asked if I knew anything about Mr. Jeeters. I shook my head. I didn't tell them about the guitar. Jimmy said if they wanted to talk to me anymore I should call him first. Turns out Mr. Jeeters shot himself in the head and lay on the floor dead all that time I was knocking on the door.

George says it's a real good guitar, a Fender. He has a Martin and a Gibson, but you can't always go by the name. Go in the music store, he says, hold the guitar and play some chords. You gotta get a feel for if it's right for you. Each one is different.

Don't pay attention if anyone bothers you on the bus, Jimmy says. Just ignore them. Men look at you, don't say nothing. I like to watch people, but I say okay to Jimmy and never tell him about who I see at the bus stop and on the bus. If I had a boyfriend he'd be like the guy at the bus stop last week who stood under the streetlight with a book, brown wavy hair tied back in a long ponytail with one of those scrunchy things. My hair is short and curly now, but I still have a bag full of them, all different colors. The guy's was pale blue. He didn't take his eyes off the book the whole time, like it was the only thing in the world. He looked like a prince. I bet he knows all the chords and strings and can play real songs. That's the kind of boyfriend I'd have.

I used to live with Jimmy, but he got engaged and the girl he got engaged to moved in and said the apartment was too small for all of us. Her name is Virginia. She has a dog and doesn't like cats. Jimmy got this place for me at Apache Rivers and paid for three months rent. You need to get some kind of job Sara, he says. You're gonna have to start paying something. That's just fine with me. Then I can give the manager a pet deposit and get a cat from the Humane Society.

Jimmy says he pays for enough and he's not going to buy food for a cat. Well, I'll take care of my own cat. I don't know where to get a job. Jimmy's taking me to a place on his day off, but we'll have to do some more practice bus rides if I get a job.

Dancing Man rides the 9:00 pm bus. He wears cut-off denim shorts and a red jockey hat and black socks that come to his knees and green high-top Sketchers. He lifts one leg and then the other and hops from side to side. He waves to all the cars that pass. The two beer guys laugh at him and the skinny lady in the wheelchair looks away. He makes me smile. I'm thinking about music from my class and I wonder if Dancing Man hears songs in his head that go all the way down to his feet. When he takes a rest from dancing, he looks at me and winks like we share a secret.

"I seen you get off at Apache Rivers," he says. "Is that where you live?"

I nod. Jimmy said don't tell nobody where I live. Be careful of strangers. Like I was a kid instead of a grown up twenty-six year old woman.

"I live out there," Dancing Man says. He points toward the mountains, but it's dark and I can't see anything except the moon which is almost gold and looks like an egg that fell over on its side.

"Right under that moon," he says. "In a castle."

I picture a castle with a tower and Rapunzel hanging her hair down the side for the prince to climb up to her prison and rescue her. My hair used to be long. Virginia took me to Great Clips to get it cut. She said I would look stylish and not so wild. Virginia works at Great Clips but another woman cut my hair. The other woman says without all that hair people can see my pretty face. Jimmy's a mechanic at Mohave Auto and thinks Virginia's a step up from other girls. Martha lives in the apartment across from the one Mr. Jeeters lived in. She's who told me he shot himself. She has short black hair and bangs that hang to the tops of her eyes. Jimmy says she looks like someone put a bowl over her head and started cutting. I can see white hair close to her

scalp.

“Why’d you cut off your hair?” she asks me.

“Virginia said it’s stylish.”

Martha shakes her head. “Don’t let nobody tell you what’s what.”

Jimmy says there’s something wrong with Martha too, but he doesn’t tell me to stay away from her like he did with Mr. Jeeters. She wears a tan raincoat when she walks to Staples with her Soviet Union papers. She carries them in two Safeway bags.

“Do you want me to help you, Martha?” I ask. Staples is across the street from Apache Rivers and I can find my way back easy.

“No, sweetheart,” she says. “These are secret, Soviet Union grain embargo papers. I’m doing research.”

I watch her shuffle slowly down the sidewalk to the traffic light, a Safeway bag in each hand. Even in the hot summer she wears that raincoat. Even when it doesn’t rain.

“I’m going to let it grow back,” I call to her.

The bus stop is bright even at night, lights from cars bounce off the street and the Big 5 Sports sign is all lit up. Cars in the parking lot, people going in and coming out. There’s a drive-thru at CVS next door and the Speedy Cash Payday Loan store stays open until 10pm. Don’t go in Big 5 without me, Jimmy says. When I go with him and Virginia, it’s don’t try on the running shoes. Don’t play with the tennis rackets. Sometimes they have tents all set up so people can see what they look like. Don’t go inside those tents. Don’t put those energy bars in my pocket. Or the ginger candies that cost fifty cents.

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George forgets the time and the man from the front desk opens the door to remind him of when the community center closes. When I get to the bus stop the 9pm is just leaving. The two beer guys are pushing each other around, laughing. Drinking something out of one of those metal water bottles. They smell like Jimmy does when he drinks too much beer, which he doesn’t do anymore since he met Virginia. One of them looks at me.

“What’s your name, curly head?”

Don’t pay attention if anyone gives you a hard time. I don’t even look at them.

“Can’t you hear me little girl?”

The other guy shoves him.

“What you got in there sweetheart?” He points to my guitar case.

I hold the handle real tight. I’m thinking of the strings in my head, saying the letters over and over so I don’t think about anything else. E A D G B E.

“Can you play something for me?”

Big 5 is still open. I walk across the parking lot.

“Come on back here, baby,” one of them calls. “We ain’t gonna hurt you.”

A rack of sports watches stands next to the rows of running shoes. One of them looks like a dress-up bracelet. Deep, deep maroon, smooth and hard with an opening to slip over your wrist. A tiny oval piece of glass covers the clock numbers. Don’t pick up anything in the stores, don’t even touch.

“May I help you?” A girl with a plastic Big 5 nametag on her shirt walks toward me.

I look at the running shoes and see a pair of high-tops.

“I want to try these on.”

“Those are men’s shoes.” The girl reminds me of Virginia.

They look just like the ones Dancing Man wears except they’re yellow. I look at the other shelf

with women's shoes. The Sketchers look the same as the men's.

"I know," I say. "Do you have them in blue? Dark blue?"

She shakes her head and brings me the yellow ones. I put them on and walk around in front of a short mirror on the floor that only shows your feet. When I get a job I can buy these for myself. Don't go in Big 5 without me. Jimmy can't always tell me what to do.

"We close in fifteen minutes. Do you need anything else?"

I shake my head and take off the shoes.

I'm halfway through the door when it squeals like it's an alive thing. The sound hurts my head. I drop my guitar case and put my hands over my ears. The girl who reminds me of Virginia walks fast towards me. And a man. A man who looks like an artificial person. A plastic man with perfect pale yellow hair and brown shoes, shiny like he just rubbed them with shoe polish. A tall man with a frown across his face and a Big 5 nametag like the girl's. He stands in front of me, the girl at his side. The noise stops and I drop my hands.

"We're going to have to check your purse."

"And that guitar case," the girl says.

E A D G B E – E A D G B E. I put my hands back over my ears, but I can still hear them. The man reaches down and unhooks my guitar case and lifts the guitar half way up and takes out the picks that were in the case when Mr. Jeeters loaned me the guitar. There's a green one from the Ernest Tubbs Record Shop in Nashville, Tennessee and another one from Tootsie's. Mr. Jeeters said he played at Tootsie's one time and lots of famous musicians played there and their pictures are all over the walls. The man takes out the thing George gave me.

"It's called a capo," George said and showed me how it hooked on to the neck and changed the way the chords sounded.

George might could be my boyfriend if he wasn't fat and didn't keep his hair so greasy. It hangs to his shoulders and always looks wet. He has a bald spot on top and wears sandals and his toenails are real long. He's nice to me and smiles when he checks to see if my guitar is in tune. He has to tune everybody else's.

The girl takes my purse off my shoulder and unzips it. She doesn't even ask. She rummages through everything, takes out the change purse with my bus money in it and my Walgreens card and the I.D. Jimmy took me downtown to get and the Burts Bees chapstick I found in the restroom at the community center and a hair band for when mine grows back. And my cell phone with Jimmy's phone number programmed so I can call him fast in an emergency.

"Okay," the plastic man says. "I don't know what set that thing off. Maybe it was that capo. It still had a price code stuck on it. She got a cell phone in her purse?"

The girl nods.

"Maybe it was that, sometimes they set things off."

He closes up my guitar case and the girl hands me my purse. I walk through the door and the noise starts up again, but the man waves and tells me to go on through.

The 9:45 bus pulls up when I come out of the store. I'm glad to be away from those screaming doors. The beer guys have left but Dancing Man is there, doing his little jig. We get on the bus. We're the only passengers except for the old guy in the back who looks like he's asleep.

"You ever ride to the end of the line?" Dancing Man says.

I shake my head. "Where is the end of the line?"

"At the lite rail station. Then you have to catch the train to wherever you want to go."

I rode the lite rail with Jimmy one time. He took me to a Lucinda Williams concert downtown. Before he met Virginia. He wanted to smoke pot first and have some drinks at the concert. We

took the lite rail so he wouldn't have to drive. Jimmy's very responsible. He's a year younger than me, but calls me his little sister. That ride wasn't a lesson like our bus rides for guitar class, so I didn't pay attention to the stops. Only the other people riding with us. There were some high school girls wearing short, short skirts with their butts hanging out and tight tank tops and skinny high heels that Jimmy called fuck-me pumps. Lucinda came back for two encores. It was before he knew Virginia.

I count off the first stop, so Monroe and Wilson is coming up. I recognize the corner where Martha crosses to Staples with her Soviet Union papers.

"Look at what I got." I stand up and reach into my back pocket where I keep my key and spray pepper and pull out the maroon sports watch. It says 10:15pm under the little piece of glass.

Dancing Man looks at it and smiles, moving his head from side to side and tapping his feet.

I slip it on my wrist, pick up my guitar case and get off the bus. I won't tell Jimmy I missed the 9pm.

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About the artist: Else Berg was a Dutch painter born in 1877. In 1942 she and artist husband Mommie Schwarz were arrested by the Germans and sent to Auschwitz, where on November 19 they were executed upon arrival.