

MY STOLEN GUITAR

BY

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“Hollywood for Children”. I would practice saying it in between answering the phones. I knew that if I sounded more American, I would be better received, but that didn’t make me pick up the messages any better. I asked people to repeat their phone numbers and spell their names slowly so I could write the information down. Many times, I would just scribble the first few letters and never get past the area code for embarrassment of asking more than once... but still Rose never complained to me. She heard and saw everything like a hawk but in the greater picture that wasn’t all that important to her; she could see I was coming into my own and it didn’t bother her as long as business kept going. She had me come in three times a week to start. I would answer the phones, send faxes, mail letters at the post office, pick up the dry cleaning, get coffee and pick up her ten-year-old son from the UN school on the East Side.

I was loving my new role of office assistant at the Audrey Hepburn Foundation, Hollywood for Children, and learning about how life works in the city. It was amusing to witness the wealthy lifestyle in NYC from the help’s eye. I didn’t have to clean her bathrooms any longer, but I sure needed to wise up and be on top of things, find addresses while delivering envelopes on foot, quickly understand Rose’s tasks and call people back to deliver her messages, and set up appointments.

I had been living guitar-less since I had arrived and that created a void in my soul masked by the logistics of living in a new country. I had sold my beautiful Telecaster to buy a plane ticket to NYC; it broke my heart but opened a door I needed to enter. My decision was based on the faith that I had to take that step; I knew everything was going to work out. I knew I was going to have another guitar someday, somehow. Guitars are just part of me like an ethereal DNA, if I lose one, another one regenerates out of thin air to help me through the next step of my life.

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I was now feeling more settled and riding on the inertia of my newcomer momentum. I carried the beginner’s luck freshness where fear hadn’t lodged itself yet so that I would go for the things I wanted without being fully ready.

“OMG, I found a band in the Village Voice!” I told my roommate Angela.

“Really? That’s amazing, Eliane!”

“Yeah, I’m going to meet up with the singer on Friday, but I need to find a guitar. I’ll check out the used ones on 6th St.”

“No, wait, don’t get one just yet, my friend has a guitar at her house that she never uses, let me ask her if you can borrow it,” Angela told me before leaving to go to work.

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The next day she told me her friend was bringing the guitar for me at the restaurant. *Awesome!* I gleamed. Beginner’s luck working at its best.

“You can use it for as long as you need; someday I’ll get guitar lessons from you,” Angela’s friend said.

“Of course,” I said. “Anytime!”

I brought the Fender Squire home, a Sunburst Strat with a white pickguard equivalent to my old black Strat entry-level guitar. I had captured the first token to enter the games. I immediately developed a close relationship with the guitar and made her my own for the time being. I had to tune it all the time because it wouldn’t hold, and I had to adjust my playing to make it sound good, but I was skilled at those things from experience with my old guitars. I was so thankful and determined to make it sound amazing no matter what. It felt reassuring to have a stranger believe in me and support my cause by lending me their instrument.

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A few days after that I went to meet with the singer of my new band. On a sunny afternoon we met outside Grace Church on Broadway and sat on a stoop to talk. Venus was a petite sassy girl wearing a denim overall and a cut up top revealing her fit dancer midriff. She wore a big smile and had ambition to be the next Prince. Most things she said went right over my head. A Brooklyn native, she spoke fast and used plenty of slang at a speed beyond my ability to catch. We, however, found common ground in music and communicated just fine through it. We went to my place and jammed for a few hours. *Thank God I have this guitar!* I thought, making the instrument sound as good as it could.

“How did it go?” Angela asked that night.

“It went well, I hope I get in!”

The following week Venus called, inviting me to a rehearsal with the rest of the band.

Wow, I’m in a band in NYC! I couldn’t stop smiling. That was huge. I had been in the city a few months and things were moving fast.

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My bandmates were excellent musicians of diverse backgrounds; I was so proud of being in the mix: Kenji, a Japanese bass player of impeccable groove; Pierre, a soulful Black jazz saxophonist; Simba, a solid drummer from Long Island; Gary, a world music percussionist who had toured with Roberta Flack; Heather, a powerhouse recording artist who supported Venus on vocals while fiercely waving her silk scarf on stage, and me. I was so thrilled by the level of musicianship and the professionalism of the band. I was doing all I could to pull my weight. Thankfully I matched the playing aspect and there were no complaints there. But my equipment was basic and weak, so it was surprising to me that they took me in at all. Aside from the guitar that struggled to stay in tune and had thin-sounding pickups, I had a couple of pedals that helped make it sound a little better but no good amp to match. I had a little practice amp but that wasn't going to cut it in a club.

The rehearsal spaces had amps, so I was ok for the most part and skated through the initial phase without any problems, except... the band now had a manager and she sniffed me out. We were about to play our first gig at a venue that required us to bring our own amps and I was in trouble. She called me to "have a talk". I still struggled with having a full conversation and making myself understood which probably irritated her as she kept raising her voice, but I was able to understand that this was an ultimatum. She was a Queens girl and told me straight up that I needed to either shape up or hit the road.

"Well, the point is we need you to be up to the part," she almost shouted.

"I know, Beth, I'm really trying," I cried, fruitlessly seeking empathy.

"I'm sorry things are hard for you, but this is business and I need to take the band to the next level," she bluntly concluded.

"Ok, I understand," I said, not knowing what the next level was.

"You must bring a decent amplifier to the gig on Saturday, or we simply can't have you in the band," she threatened.

"I will," I assured her, not having a clue of how I would make that happen.

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Naturally, the band wouldn't have any trouble finding a replacement in NYC and I knew it. I wasn't going to let that happen. Financially speaking, being in the band was a bad deal; it cost me rehearsal money and we didn't get paid from playing original songs at the clubs, but in my mind, it went beyond that. On a personal level, I was living my dream and the band was part of my identity at the time. I needed that more than I needed money. The strength built from that experience would be fuel to get me to the next level.

I didn't know many musicians from whom I could borrow an amplifier for the evening and wasn't even ready to buy a used one either. So, I explained the situation

to Venus, and she helped rent one for the day from S.I.R., a reputable studio with a vast inventory of high-end sound gear. I needed Venus to leave her credit card on file as I didn't have a card, or a bank account, and I paid her cash for it.

We were playing the 9 pm slot on Saturday night. I got to the place early. I brought my rented Fender Twin amp upstairs to the club on Houston right across from the Angelika Theater. There were a handful of people upstairs and this gig was so important to me. It was our first gig after rehearsing for months and it would finally validate my dream of playing in NYC. I was wearing a pleated plaid gray mini skirt over black leggings, ankle combat boots and a black t-shirt, hair down, makeup and contacts. The stage was to the right of the bar against the back wall, it was dark, smoky, and noisy in there.

We played a fairly decent set with great moments that got us all to high five each other at the end of the show. We were promptly rushed off the stage as soon as the last chord rang out and the next band started to set up. I was very careful of the amplifier and never left its side until we all said goodbye and left the bar. I hailed a cab and loaded all my gear in, finally taking a deep breath. *Thank God all went well!* I thought to myself, relieved. I took in the sights from the window; it was a beautiful night. I passed Gramercy Park and experienced being in a three second movie scene. Zip. There it went, and on to the East Village.

The cab stopped and I was so happy to be home. *Mission accomplished*, I thought.

Unload the amp, unload the pedal bag, backpack. Where. Is. The. Guitar?! *Gasp.* The cab driver assured me I didn't have a guitar when he picked me up. I panicked. A hole formed in my stomach.

"Wait for me, I'll be right back, we need to go back to the club!" I said, bringing my amp and gear to the apartment.

We turned back and drove straight to the club. I jumped out of the car and explained to the bouncer: "I just played here, I forgot my guitar by the stage, I have to go up!"

He let me through, and I ran upstairs. The band was still playing. I scanned the side of the stage and saw nothing.

I asked the bartender if he saw my guitar. "No, I didn't."

I asked the sound guy. "Nope."

I asked the waiter. "No, I didn't see it, I'm sorry."

I asked some guys in front of the stage, negative.

The hole in my stomach got deeper, just like when I got my bike stolen at the beach back in Brazil, or when I took my new portable electronic keyboard that had a built-in drum machine to school in 7th grade and it was gone from my backpack after lunch. Oh, my God, *somebody took it! It's not here!* Then another terrible thought...*The guitar is not even mine!* And fear... "What am I going to say?" And

terror... *“I have a rehearsal on Monday! They’re going to fire me if I don’t show up and I can’t show up without a guitar! And embarrassment... “I’ll have to explain what happened, oh my God, I’m so irresponsible!”* The hole in my stomach turned into a knot in my throat and I held the tears back while I was still trying to gather clarity to resolve the situation. *I have to find my guitar; I can’t walk out of here empty handed...* I went back to the side of the stage and looked for it once again, under the stage, near the bathroom, in the bathroom, behind the stage... *wait, there’s a door to another room:* it was ajar, and I pushed it in revealing an inactive dusty kitchen serving as a storage room. There were stacked tables and chairs, boxes and tools over the counters and the stove, brooms, sound and restaurant equipment everywhere and... guitars... Guitars!

I see 3 or 4 guitars just thrown on a table among some junk, some are missing pieces and strings, they aren’t name guitars, they look more like props but nonetheless they are GUITARS! My heart is pumping fast, and a million effervescent thoughts take over, there is a surge of energy masking any thoughts of guilt and righteousness, I quickly assess which of the prop guitars would be in the best shape to be functional, a Les Paul look-alike, and not thinking twice I grab it by the neck like I’m capturing a wild goose and quickly walk out of there. I am full of adrenaline.

I walked past the stage and the band hadn’t finished the set yet. I smiled at the bartender, and he saw that “I found my guitar”. I went downstairs and nodded to the bouncer as I walked up to the curb and left in a cab for the second time that night. I had just captured, or stolen, another token. The fake Les Paul felt like a hand-off from the Universe, which made my guilt manageable. It was also a token of faith in the obstacle course that powered me to go a little longer.

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Meco, my best friend from Sao Paulo, came to visit in 1994 and brought the kind of fun only we can have together. The silliness of our spontaneous photo and video shoots, the excitement of roaming the city, the memories, and the same old jokes that somehow never failed us. We carried his camcorder everywhere and our worries only amounted to how much battery was left to use.

“Look, it’s The Plaza Hotel!” he exclaimed excitedly as we turned the corner from 5th Ave.

“Oh, yeah, it’s so beautiful,” I added.

“Let’s go inside!” he said, leading us.

“Do you think they’ll let us in?” I second guessed.

“Of course, we can visit the lounge and pretend we are guests,” he said with his permanent wide smile.

We immediately got into character. Not tourists staying at The Plaza, no, we were Brazilian rock stars on location to make a music video.

“Look, how gorgeous!” Meco pointed his camera everywhere: chandeliers, wall trims, wallpaper, chairs, rugs, mirrors, flowers, people.

“Let’s go upstairs,” I said, pointing at the staircase.

We found ourselves on a spacious floor upstairs, sectioned into three main parts by large white columns all decorated in deep tones of red and gold, with velvety seating and gigantic mirrors.

“What is this door?” I asked, opening it onto a divine-looking marbled bathroom.

After our photo session in the lavatory, we set the boombox by one of the columns and turned on the camera. Meco was wearing a black beanie and eyeliner, running from side to side of the room, and singing to one of our demos coming out of the speaker. He appeared on- and offscreen from behind the columns as I followed him around with the camera pointing up at his 6’2 figure.

“Now it’s your turn,” he said, taking over the camera.

No one seemed to pass the room--we took more pictures and videos with the stolen guitar.

“Look, more stairs.” I pointed at the steps that led us to a lower level where a shiny grand piano stood by marvelous drapes.

“Ok, play something and I’ll come filming from the top of the stairs.”

I was wearing a brightly coloured wide-sleeved top and had wild hair that made me look like a modern hippie.

We kept moving through the hotel with our paraphernalia and we found an empty theatre behind one of the many of the doors we tried.

“Wow, it’s a theatre!” Meco said incredulously. It had about one hundred red seats, a wide stage, a piano, and a plump red curtain.

Meco jumped on the stage, and I knew what to do. Boombox and camera ready to go.

He performed for an imaginary full house for about ten minutes, moving enthusiastically from side to side on the stage as I filmed him and changed the music he was syncing to.

Inevitably, we got caught. The hotel security guy asked us to turn the camera off as we pretended that we could not fully understand what he was saying. Well, the ancient dumb foreigner trick didn’t work this time. He made us leave with all our stuff.

We simply couldn’t stop laughing as we watched the videos for hours and hours when we got home.

Meco left after the summer, and I went back to my immigrant life of odd jobs and several roommates.

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I was now entering Year 2 of my Coming to America Journey, of what would end up being a series of ever-evolving stages of difficulty in an ever-evolving Virtual Reality video game. *I'm doing so well*, I thought. I had a job as an office assistant at the Audrey Hepburn Hollywood for Children Foundation and lived in a tiny room in a huge loft on 11th and University Place and was able to make music. Life was great.

A dull film layer is lifted when you step into the reality of your dream, like unwrapping a candy bar; colors and flavors become sharper. I'm now animated in my dream, both as a spectator and as the main character, a role I had assigned myself many years back while looking through the vivid pages of imported music magazines, lounging and daydreaming with friends after school.

The gritty grayish tone of 8th Avenue on a Tuesday afternoon is the usual back canvas to the yellow river of cabs framed by attention-grabbing letterings everywhere: the delis, the shops, Madison Square Garden, the subway signs, and the newsstands.

I get off the bus and fit right in like a puzzle piece in a gigantic moving engine. It's 1995 and I feel glorious. I'm nearly invisible to the incoming sidewalk traffic; I'm a grain of sand in this urban sandbox but I feel larger than a beach seashore extending out as far as my mind's eye can see.

I have the stolen guitar strapped on my back, and at all times, my faithful flimsy headphones over my ears. I turn onto 30th St., one of the city's most populated musicians' hubs, passing Rudy's music shop and walking right up to 251 W 30th, the Music and Arts Rehearsal Building. Less than a year ago, just off the boat and before I discovered the Village Voice, I was the awkward girl stopping musicians in the street looking for a band. Little did I know this address would become one of the most stable pinpoints on my life path GPS, where thirteen years later I would get the job of my dreams teaching professional adults how to play in a band.

I go up to Ultrasound on the 6th floor and find my bandmates setting up in the studio. "Hey, Louise," they say. I smile and let out a chuckle because I'm happy to greet them and because I think it's hilarious that they have so readily adhered to my alter ego name, the one I gave myself after long drunk consideration; it was a name that kept coming up under different scenarios, a good American name, nonetheless. I had been told by a girlfriend that I looked like Mary "Louise" Parker in *Fried Green Tomatoes*, I was reading every self-help book I could find by "Louise" Hay, and I

found out that Madonna's middle name was "Louise", too. At the time, Madonna had been regarded as an absolute Queen, so I thought it was just perfect. I could combine the appeal of Ms. Parker, the wisdom of Ms. Hay, and the confidence of Ms. Ciccone.

Louise helped make my social anxiety a lot more manageable; it seemed easier to say "Louise" in somebody's ear in a loud smoky bar in the Village than to say my real name and answer the "where are you from", "why did you move here" and "how long are you staying" questions. No doubt, she was a lot more self-assured than I ever was at twenty-five: she was studying to be a lawyer, wore hats and smoked clove-flavored cigars. She was brisk and didn't really give anyone the time of the day unless they looked attractive to her. Louise was set in her path and not at all concerned about what anyone thought of her, she came alive after dark and was in for a good time anywhere she went, and that she had. We were so different but we both loved Cosmopolitans.

Life carried on and I clung to the false sense of security provided by my part time job at the office supplemented with various survival jobs: house cleaning, bike messenger, pizza maker for the day, occasional dishwasher, cocktail waitress. I was already trapped in a Catch-22, but I believed that something was going to pan out working with Rose, after all, I had been with her for over a year already. I hadn't realized that my beginner's luck had expired. Nonetheless, the band was going to work out, it had to, how would it not? *We really have something good here*, I would think wholeheartedly to myself.

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My band still carried momentum through the Spring of '96, and that kept me on track and connected to my dreams.

We played our last show at The Tunnel, an iconic dance club in the city. I had bought my own amplifier but was still using the fake Les Paul. I was excited to play at that club and wore a white vinyl tank mini dress from the Strawberry store and high black lace-up boots. That was the most exciting show and the biggest venue we played. As soon as we finished the set the DJ unknowingly blasted a dance track that our backup singer had released, and her powerful voice echoed through the club as we were breaking it down. We were astonished when our main singer Venus, in a fit of jealousy, stormed out of the club. She never reached out to any of us after that and we all concluded that the band was over. Weird? Common diva fit? Who knows? As in any breakup, life goes on and we have no choice but to pick up the pieces and eventually build something new.

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In survival mode, many decisions have to be made on a regular, even daily, basis and they are all potentially fatal. I had my intuition and instinct, my faith in life and determination, my drive and creativity, but not a lot of guidance from anyone with any considerable amount of common sense, or at least any more than I had. My family did not consist of good role models who cared enough about my journey to help me through. Maybe I should have known better on my own. I wish I had had Glaura, my 8th grade teacher and mentor, to talk to but she had passed on and wouldn't be writing back to me anymore. I was alone in the world I chose. So, I sometimes made poor decisions and situations unfolded based on my lack of foresight masked by delusional hope.

I eventually lost my job and the place I was living in. I found out I was being cheated on by someone I cared about. Rose had new accountants in the office and fired the under-the-table people. My landlady was one of her business associates, and she kicked me out because I wouldn't have any income to pay rent, let alone the hefty phone bill I had incurred by calling Brazil. She confiscated all my belongings including the stolen guitar and threatened to sell everything if I didn't bring her the phone bill money.

Game over it seemed. I had lost any power I possibly had. *I'm done*, I thought.

Not knowing where to go or what to do, I walked to the subway and got on the A train. I rode it as far as it would take me. A somber silence accompanied me station after station. I got off at Rockaway Beach and walked on the shore along the water. It was a gray day, and the beach was deserted. Many thoughts flew around as the ocean breeze pulled them from my mind, carrying them back to me, some hitting hard and yielding a sea of emotions: blame, shame, weakness, loss, sadness. I picked up a stick and with my face covered in tears I drew big letters in the sand: *H.E.L.P.*

I know in my heart that life is what you make of it. If you want an electric guitar buy one, make one, borrow one, or steal one. If you want to live in NYC, just move there. If you want a memorable life, just create amazing memories. I believe we are given all the tools within ourselves to build a wonderful life. Openness and humbleness will let us access those tools anytime, especially if we can manage to have fun in the process. In the end it is how best you made use of your talents and how many people have benefitted from knowing you.

Author's Note

This story is based on my “My Stolen Guitar” storytelling piece performed on August 15th, 2021. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W_KlcKRiWug&t=107s

Author Biography

Originally from São Paulo, Brazil, Eliane started her studies at the age of 10 and started playing professionally at age 17. Eliane attended the Guitar Institute of Technology (I, G&T) in Sao Paulo, Brazil, graduating in 1989. Eliane also studied Audio Recording at the Musician's Institute (MI) in Hollywood, CA. She is an accomplished guitarist, composer, and sound engineer. Besides being a great musician, Eliane is a remarkable teacher, band coach and arranger. In 2009, Eliane was featured in the *Daily News* as one of “NY’s Guitar Heroes” due to her extensive work teaching Rock Guitar for Kids and Teens. Eliane is the founder of the Eliane Delage Guitar Ensemble (EDGE) and the Happy Hour Guitar jam (www.meetup.com/happyhourguitar).