

Crime

Elizabeth Shove

Harry: 'Do you see what I see?'

Dez: 'No, what?'

Harry: 'A bloke with ginger hair and white trousers. He's got his back to us and he's sitting at the table just behind the column.'

Dez: 'So?'

Harry: 'We could slip past, nick the case on this side and make a quick get-away through the back of the shop.'

Dez: 'But what if it's worthless tat?'

Harry: 'The one on top looks like a violin case, we could easily sell that on.'

Dez: 'OK, but we'll have to be quick. I'm meeting my mum in ten minutes.'

Between them, Harry and Dez have years of experience picking pockets and stealing from unwary travellers. They are usually on the look out for mobile phones, but this afternoon the young man's luggage is just too tempting to ignore. They swooped, grabbed and vanished into thin air.

Three seconds later, Andrea returned. Oliver had promised to look after her Stradivarius while she went to the loo, but ... she looked at the empty space behind the table in disbelief. It had gone. It wasn't there. She looked again. It really wasn't there. Oliver, how could he! Oliver, who was also in shock, called the transport police right away.

Outside the shopping centre, Dez and his mum gave each other a hug. They made their way back to their favourite café. There was a huge hullabaloo. Police were everywhere. A young woman was distraught, and so was her boyfriend, who turned out to be the man with ginger hair and white pants.

Dez sat his mother down and went inside to order two large lattes. When he came back, she was full of gossip. Someone just stole a violin, and the owner was on her way to play in a concert somewhere in the North. Dez shrugged. Stuff happens. Nothing they can do about it now.

An hour and a half later, Dez knocked on the door of Harry's flat. Three quick taps, to signal that it was him. They sat on the torn leather settees surrounded by the boxes of counterfeit watches that Harry had got for a cut-price rate. Dez opened the stolen case and, sure enough, it contained a violin and two bows.

Harry: 'I told you so. Dave gave us a hundred for the last one, and with any luck he'll do the same again.'

Just then someone rang the doorbell. No one, but no one, uses the doorbell. What if the cops had tracked him down! Harry peered through the spy hole. A Deliveroo driver was standing outside – Pizza Napolitana for Harry and Verdura for Dez. Harry checked the order and nodded.

The pizza guy handed Harry the boxes and turned to go. As he did so he spotted the violin on the table. 'That's a good bit of kit you've got there' he said. 'I play the fiddle myself – folk tunes from the Balkans'.

Harry was always quick to spot an opportunity. 'You can have it if you like, £200 the lot, including the case and the bows.'

The driver picked up the instrument and looked it over. He noticed the label inside one of the F holes: Antonius Stradivarius Cremonensis Faciebat Anno 1694. It must be a fake – there are dozens of them in circulation these days. Even so, £200 was not bad for a well-made fiddle. He'd just been paid – cash as usual – and he handed over half of last month's wages there and then. As soon as he got home Marko – part-time Deliveroo driver, part-time musician – knew he'd struck lucky. It couldn't possibly be a real Stradivarius, but the sound was amazing.

Nine months later...

Andrea's promising career had stalled since the loss of her precious violin and these days she didn't go out much. On this occasion, Oliver was insistent. He had tickets for a charity concert in Hammersmith, in aid of the Howard League for Prison Reform. Romani music was not her thing, but when the Croatian fiddler began to play, she got goosebumps all over. The sound was so familiar, and yet so strange. Surely it wasn't, surely it couldn't be *her* violin?

The musicians on stage were in another world: melding with their instruments and pouring body and soul into tunes that had been passed down through the years.



Harry and Dez, who had been tagged and given special permission to attend, were also in the audience, courtesy of the Howard League. Dez dug Harry in the ribs. Look, over there, it's the Deliveroo driver, the one who bought that violin off us. Don't you remember, it was a just few days before we were nicked for fencing those dodgy watches. As usual, Harry didn't remember.

After the concert, Andrea and Oliver walked home in the rain. The insurance company had eventually paid out, but the stolen Stradivarius, now valued at £1.3 million, was still missing. It had been played by previous generations of soloists, all at the top of their game, and in the right hands, it took on a life of its own. Now too hot to sell, and worthless on the open market, it might never be heard again. Andrea stared at the wet pavement. She might eventually get over the theft, but nothing could be worse, nothing more criminal, than an everlasting silence.

Little did she know that she had just heard 'her' violin or that it was alive and well and having a fine time as a fiddle in a Balkan folk band. Marko was convinced that his group's success – and their new recording contract - was attributable to the distinctive sound of his mystery instrument, but he wasn't going to let on. After the concert, Marko put the fiddle back in its case. His career was starting to take off, and he'd be devastated if it went missing or fell into the wrong hands. He knew, for sure, that it was the key to his new life.

Note: this is a story, but it is based on an account of Min Kym's stolen violin, heard on Radio 4, Sideways,

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/m0030127?partner=uk.co.bbc&origin=share-mobile>