

Saved by the Bell

The café door dings as the old lady pops her head in and says in precise English: “He took your bag.”

Kate and I look at each other and try to plug those words into our current situation.

We’re sat on a corner in Barcelona’s Gothic Quarter, warming up after admiring Christmas decorations strung across a nearby square. Our cartoonish-looking hot chocolates are barely touched. Is this granny – who’s already bustling off – even talking to us?

Then Kate glances down and she can’t see her handbag. Not under the table, not by her seat, not anywhere. The handbag which contains her purse; our passports; the keys to our hotel room ...

“Oh my God.” Her words are flat with shock as we realise we’ve been conned, somehow, by the ragged man who tapped on the café window 30 seconds earlier. Who grinned at us, did a little dance, and waltzed away laughing.

When we turned back to our drinks we’d shared a shrug, and maybe thought it was a shame to see someone wandering that way on a cold Sunday morning.

And then we’d both forgotten that lopsided, smiling face, until he abruptly became the centre of our universe again.

But I’m not pondering the elasticity of time as my chair screeches back and I charge into the alleyway. Dark, old stone blurs on each side as I pound forward, with no clue where I’m going.

Then I lurch around a cobbled corner and he’s there. The star of the show, 15 feet away and peering into Kate’s purse as another man – obviously the one who darted softly into the café during his friend’s routine – holds it open.

My brain is moving much, much slower than my feet, so the fact there are two gentlemen ahead of me – both of whom are criminals and either of whom could have a knife – is delayed elsewhere.

I’m so surprised I’ve caught up with them that I just barrel forward, bouncing every Spanish swear word I can summon off the narrow walls. This double act seem a bit shocked themselves as they turn pinched faces towards me, which is probably why one of them drops the red purse.

“OK, OK, OK –” The man’s taller than me, but looks like he mainly breathes fumes to survive.

“Cabron, puta –” I’m half glaring at them, half looking down to scoop up the leather and see what’s missing. Credit card’s there, passports are there ...

Both guys are now backing away as I move forward at the same pace. The situation slows into weird uncertainty; I am now rifling through a woman’s purse, while these two thrust out hands full of innocence.

Their grimy nails make me realise that I appear to have stopped three feet from the two amigos. They stare at each other, and I wonder if their new scheme might be to repeat the theft, with a bit of assault thrown in.

“Fuck you.” This is embarrassingly unoriginal, but as adrenaline washes down the back of my neck, it is literally all I can think of.

And – thanks perhaps to my shaved head, in combination with decades of footage of English hooligans going berserk in continental cities – “Fuck you” is what they hit back with.

For a beat we stand there, taut. I can’t go forward or back. And then we both seem to decide that the situation is finished, and start to move away.

My hands are shaking as I walk back, forcing myself to think of anything else that might have been in the purse. But there’s nothing. It’s all there.

The whole scene mustn’t have taken three minutes since that *à via* appeared, her chime marking the most important moment of our day. How long might have passed before we noticed? How much trouble would we have faced if she hadn’t been there to save us?

I pass our café window and wave Kate’s purse at her, feeling stupid. Glancing up and down the street, there’s no sign of our shuffling saviour. Maybe she’s back decorating a Christmas tree somewhere.