

"I'm going broke! It's the out of town shopping centres and the internet taking it all away from the high street. I don't know how businesses like mine can keep going."

I grunted. I'd heard it before. But he was right. I waited for the rest of the tirade.

"It's about quality. They don't understand. If you buy a decent pair of shoes, they'll last you a lifetime."

I grunted assent again.

"I provide the kind of quality that people need in this disposable age, but they just don't know they need it. And I can't match the prices. If I could make shoes three times as fast, then I could compete, but I can't"

And it was true. I was sitting listening to him, wearing a pair of his shoes. Good leather, well made and well cared for. Waterproof, broken in and comfortable. Very old school, but very good. We were sitting in an old school pub as well. Wooden floors, old beer mats, rickety tables with cast iron legs and solid wooden tops, not quite enough light to read by and a landlord too mean to add an extra bulb or two. The kind of landlord who asked you to move away from the meagre fire in the grate because "you're blocking the heat from the other customers" when we were the only people in there. And if you argued, you were barred.

At least we thought we were the only people in there until:

"I'm sorry. I couldn't help over-hearing your conversation. You say you're a cobbler, a shoe maker and you can't work fast enough. I think I can help you. I know a little bit about shoe making. The real skill comes in getting the last right, cutting the pattern from that and then creating all the different parts in leather. Am I right?"

The stranger who interrupted us was very striking. Even in this light I could see he had a very distinctive appearance. Dark skin, good looking, the kind of eyes that seem to look into your soul and an extraordinary silent-movie-villain moustache. My friend opened his mouth to agree, but the stranger continued without stopping

“Then, when you have all the parts, the only thing to do is to put it all together with a sewing machine and a bit of glue. And that’s the easy part, right?”

“Well...”

“Well ,yes! It’s all relative, of course, but the pattern and the cutting, choosing the leather are where the craftsman’s skill comes in. Where it really makes the difference. Right? Right?”

“Yes, but...”

“And that’s really the skilled part. The bit that takes the time and the knowledge. Am I right?”

“Well, up to a point...”

“I knew you’d agree, because I’ve got some experience, me. And I know where I can get shoes assembled cheap.”

A silence followed, eventually broken by the stranger.

“Look we don’t know each other. You’ve no reason to trust me, but let me make you a proposition.”

I’d like to say the room fell silent anticipating something momentous, but we were the only people in the bar. We fell silent. Waiting.

The stranger went on.

"I'll make you a proposition. Offer you a test."

Our silence allowed him to continue.

"If you prepare the raw materials and provide the pieces, then I can get the shoes made up overnight for you. You leave them on your work bench, let me have a key and when you come back to the shop in the morning, I guarantee the finished shoes will be waiting for you to sell. There will be a nominal cost and at some time in the future I may ask for something additional in return of course, but it'll be something you weren't expecting to have, so you won't miss it. It'll cost you nothing, but a little effort of will."

My friend the shoe maker was uncertain, I could see him wavering. Here was a complete stranger offering to help him, but at what price? But he was desperate and desperate men will cleave to seductive strangers. And if he couldn't deliver on what the stranger asked, so what? What was he going to do?

At that point the stranger said

"I expect you're wondering exactly what this is going to cost. ? Can I suggest a price?"

At that point he mentioned a sum which even I, as one totally ignorant of the shoe making industry, recognised as irresistible.

My friend's jaw dropped. He had nothing to lose. Some further conversation followed during which the stranger offered more re-assurance and almost convinced me that he was genuine. My friend was only too willing to believe and offered his key and the deal was struck.

I lost touch for a while after that, although I passed my friend's shop occasionally and it was obvious that business was booming. Clearly the deal had been a success, for my friend at least. And then the shop closed.

There was a notice on the door "Relocated to larger premises. Visit us at...." It gave an address in an upmarket part of town. I strolled over there and saw the shop from the outside. It was large and had clearly been expensively refurbished. There was even an article in the business section of the local rag with a picture of my friend beaming as he stood in the door of his new premises, with two attractive assistants behind him. Things had obviously turned around.

I resolved to visit my friend and ask him how things had gone from despair to success, but like so many resolutions, it slipped my mind for a while. And he was clearly too busy making money to meet in the pub as we used to.

So, I was a little surprised to receive a call one day saying that my friend was at the police station and had asked to see me.

"You're the only one that will understand."

It was the first thing he said and he looked desperate. His expensive suit had seen better days. And sitting on the cot in a police cell, he looked dishevelled.

"What happened?"

It was an unnecessary question, but it filled the gap.

The story came out in a pretty broken fashion, so I won't subject you to the stuttering, discontinuous tale that I heard. What follows is a summary.

The stranger had kept his side of the bargain. On that first night. My friend had left out 5 complete pairs of shoes ready for assembly and the following morning there were 5 pairs of shoes ready for sale: all well sewn, perfectly made.

The pattern of events continued and my friend increased the number of pairs of shoes he was able to leave out each night to the extent that they were soon collected by a van and a driver. The stranger had continued to deliver even though my friend did not see him again for a while. You can guess from what I have already told you that the business prospered, the number of shoes produced increased and the stranger, despite his non-appearance, was apparently able to keep up. The quality was good and the word spread and the shop moved and everything was looking rosy.

Then a short while ago, one evening, my friend opened the door of his house to see the stranger standing there, smiling. It was the first time he had seen him since that night in the pub and, although he hadn't forgotten about him, the stranger had moved to the back of his mind. He invited him in, of course, and offered him food and drink as well as his profuse thanks.

The stranger accepted all three and enjoyed them while my friend waited nervously for the inevitable, which came, inevitably, as these things do...

"You'll remember our bargain, of course."

"Of course."

"Then you'll remember that I have yet to specify the additional price of your success."

"Yes." A drawn out reply, nervous.

What followed next may not come as surprise to those of you who are familiar with stories of this kind, but it was a bit of a shock to my friend.

"I want your first born child."

As you can imagine, this was followed by a bit of a silence.

Eventually.

“And if I don’t comply?”

“You will. The consequences of not doing so would ruin your business, your marriage and your life.”

And with that the stranger walked to the front door and let himself out.

Now, you need a bit of background here, as I have not told you of my friend’s personal circumstances. He was married and he was devoted to his wife, as she was to him. They had been happy together for a number of years while they struggled to make money, but they were childless. The way the business had grown occupied much of his thoughts and his wife had supported him. They had tried for children, but had been unsuccessful. Then there had been the tests which had confirmed what they knew in their hearts and they had accepted it. All of which explains why my friend was not over concerned by the stranger’s demand.

He had said nothing to his wife about the arrangement with the stranger. He had explained it all away by saying that he had found a source of shoe assembly himself and took all the credit, in his wife’s eyes, for the businesses success.

So, he put the ultimatum to the back of his mind again and life continued as before for a few pleasant months. He was beginning to relax and enjoy the fruits of his success. His wife also began to relax as the stress of financial worries disappeared. And maybe that was the cause of it all. They were relaxed, free from the stress and unusual things happen sometimes as a result of this. So, one day he came home to find his wife waiting for him at the door, beaming..

‘Sit down. I’ve got some news’

He couldn’t really imagine what it was, but she continued to beam.

Again, as an astute reader, I am sure you can see what's coming.

His initial reaction was the same as his wife's: sheer delight. Surely this was the icing on the cake, the completion of their near perfect life. He glanced into the future and saw their new family in their new home with a successful business. All in all, a very rosy future. And it was not until that night in bed that the secondary reaction hit him.

He lay awake turning over the possibilities in his mind. The stranger would not return. The stranger would return and he could persuade him to change his mind. The stranger would chose an alternative reward. The stranger would insist on his original demand and he would ignore it. There was no way the stranger could enforce it. He'd go to the police. There was nothing he could do. And so the next 8 months or so were passed in public joy at the way his wife's belly was growing and private anguish and fear that the stranger would reappear.

The day came and a boy was born, A happy, healthy bouncing boy and there was great rejoicing. Both boy and mother flourished and life on the surface was good.

Then another day came, the one my friend had been dreading. The stranger reappeared at the door. The ensuing conversation was calm, but left my friend trembling.

"You remember our agreement."

"Yes."

"Well?"

"I can't do it!"

"Do you want to reconsider that?"

"I can't. My wife doesn't know. I couldn't possibly..."

And his voice trailed off as the stranger turned and left with the parting words...

"You'll regret this."

And he did. The next day the shoes left out for collection were still there, unassembled. From there things started to fall apart. He had no way of putting together the shoes he had orders for. Customers started demanding their shoes or their money back. Cash flow issues built up. He couldn't pay the rent. The money shortages hit home. The overdrafts built up. His wife had to take their son and move in with her parents at the other end of the country.

Then there was a knock on the door again. He opened it, expecting the stranger, but instead there were two policemen.

It was shortly after this that I saw him in the cell and he recounted his tale and started sobbing. I was confused.

"But why did they arrest you? What was the charge?"

"They didn't at first. They went through all the usual formalities. Asked me to confirm who I was. Then they asked me to accompany them. All very polite. We got into their car and drove across town to a large factory complex. We went into a large hall filled with work benches, sewing machines and shoe lasts and high with the aroma of leather. There were groups of men and women standing round chatting and smoking. I didn't know what the language was, but it wasn't English. The police took me over to a work bench and showed me a pile of shoe pieces, uppers, soles, tongues and so on. They asked me if they were mine and I confirmed that they were."

He said that at that point the attitude of the two policemen changed.

“We’re arresting you on charges of human trafficking, illegal immigration of labour and exploiting foreign labour. And I’m sure there will be one or two other charges as well.”

At that point he broke down and wept again there in the prison cell. And my time was up and I had to leave. I don’t know why he had called me. There was little I could do.

The next time I saw him was in court, the following day.

After the usual legal preamble he was asked to explain in his own words what had happened. He related the tale. He explained what had happened and tried to make it sound convincing. He didn’t mention the stranger’s final demand. The story sounded unconvincing enough without stretching the court’s credibility further. Listening to it, although I believed it all to be true, I have to admit that it all sounded very thin.

“I didn’t know who was putting the shoes together. I didn’t know it was illegal immigrants. You have to believe me,” he finished desperately.

I watched him from across the courtroom. As he finished his story he looked up, looked directly at the judge and his expression changed to one of absolute horror. I followed his gaze and watched as the face of the judge slowly morphed into the unmistakable face of the stranger we had met in the pub. As the transformation came to an end the judge opened his mouth and said with something of a smile beneath that moustache,

“And who did you think was making your shoes for you. At such a ridiculously cheap price? Elves?”