

Books

'Gone: A Girl, A Violin, A Life Unstrung'

Gone

A Girl, a Violin, a Life Unstrung

'Suspenseful, devastating, redemptive . . . it is about who we are, how we love, how we grieve' *Mail on Sunday*

'Thrilling'
Observer

'Gripping'
Sunday Times

'One of the most extraordinary memoirs I've ever read' John Boyne, author of *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*

Min Kym



by Min Kym. Penguin Books. (First published by Viking.)

Part of the subtitle of this book, '....a Life Unstrung', is a real leitmotif of the read for me. Min Kym, a virtuoso Korean violinist, well known on the international stage, may seem to have had a somewhat glamorous and privileged lifestyle but, as Kym

describes it, it could also be a lonely and alienating one. The 'Gone' of the book's title seems to refer as much to her family, childhood and adolescence as to her violin. It's a difficult book to put down.

If you have ever lost or mislaid a treasured item, or had belongings stolen, you will begin to feel the terrible anguish that Min Kym experienced at the loss of her Stradivarius violin. If you have been fortunate enough not to have suffered such loss, then be prepared to discover how it feels in this poignant book. The violin was not merely an 'investment'; it was Kym's extra limb, her soul, part of her.

Kym was a child prodigy from a traditional Korean family, who were ambitious for their prodigiously talented daughter but also reluctant to allow her to let go of the time-honoured virtues based around obedience and respect. They gave up more or less everything for her and at six years old she had "found her voice, her element." She unusually was only a year older when she joined the Purcell School, subsequently playing in professional concerts as well as winning international competitions in her very early teens.

In those early years her violin was in turn a Panormo, a Gagliano, a Bergonzi – often a small-sized instrument to suit her slender build. Eventually, at the age of only 21, she had a thoroughbred, a Stradivarius! But there were many conflicts going on: her Korean roots contrasted strongly with life in the UK; she struggled with asthma; there were money problems – it was expensive living in another country, especially with travel and tuition costs; and she didn't have many friends. She seems to have had a very accelerated childhood, which did not include much in the way of friendships or social contact or even simple fun. Her conservative background kept her very sheltered. Meanwhile, her prodigious playing was increasingly captivating the profession and audiences alike, and she had a number of renowned tutors, Ruggiero Ricci perhaps being her favourite.

I loved her descriptions of her treasured instrument. From the Stradivarius 'long pattern' period, it was "feather light, a slender body, a slim neck, enchantment waiting." "Get cross, treat it with impatience, and my violin would seize up, sulk. Be kind and it would respond with generosity, wings to my shoulders." A crescendo of delight and expectations and hope builds up to the crux of the story, which is, of course, when the instrument is stolen.

Min Kym had met an engaging young man at Prussia Cove, where she was bowled over by the musical maelstrom. He was in turn charming, manipulative, caring and self-centred, and he basically took control of her and turned out to be rather a malign influence. It was in his company that the much-loved violin was stolen from a station café, which unfortunately linked him to her for a long time. Her dependent upbringing, centred around obedience, exacerbated their relationship.

There are some heart-rending chapters detailing Kym's complete devastation at her loss, leading to what seems to have been a breakdown. She even gave up music and playing, and sank into a deep lethargy. Could she retrain as a doctor, perhaps? Or a lawyer? She replayed to herself the story of her loss repeatedly. If only.... If only.... Yet this was a chance theft at a railway station by thieves who were at first

unaware of the value of the instrument and who even offered it to a bus driver for a paltry sum. Yet, of course, Kym blamed herself over and over again.

From here, the plot reads like a detective story, with the painstaking work of the police assigned to the case and the long wait for news, good or bad. Well, after a very long time, the instrument was found, but the story unfolds towards a rather sad ending: Kym no longer can have possession of the violin. Yet the resilience and strength of this young woman overrides everything and she reconciles her loss by eventually finding again the music within her.

I am now going to reread the book again, this time with a musical accompaniment. Throughout the book there are numerous musical notes in the page margins, indicating the pieces described by Min Kym, and these can be heard on 'Gone: The Album,' to accompany the book, an ingenious idea which will bring this lovely book even more to life.

Chris Bradshaw