

MAGIC CARPETS

The Flying Carpet

Swirling its fringes, it flies past my ear, with the swoosh, but quieter, of one car passing another's open windows. Then, like a stream of cars, another and another swish into the room from both entrances, propelled by the practised swings of the carpet-sellers. They criss-cross each other and land in a pile of panting colours: bright red, terracotta, gold, green, white, black, brown. They lie, slightly stirring, still breathing: alive, silk shimmering and wool wrinkling. They are still now, illuminated by delicate parallels of bright sun shafting through the four-leafed clover lattices over the windows. Their passengers are patterns, shapes, symbols that can be read if you know the language.

We, the audience, sit on wicker chairs at the circumference of the room with glasses of apple tea in our hands, mesmerised; we know it is a practised marketing skill, as with each carpet comes the murmured price - from high to low. It makes no difference that we acknowledge the technique, we are happy to be manipulated, to be led up the path of desire - *we must have one*. We are eager to see which one is at a price we can afford. No, the price we are willing to pay to the limit of our travellers cheques (these are the days before we trusted credit cards abroad). We crave to take one home, to own one.

Some resist, we do not. We touch carpets, rugs – in piles, turned over by one of the murmuring, smiling, black-haired, black-bearded, black-eyed men, who ought to be wearing gold silk turbans, waists bound with fringed sashes, up turned slippers and a curved sword. My husband, John, mutters of a longing for a silk one, but we know we can't afford it. Besides, they are made by children up to ten years old, after that, the fingers are too big. We, the pinko socialists, cannot condone that. We touch the wool, making the tufts fall and rise as we pull our fingers cross it. Rug' is the right word for this rough/smooth object where a stroke across it is an arm's-length, the right sound with its long vowel emitted through the teeth after the fish-pout of the first consonant. *RUUUG*. A rug is for toe-warming and the curling of cats – it is friendly. 'Carpet', its two short, snappy syllables separated by a sharp, petulant aspirate, is grander. It wants to be in a large room or a palace, its job being to cover and soften a floor. Even hung on the wall, it takes more than the length of an arm to stroke its width. In the story-world of fantasy, it has, in a lyric translation, to be a Flying Carpet, an impressive trochaic dimeter. A 'flying rug' is cuddly, homely, the soft bark of a welcoming dog, especially with a rolling *rrrrrr*. The difference between them is akin to that between a flying horse and a kitten.

'These are very fine -150 knots to the square inch.' It is a soft intonation - *please buy this kitten*. 'It takes six weeks to make such a rug.' This rug is just a little more than hearth-size. How long does it take to make a silk carpet? 'A year or more.'

'What colours do you like?' This is addressed to me. All of them, no, not these gaudy patterns, not this bright red. Something more subtle, something made from a fawn-coloured sheep. We find it: fawns, browns, dark reds, golds, blues. Two central rectangles with apse-like ends, inside a rectangle of daisy heads, inside a rectangle of line curved-at-one-end-patterns and hanging candelabras, inside a rectangle of trails of diamonds, inside a rectangle of dark, dark brown. It is made of the colours of the spices in the Grand Bazaar.

'You can walk on them, or you can hang them on the wall. This is what we do.'

The choice is made. The rug is folded and put inside a large brown paper bag. We get on the coach, most of us with such bags. Our guide will get a good commission for stopping here. I don't want to leave this bejewelled cave with its tasselled dreams, the prelude to entering Istanbul for the first time.

This is when the space between the Blue Mosque and the Ayasofya is still uneven grass, in the centre of which is an art exhibition in a shed with a café. There we share baklava dripping with honey and thick Turkish coffee with sand at the bottom of the cup with Guilin, our guide, who becomes a friend, who visits us. The curving tufted lines of the rug become a symbol of the eternal curving, twisting and lapping of the Bosphorus. The triangular candelabra, looked at the other way up as it hangs, are ships, full of fish or cargo, resting near the Galata Bridge. From here can be seen that which initiated the desire to come here, glimpsed in a programme about Middle Eastern cooking, the architecturally-perfect sunset skyline of this mysterious, pulse-racing-stopping city. On our last night, after dinner, we take a taxi which is required by John to deviate so I can see the Süleymaniye Mosque lit up against the sky.

The rug goes home in the spare suitcase. We are skilled at bringing loot home: our clothes occupy a medium suitcase inside a large one. The rug, our first together, is hung, its colours at home with the golden-wood bedstead and wardrobe. In daylight, it is stroked as we pass, at night, it is gazed at from the bed before the lights are extinguished. It will remain in the closed eye, a sign of the whispering Ottoman, of the enchantment of domes and minarets, of the blues and greens of the Harem tiles. Perhaps we will dream of the city - the enchanting, bewitching, bewildering, scary city. Of the Grand Bazaar before it becomes repetitive rows of the same t-shirts, factory-made kilims, and cheap machine-made trays - when it is lanes of colour lined with a miraculous multitude of stalls. Of handmade goods, finely crafted; copper and metal jugs, tabletops and trays, of antique handstitched clothes worn by shepherds and herdsmen, and village children. A waistcoat, too small now, nestles in a woven lidded box of dry hemp, alongside an embroidered cloth of fine cotton sewn by a nun from a Christian convent in Greece. There are goldsmiths and silversmiths, jewellery made of gems - not glass - and, naturally, carpet sellers. Spices and fruits are here, billowing scents of saffron, herbs, melons. Sweetmeats and Turkish delights with pistachio nuts, of a real gluey substance that satisfies the teeth in pyramids re-built after each purchase.

There is a click, and darkness surrounds us as we close together.

The small carpet is not flying now. It has found its home.

The Greek-Cypriot Carpet

It hangs on an eight-foot wall, with only an inch between it and the ceiling, its fringes pooling on the floor. It once hung on an orthodox wall, Greek Orthodox, a church for St Barnabus on the flattened tail of the squashed-lizard island, Cyprus. A church which bade farewell to its last three monks and its own Christianity when the island was divided between Turks and Greeks, when families had to leave their homes and find others, emptied of their proper people. Perhaps these passed each other on the roads to and from Nicosia.

The church became a museum of icons taken from all over Greece to find a home next to the bombed, barbwired ruins of Famagusta. A seemingly strange cultural decision, an unexpected respect. The village around it is Greek, the museum is looked after by Greeks, the woman knotting a carpet in front of 'ours' is Greek.

There were bombs in Cyprus when I live there, at the time of EOKA, and Archbishop Markarios who both wanted the British out, who wanted the island to be Greek. My father is here to sort out the water supply, he is often, on his arrival at work, or by telephone at night, told that one of his pipelines has been blown up. Years later he tells me he was sure his Greek workmen, the menders of pipes, informed EOKA where the best spots were.

We, teenagers, are oblivious to 'the troubles'. You only know a bomb has gone off if you are near enough to hear it. The nearest we get to them is when, on a Youth Club trip out, we stop at a café in Nicosia to drink Coca-Cola when the window is smashed by a bullet. 'It was a drunken airman,' we are told, and, ludicrous though it sounds, we accept this. We think that going out in car convoys for picnics is friendship, not protection, even though we are aware that when driving through certain villages we must keep the windows closed. Teenagers don't *think*. They dream.

We live in Larnaca, because my father does not want to spend three years in an army cantonment, Dhekelia. Each morning, a coach picks up the Larnaca children to attend school there. We are taught from 8am to 1pm, then the afternoon is spent in the sea, on boats, in the shade of olive trees. On pocket money days we have Coca-Cola with ice cream, the next day, Coca-Cola on its own, then the cheaper Fanta orangeade, then water.

Larnaca - Λάρνακα – urns from ancient burials. Alive with everyday commerce: an Armenian fabric shop, markets of oranges, root vegetables, cabbage, thyme, parsley, and herbs from the mountains, flatbreads and live chickens in crates. With

people: Ali Karim's kebab restaurant, Dimetria our Greek dressmaker, Adrianna, who cleans for the British, lives opposite us and offers coffee and preserves in her house, the music school at the end of our road which I attend - my teacher doesn't speak English, we get by with gestures and pianistic demonstrations. Four miles of sand, just sand, flow from Larnaca to Dhekelia - our sun and moonlit delight, where we sit at the edge of the sea eating melons.

After I have gone, after the island is bombed and divided, the Northern side becomes the Turkish side, it has no direct air routes, is cut off, is a sleeping beauty, with thorns. The Greek side is not cut off, it is invaded by blocky hotels, fish-and-chips, and bars with English names. The four-mile beach is claimed by developers, awash with umbrellas. I do not want to see Larnaca filled with gobby girls and unsteady, 'mooning' lads. I do not want to see the soft, immaculate, gently sea-washed beach where I dived among the little fish and orange and lime-green centipedes to find either end of a crusted Roman amphora, desecrated with vomit and other bodily fluids. I have no desire to return.

Then, after I have married John, the Northern side is opened for tourists, via an airport on the mainland. We go. Kyrenia (Girne, but not to me), the main town, the name chosen by my parents for their house, is exactly the same as in the nineteen-fifties.

Except for the Turkish boys in soldier uniform who mill about in bored groups.

Except for seeing, having crossed the mountains, the Turkish flag painted on the mountainside, with an insult – in Greek – facing Nicosia in metre-high letters.

Except for seeing the barbed wire enclosing the ruins of Famagusta.

It is quiet in the shop. There is a pile of worn woven cushion covers, family remains, for sale. I pick up a long cover for the top of the chest, orange and brown, perhaps fifty years old. Was it owned by a Greek family? A family which is no longer here?

We whisper in front of a carpet and ask the price. She calls out and two men appear. We are astonished at being asked for only a million Turkish lire (£150.00). They cannot take cheques. We have dollars, English banknotes and Turkish lire. The woman stops working to watch as the men produce a calculator each to make currency conversions. They show us the total, we are a hundred lire short. 'Don't worry, the exchange rates change so often, in three days' time your money will be worth over a million.' I move to return the seat cover to its place - we now had only money enough for a meal. The man with the beard waves his hand. 'No, no, you take it!'

With carpet and story-laden cover over our arms – no paper bags here – we walk with the bearded man to a little kafenion. He speaks, and we are welcomed with smiles, are seated on worn Van Gogh chairs. We are served a salad of home-grown leaves and tomatoes, olives and feta cheese with potatoes fried in olive oil which we

understand by a waving of arms comes from the trees all round us. We have Fanta orangeade in tins, and Greek coffee.

In our rented villa, the carpet-rug is spread out and I sit on it to fly. I fly to the courtyard of Kyrenia castle, long ago, where the Halle Orchestra conducted by Sir John Barbirolli is playing Tchaikovsky's Romeo and Juliet, against a chorus of frogs and a blue evening sky with a crescent moon and a star.

The Other Turkish Rug

It has just occurred to me that two rugs, made by the continuous political enemies Turks and Greeks, hang side by side. In perfect harmony. The St Barnabas Greek rug is partnered with one made in Milas, Turkey. The rugs are stroked equally whenever I go past. When I brought home the little black rescue cat, it frightened itself by climbing up and pulling down the rugs on their poles. It also scratched the wallpaper between the rugs, protected now by a cushion made of scraps of Indian fabrics and a cat-scratching pole. The other hallway walls are hosts to Turkish and Palestinian tiles, plates from Venice, Granada and Marrakesh. On shelves, separating books filled with gardens and history, are contemporary ceramic jars with 'ears' and Sicilian majolica. Were we tourists or travellers? Ask the Oracle.

The Milas rug was not bought from whence it came; it is from an exhibition held in Aldeburgh, Suffolk. Aldeburgh, deceptively cosy, its toy cottages and shops leaning on each other for safety and friendship cuddling its fishy, salty smell. Its green-grey sea colours the rug together with the browns, greys, reds and golds of the sucking pebble beach. Britten's *Peter Grimes* and this sea have an unbreakable connection: the music insinuates itself into the seagull's cry and the yawling and shushing of waves whose receding white edges crinkle like a lace cuff over a wrist. When I first saw the opera I tore a paper tissue to shreds. Kent Opera cast a black singer as Grimes; the anguished repetition of his name near the end calls up the slavery in which men have no name of their own, only that of their owner.

John and I go to concerts at Snape Maltings, we always book a pre-concert table in the top floor restaurant. We ask for a table next to the room-long window so we can see how the 'dinosaur' is doing. I suppose it should really be a pterodactyl. It roosts in a tree top, eating its leaves. There are leaf shapes in the rug, red accents that could be veins: blocked veins. The trees have grown together now and the dinosaur is no more. Neither is John.

The Ukrainian Carpet

The Director of Podyllia, the dance company from Vinnitsa in the Ukraine, sits on a chair in our house straight-backed and unsmiling. Opposite is the Chairman of the

Peterborough Ukrainian Society, who asked for a list of the names of the company to ensure himself that they were Ukrainian, not Russian before he agreed to this meeting. In between them, on the sofa, sit our other guests, the married singers Dmitry and Diana. In front of them, on the other side of the coffee table, I kneel (praying?) silently, pouring coffee. John sits behind me. The silence is broken by the Chairman, speaking in Ukrainian. The Director straightens even more. 'Anatoli Ivanovitch Levitsy,' he says. A stilted exchange takes place. Dmitry and Diana, cups frozen in hands, follow the dialogue as if they are watching a tennis match. Anatoli's coffee gets cold by his side. John rises to make another pot.

Suddenly they all relax. A decision has been made. Fresh coffee is offered. The Chairman tells us that he is satisfied and has accepted an invitation to watch the company perform in Peterborough Market Square scheduled for the Saturday in two days' time.

Поділля - Podyllia: named for the region from whence they come, south-west of Kiev, seventeen hours on a train. Like the one Lenin arrives on in the newsreels, travelling through mile after mile after mile of white trunks of birch trees. At the end of the carriage corridor an old woman makes tea in a samovar.

But Podyllia comes to us first, their twin city. I sort out performances, schools, the Arts Centre, the Market Square, hosts, and an interpreter, Victoria (Russian).

The Ukrainians arrive - with roubles. The bank manager is sent for. White-faced, he thrusts banknotes into my hand and tells me that roubles are illegal, how did they get it into the country? He will not report us, as it is an official visit. Officially, I am on strike. The Ukrainians join the picket line in workers' solidarity and take photographs. Unhappily, I cross the line to see my manager. I fear an international incident. He gives me his handkerchief and heads for the Tourism Officer. That night, at the Arts Centre, the audience is told of their plight and a bucket is passed around. The Tourism Officer, late from a boozy reception with Councillors, arrives, somewhat unsteady on his legs, to pull banknotes out of all of his pockets. These are added to the bucket and presented to the company, a fee for their performance. The hosts, without exception, offer cash as well as accommodation. We are thrilled by these exuberant Cossacks, thrilled to be part of Perestroika.

Outside the Town Hall wait the city's Ukrainians, descended from White Russians escaped after the revolution. The company comes out, uncertain when they see the blue and yellow flags. The Chairman steps forward to shake hands with Anatoli. There are murmurs, half-smiles, subdued applause. The Peterborough Ukrainians walk Podyllia to the market place, in front of the Cathedral. The accordions start. They and the costumes draw an audience. The women whirl, the ribbons from their floral headdresses flying as they twirl, their red boots stamping, their hands clapping. As they furl and unfurl across the square, their sleeves and aprons form white and red wings. The men join them, arms over shoulders in a line snapping backwards,

forwards, sideways, heels crashing against stone, arms crossed, knees and legs in the air. The curious high singing metallic tone of the women slides into our ears, and I can hear the rhythms of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*. Gasps and cheers draw more until the crowd is four or five deep. The Peterborough Ukrainians cry, they embrace the company members, they take them off for drinks and presents. A rift is healed. John and I are invited to a meal at the Ukrainian Club. The tables are loaded with food; the room is awash with tears, laughter and vodka, Podyllia dance. We are toasted as peacemakers.

At the airport our Ukrainians have so much excess baggage – stereos being the winning objects – that the woman on the Aeroflot check-in desk looks at the long queue in front of her and telephones for help. We explain who they are. When no one from Aeroflot arrives she shrugs and signals them all through, without payment. Anatoli produces glasses: 'Toast!' and we drink vodka at 7.45 in the morning. He asks what we would like as a present when we came to his city. We answer 'a rug,' thinking, foolishly, of a Bokharan knotted jewel.

We board the *Anna Karenina/Dr Zhivago* train: Peterborough Dance (students), a singer who has learned Tatyana's aria from Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin*, her pianist husband, two visual artists, myself as performer of Shakespeare and *Mac the Knife*, a Peterborough Councillor as official lead, and John. We perform in sports stadia, community theatres, Palaces of Culture, and meet a group of artists. I can bore anyone into insensibility with the stories of that visit.

Anatoli takes John and I and the Councillor to the only jazz club, newly opened post-Perestroika, for a final meal, at which we drink quite a lot. The jazz trio starts to play *Mac the Knife*, and I am led by Anatoli to join them. My last 'professional' singing appearance ever, in 1989, with a Ukrainian jazz trio. You couldn't make it up.

The carpet is presented. Anatoli unrolls it, he looks uncertain. 'Why would you want this?' is in his eyes: a large factory-made beige carpet with a brown pattern. It was an unthinking request, we now know. We have seen the Vinnitsan shops of empty shelves and stale loaves, and we will see in GUM, Moscow, the queues for a pair of slippers at which we would turn up our noses. Rugs from Bokhara are just as much a dream for the Soviets as for us. I am ashamed.

It is huge. The Soviets are highly skilled packers, as we had seen at Heathrow. Anatoli folds and re-folds the carpet into a thick parcel tied with string. He adds a small brown bear. It sits on my dressing table, named Anatoli. He has learned to speak English from my 65 year-old Pooh.

The carpet is no longer with us. It was too big for the bungalow, and lay rolled up until it found space on a floor in my parents' house. After they died it was left there, and sold with the house, twenty years after it left Vinnitsa. The carpet, though not hand-made, had its own stories of the people we met. The people who, in

Peterborough Cathedral, at a folk group concert, got up to dance, and led the British audience round the aisles in a conga...

The Delphic Kilim.

The word kilim, for the woven, not knotted, carpet, is Turkish. For over three hundred years, the Ottoman Turks ruled the Greek peninsula and while the Greeks guarded their own language and their written alphabet, many Turkish words for objects were absorbed, almost without them noticing. One such was κιλίμια – kilimia. You might think the Greeks would have ousted the word when they gained independence in 1821, but they didn't. Perhaps the original Greek word had been forgotten, or it was just a word that potential buyers, particularly foreign visitors, knew, so commercial interest prevailed.

In the 1980s the making of kilims is still a self-contained hand-loom activity in the villages of Greece. The sheep nibble mountainsides smelling of thyme, oregano and sorrel. They are sheared, the skins collected into strong-smelling, dirty heaps. Women pull the wool from the skins, carding it into soft clouds, which are then spun and dyed. Red from the madder root, black from walnut hulls, blue from the indigo plant. Hanks hang from olive branches as they have for a hundred years or more, colouring the village with rainbows. The weavers work indoors, for the sun dulls and bleaches the colours. If the kilims are to look antique, they are laid flat in the sun for days (a questionable activity?). Feet on pedals change the position of the warp threads, the weavers push weft shuttles through them and push down the rows firmly between each pass. Their speed blurs the shuttle. It takes less time to weave than to knot, so the kilims that a village makes can be piled up more quickly. Just as they are in the little shop next to the museum at Delphi.

Δελφί - Delphi ('fee', not 'fy'). The sonorous word, a spondee, defines the mountain site and its view of peaks amid clouds, sometimes dolphin (δελφί) grey, or against a seamless delphinium (άνθος δελφί) blue. The religious site of the Oracle, the female seer, η Πύθων, the Python, who sits in a cave beneath the Temple of Apollo. From here, she emits incomprehensible utterances when asked a question, except to the priests. They translate these predictions in poetry stuffed with ambiguities so they cannot be wrong. They have to keep visitors coming to fill their coffers. Their most famous answer is to Croesus, the fabulous King of Lydia, who wants to know if he will win his current war. He is told: *this war will cause the fall of a great Empire*. Self-centred as he is, he thinks this means the fall of his enemy, the Persian Empire. It is his own empire that falls.

Then, I did not know the theory that the priests had found a natural gas which sent up a drugged smoke, literally entrancing the Python. It presumably affected the questioners above, who had to wait in a designated space. I ask my own question, now unremembered, unanswered I am sure. No smoke now, just mirrors of the past.

Apart from Pythonic predictions, the priests are responsible for loot taken from Sparta, or as tribute from within the Greek Empire: from Thebes, Euboea, Corinth, Argos, Crete. Gold, silver, gems in treasuries commissioned by important visitors, now fallen blocks. These once climbed up the hillside towards the Apollonian temple, towards an amphitheatre where actors spoke-sang poetry to rise on thermals of air. Towards a stadium where high, slim cypresses once watched the racers below. This ancient, built-up, painted and gilded Delphi is a place of festivals, crowded with rich and poor, filled with chatterers and charlatans, with people wanting to go back to their homes to say - *I went to Delphi – I was blessed by the priests. I have won back my soul.*

The last coach party has left and the next has not arrived; perhaps groups of students, whooping and clattering up and down the steps, or adult tourists, largely quieter, contemplating something they know about. Many just take pictures without seeing, to prove that they are here, their grinning portraits set against and hiding the ruins. Others have the contented smiles of people who have longed to be here in person, who look before they take a picture, if they do. The mind can take better pictures.

We look down towards the tholos: what is it about a ruin that is so irresistible, so beautiful? In eighteenth century England, landscapers built ruins into picturesque landscapes, while the Edwardian garden designer Harold Peto wrote that it was all a question of the right amount of masonry with the right amount of vegetation. I'm sure he came here, where this view of the ruins against the green-brown of the mountains, the dark, dark green slim cypresses, the shrubby bushes amid rocks, would have proved him right.

The museum houses the bronze Charioteer, archaeologically uncovered, ineffably, eternally beautiful, holding long-gone reins attached to now-invisible horses. His horses, were they taken to Constantinople? Removed to Venice, where they now are? He is not moving, he is still, waiting for the signal to race. His face is motionless, a beauty which ignores us, travels over our heads. Like that of Michelangelo's *David*. Like the *David*, there are cheap plaster or plastic imitations here, but there are also carefully-made small ceramic replicas on sale, perfect in form and colour. One is bought for my mother.

The tiny carpet shop has the usual pile of kilims, folded into layers of colours, piles from which one will be extracted on request. The owner can spot a serious buyer from a browser, and concentrates on me, the equivalent of Isabella d'Este, the undenied acquisitive consumer of beautiful things. We are not on a tour, we have our own hire car; we are not to be hurried. He speaks to us first in German. 'No, we are English.' He smiles, a smile to his eyes. 'Then I give you good price'. It's what they all say. But I learn later, when in Olympia, from an acquaintance we had made, that the remembrance of the war and the Nazis is still alive with hatred and resentment.

'It isn't so much the British get a good price, it's that if you were German you would get asked for a considerably higher one.'

He states a price. I hesitate, working out what money I have in my bag. Misreading my hesitation for a bartering technique, he lowers the price all by himself. I wasn't into bartering then. My husband, who was, said 'Is this the one you really want?' I glance at two others spread out on the floor, and hesitate again. The owner puts prices on the other two. These are higher than for the one I want, the bright red, white and black one, eight by three foot – he knows which one I prefer. My husband raises his eyebrows, and the price lowers again. He waits, then I agree on the kilim, the red one, and the price. The owner smiles. The kilim is taken to be paid for and wrapped by an assistant, while the owner turns his attention to the next buyer.

The bag with the kilim, and that with the charioteer, is stowed in the hire car, and we stop for lunch in the shade of an awning with a view to where there were nymphs, satyrs, and dryads.

Hung on the wall of the dining-room, it is our only kilim. The Charioteer is broken in my parents' move to our village, so much so that it couldn't be repaired. He is a memory.

As is John.

I question the oracle, the answer is not unambiguous.

Touch the magic carpets. They will fly you to all these places. They will fly you to John.

They are still.