

KATIE AND THE MAGICIAN OF MOROCCO

Short story

It wasn't that often that Katie's mum said, "I've got some good news darling," but that's just the phrase that came tripping off her lips when she met her at the school gate. They had to hurry to the car, because she had parked on a yellow line and had left the shop closed while she came to pick up Katie. It was only when they were on their way that she revealed the details: "We're going on holiday ... to Morocco."

"That's wonderful," said Katie, and then: "How can we afford it?"

"We can afford it," said her mother, "because a rich and famous witch came into the shop and asked me to find her a flying carpet. She is paying for us to go to Marrakesh for a few days to look for one."

"Oh Mum!" exclaimed Katie. "I dreamed that something good like that would happen to us soon!"

"And, we can find some other magical things for the shop while we are there," continued her mum with excitement that was unusual for her: "Marrakesh is the magical capital of the world. Of course the magic shops are secret. We'll have to find somebody to help us. But, I'm sure that won't be too hard. After all, we are witches."

Two weeks later, Katie and her mum flew to Marrakesh. They went by plane, because it's an awfully long journey to go by broomstick, and besides, Katie hadn't passed her flying test yet.

As they came down the steps of the plane, the evening air felt surprisingly chilly. Katie had expected Africa to be warmer. Katie's mum explained: "They say Morocco is a cool country with a hot sun. It will heat up in the day."

The airport bus took them to the city. The reddish-pink walls of Marrakesh welcomed them in. Dusty palm trees wafted the hot tempers of drivers stuck in traffic jams. Mules argued with motorized rickshaws. The air smelt of oranges, spices, and petrol fumes.

The bus dropped them off just outside the Medina... which is like a little city within a city ... a maze of streets and alleys. They would never have found the guest house on their own, but there was no shortage of porters with wooden trollies who were only too ready to ferry their luggage and show the way. One of these led them through the allies, under ancient archways and past dilapidated walls, little shops, tiny squares, and stray cats, to a door that looked just like all the others in the Medina. You could hardly have guessed that behind lay a beautifully tiled courtyard with a fountain and potted palms.

"How wonderful!" exclaimed Katie. "Was that a magic door we just stepped through?"

"No," said Katie's mum. "It's just a nice surprise!"

Their room inside the traditional house, known as a riad, was up on the second floor, overlooking the courtyard. When they had rested and washed, they took a map and found their own way to the great square of Marrakesh known as Djamaa El Fna.

The sound of Dmamaa El Fna is one of the greatest cacophonies of the world. It is a clashing din of store-holders cries, snake charmers Kazoos, storytellers tales, musicians, twangs, and general hubbub. Although it was night time already, the food stalls were a blaze of little light bulbs. It seemed like the whole of Marrakesh had come here for supper and was sitting down on the benches under the canvas roofs. Katie and her mum found soups and stews flavored with figs, and cooked in earthenware pots called tagines.

“And none of this is magic, it’s just normal life?” asked Katie.

“Well, there may well be some magic on the square,” said her mum, “But most of this is just normal life.”

In the morning, they explored the souk, which is the huge market in the Medina. You could wander all day through alleyways and streets, and look at the stores overflowing with pots and pans, clothes and fabrics, spices and dried fruits. But nowhere was there a sign of a magic shop.

“We really need a guide, somebody who knows the secret places,” said Katie’s mum. And Katie wished hard that somebody would come and help them. A few minutes later, while Katie’s mum was examining a lovely piece of fabric, a man came up to her and said:

“Madam, you are beautiful like a gazelle! Let me be your guide for you, and your lovely daughter.”

“No thank you,” said Katie’s mum, who was always suspicious of flatterers. “We are alright on our own.”

Katie thought that perhaps her mum was being too hasty. Her witch’s intuition made her feel certain that help was near at hand.

They went inside the shop and her mum asked the sleepy looking owner.

“Do you have anything magical?”

“Madam, only your eyes are magical things in this market.....”

“Well, thank you,” said Katie’s mum, who really wasn’t open to flattery, but secretly felt quite pleased by the remark.

As they stepped outside, another man stood close by and said very quietly.... “Excuse me Madam, did I hear you are looking for magical things?”

“Well yes,” she replied. “You did hear correctly...”

And Katie just knew that they had found their magical guide. He was young with quick intelligent eyes, and a little mustache. Like many people in the Medina, he wore a long loose robe, with a hood and wide sleeves.

Katie’s mum looked doubtfully at him: “He just wants to take us to his own shop,” she said. Katie felt quite embarrassed by her mum’s unusual lack of tact. But the man was not put off.

“My name is Omar,” he said. “I know all the special magic places. Let me take you to them.”

“Oh come on Mum,” said Katie, “At least he hasn’t praised your eyes or said you look like a gazelle.”

“Well that’s true,” said Katie’s mum with a sigh, and scrutinizing Omar through her dark witchy eyes: “Can you show us where they sell magic carpets?”

“Certainly,” said Omar, and he lead them on through the winding passages, past the slippers and cloths, the painted urns, and the baskets of spice. They came to the part of the market that was full of carpet shops.

“Only one of these has magic carpets,” said their guide, “and you can be sure that I know which it is.”

He took them into a place around a corner, and a little away from the rest. An old man sat peacefully on a stool. He did look kind of magical. The guide greeted him very politely and spoke to him. The old man snapped his fingers and a boy appeared. He sent him to fetch a large carpet which he unrolled on the floor.

“It is very old,” said the shopkeeper.

“It does look lovely,” said Katie, admiring the zigzags and arches that were patterned on it.

“Does it fly?” asked Katie’s mum.

“Oh no Madam, but it does some have some very nice magic. If you lie down on it for one hour a day, you will be thin and even more beautiful, by the end of the month. It is much better than going for runs or not eating nice food, don’t you think?”

“Well, it would be,” said Katie’s mum, trying not to laugh, “but actually it’s a flying carpet that I am looking for.”

“I must tell you the truth,” said Omar. “This man does not have a flying carpet. But what else would you like to buy? I will find it for you, Inshallah.”

“What does Inshallah mean?” asked Katie.

“God willing,” said her mum. And then turning back to Omar: “If you can find me a good supply of something pretty and magical, I can buy plenty of them for my own shop back home, Inshallah.”

“Oh Madam, it is a pleasure to help a lady of business. We will find twenty magic coffee pots at a very nice price for you.”

And soon they were in the part of the market where the copper makers worked, sitting on stools as they hammered out trays and pots.

“This special shop has a very nice pot,” said Omar. “You see the little bird who sits on the top of it. He is the bird of wisdom. If you make your coffee from this pot everyday, you will become very wise. If your daughter drinks from it, she will pass all her exams.”

“I’m afraid our customers back home are tea drinkers,” said Katie’s mum.

Omar bowed. “Never fear. I have just the thing for you, Madam,” he said. “Follow me.”

As they made their way through the illuminated alleys, Katie whispered: “Mum, do you believe anything he says about magic?” and Katie’s mum replied:

“Everything he’s shown us so far is fake. But my witch’s intuition tells me that he does really know where to buy some magic things, and he’s just holding it back.”

“That’s good, because I got that feeling too,” said Katie.

Finally they reached the slipper market. Here you could choose from thousands of lovely pointed slippers with charming patterns on them. But, according to Omar, only one of stores sold magic footwear.

“When you feel tired put on these slippers, and you will be refreshed within fifteen minutes,” he claimed.

“That’s a nice idea,” sighed Katie’s mum, “but not everyone where we live will believe that. In fact, we have laws against selling things that make big claims that can’t be proved. What we need is something that nobody can doubt is magic – like a flying carpet for instance. That’s really what I came to Morocco to find. I am sorry to be difficult, but are you sure you can’t find us a real flying carpet?”

“Madam,” said Omar, “I see that you are a wise lady, and that you know in your heart what you want. Inshallah I shall find it for you, but not in this market. Meet me tomorrow at 7 in the morning. I shall take you to a very secret place in the mountains where they make magic flying carpets.”

“That sounds more promising,” said Katie’s mum brightly. “But only real flying carpets mind you – none of that close your eyes and fall asleep and dream you are flying business.... I want truly magical elevation.”

“You shall see real magic, Madam,” said Omar, “Inshallah.”

The next day they met Omar by the taxi rank. He had hired a dusty old car. They drove out of the reddish pink coloured city, and up into the matching reddish-pink coloured Atlas mountains. They saw goats climbing up trees to munch the leaves, and terraced fields pushing up grass between the stones. The higher they went, the dryer the land became. It was steep and full of pebbles. But on the peaks of the mountains, they could see snow. Eventually the car pulled onto the side of the road, and Omar said:

“Now we must walk. It is the only way to reach the secret village where they make the magic carpets.”

Fortunately, Katie and her mum had both brought thick soled hiking boots. They drank plenty of water as they tramped along the stony path, with the hot reddish-pink sun beating down on them. Eventually they reached a tiny village. It seemed to appear like magic. Perhaps it was magic.

Omar lead them into a house.

“This is my grandmother and my grandfather,” said Omar.

And Katie and her mum said how pleased and honoured they were to meet the friendly old couple. Katie’s toes tingled. She knew that they had magic powers.

They sat down on cushions on the floor. The old lady brought them tea in little glasses, and sweet cakes on a tray. Omar spoke at length to his grandparents, and at one point appeared to be almost arguing with them. Katie guessed that they did not want to show their magic secrets to strangers.

After a while, the old man disappeared into the back of the house, and brought back a small carpet which he unfurled on the floor. His wife spoke some words, in a commanding sort of way, and the carpet began to rise up a few inches above the ground and hover. The old man put his tea glass on it – as if it were a table – and he laughed. They all smiled and Katie clapped.

“Thank you,” said Katie’s mum. “This is what we came to Morocco to find. Is it for sale? Can we agree a price?”

The grandfather named a price. It was rather high, and Katie’s mum shook her head. He named another price, slightly lower, and she still shook her head.

“I’m sorry,” said Katie’s mum. “I love the carpet, but it’s too high. I can’t sell it for that much back home.”

When Omar translated this, the price came down even lower and they had a deal. Katie was pleased, because she really wanted to take that carpet back home and try it out before they gave it to the rich old witch who had sent them to Morocco.

Now that the deal was done, the atmosphere became relaxed. The old man wanted to know all about their shop back home, and what sort of prices people paid for magical things. But while they were chatting some visitors came into the house without asking. One of them was a tall, thick set man, with grey hair and a squarish head. He held a thick stick in his hand. Katie felt his magic powers. They were strong and aggressive. He pointed his stick at her mother in a threatening sort of way. Omar looked frightened and said:

“This is the village elder. He wants you to go with him.”

“We shan’t,” said Katie’s mother.

“He is a very powerful magician. You must do as he says,” said Omar.

“We can do magic too,” answered Katie. Omar shrugged his shoulders and held his hands up as if to say: “Get real,” which he might have said if he knew English slang.

Katie tried not to cry. Her mother put her arm around her. There were several other men crowding into the little house now. They had no choice but to go with them. There were lots of people out on the street now. They were talking excitedly and some people were shouting. They were led into another house, and a little room without a window. The door was bolted behind them.

“What will happen to us?” sobbed Katie. Her mother comforted her and said soothingly. “Don’t worry darling. It’s going to be all right. I promise.”

An hour later, Omar brought them some tea and oranges. “I am very sorry,” he said. “The village elders are angry that I brought you here. This is a very secret place. They do not want outsiders to know about our magic.”

“I realised that,” said Katie’s mum. “What do they mean to do with us?”

“The village council will decide tomorrow morning,” said Omar. “I am afraid you must stay the night here.”

When he had left them alone, Katie said:

“Do you think they will murder us?”

“I don’t know, and I don’t intend to find out,” said her mum. “We will wait here until it’s dark, and then we’ll leave.”

A few hours later, it was completely dark in the room, and uncomfortably cold. All was deathly quiet, except for the occasional bark of a village dog. Katie’s mum got up and felt her way to the door. She tapped it very lightly with her fingers, and Katie heard the bolts fall off onto the ground on the other side. They pushed the door open, and crept through the house onto the street. A dog came running towards them. Katie’s mum waved her arms with a downward motion, and the dog lay down on its tummy.

“Good doggie,” said Katie’s mum. Then she tested the air with her long finger. “I sense the most powerful magic is coming from that house on the other side of the street,” she said.

“So do I,” agreed Katie. Her mother beckoned at the house. The door opened and a carpet flew out towards them. It stopped on the ground at the feet of her mother. The village elder was at the door of the house looking surprised.

“Hop on quick,” said Katie’s mum. And Katie stepped onto the carpet and crouched down. “Hold on tight to my waist” said her mum, and soon they were flying forwards, a few feet above the road, at quite a fast pace. As they rushed along, they were also rising into the air. Katie looked round:

“That nasty man’s got onto a carpet too,” she exclaimed to her mum.

“Faster!” commanded her mum, and the carpet started to accelerate. The night air was rushing through Katie’s hair. Patches of snow were glinting blue on the surface of the Atlas Mountains. Katie could see the minarets of a high altitude mosque.

But the thuggish village elder was catching up on them. Soon he was raising his stick and pointing it at their backs. Katie wondered if it could shoot them in some sort of way. Her mother turned round and pointed her finger back at their pursuer.

“Halt” she commanded. “Oh no,” thought Katie. “His carpet doesn’t obey mum’s voice. Or perhaps her spell can’t reach that far back.”

But actually, the magician's carpet was slowing down. The man started to beat the carpet with his stick. His face was furious as he glided to a standstill in midair.

"He will be stuck there for at least an hour," said her mum cheerfully. Their own carpet sped on through the night air, but the magician raised his stick at the fleeing witches. Katie could feel its cold shadow on her back. She cringed, feeling that she was about to be hit with a powerful magical force. She was sure that she and her mother would go tumbling down to the ground at their doom. "Mum!" she cried. Her mother turned round and snapped her fingers. The stick flew out of the magician's hand and spun off into the sky towards the stars.

And after that, Katie and her mother enjoyed a pleasant flight back to Marrakech. Fortunately it was a dark night, and not many people saw them land on the roof of their riad. Those that did probably thought they were dreaming. Katie's bed never felt so warm and comforting as that night.

They got up late the next day, and had a lazy breakfast on the terrace. Katie's mum bought a few nice but not particularly magical things in the Medina. They took a bus to a lovely seaside town and stayed there for a few days. Katie's mum bought a magic coffee pot there, that really did do magic things, like make coffee without being put on the stove. And she bought some crystals that could stop you getting colds. But mostly they did things like swimming in the sea and horse riding along the beach.

When they returned to Marrakech at the end of the week, they bumped into Omar in the Medina.

"I am glad to see you," said Katie's mum. "I was afraid the village elders might take things out on you."

"They wanted to," said Omar, "But now they are afraid of me, because I know a powerful witch like you."

"That's right," said Katie's mum. "If anyone threatens you, tell them they will have to deal with me."

"I will Madam," said Omar, with a sly grin.

And the following morning, Katie and her mum took the plane back home, with the flying carpet in their luggage.

