

The Red Shoes

By Bryony Doran

The time for take-off moves around on the hands of the clock. The queue is stationary; a murmur of discontent ripples toward you – Turkish officials who came over for the royal wedding have commandeered the plane. You will fly tomorrow.

People start to move away. You watch as they cross the hall and when you eventually manage to control your trolley enough to follow them, they are already circling a woman in a red hat who is giving out vouchers for an airport hotel.

You are stranded, beached by the whale that is your piled-high trolley. There are no left luggage lockers. They are all closed since the bomb scares.

The year is 1980, sometime in late July. You don't remember the exact date; you do remember it was the day after the wedding of Charles and Diana. Your aunt had dropped you at the airport entrance. She hadn't parked and come in, not this time. But she had waited, boot open, while you'd found a stray trolley and with difficulty piled your bags three high. She'd waved you goodbye and watched as you'd pushed your swaying trolley towards the Turkish Airlines check-in.

A few weeks ago you had studied your biorhythms, seen how all your luck plummeted to a trough on this day, the day you were due to fly out of Heathrow; you'd dismissed it as nonsense even though someone had told you that airline pilots tracked their biorhythms, refused to fly on the days they were down.

You want to abandon your trolley with all its bags bulging with other people's desires. The reason for your huge overdraft: a Kenwood whisk that will never be used but hoarded in a bedroom drawer; washing-up liquid, two jars of Nescafé, a trilby for your father-in-law – gifts running out to the most distant of relatives. You want to cry with rage that you cannot walk out of the airport and disappear in a taxi or on a bus or the Tube into London. You cannot even go for a coffee or to the toilet.

You call your aunt, she laughs, she knows your luck runs bad with the airlines; she has been here before. You wait for her in the draught of the pickup point, watch dignitaries from the royal wedding arrive: An Arab with five wives, one who looks English, diplomats in black suits with black bags. You wonder who is sitting in your seat on their way to Istanbul.

Your aunt knows where the hotel is. You pile all your bags into the boot of her car and she takes you there; a square block of windows and concrete. You find another trolley and together you go up in the lift, along a corridor, past chambermaids and trolleys piled high with soiled sheets.

You go with your aunt to her house, sit with her at her kitchen table. You feel flat with frustration; there is a metallic taste in your mouth. You phone Istanbul and get no sympathy. The welcome meal has been cooked. All the relatives have gathered. He and his brothers had waited hours at the airport.

Why didn't you come?

You explain, but it is not good enough.

Why were you so stupid as to book with that airline?

You eat lamb chops, new potatoes and salad with your aunt and her family – she says stay – she will take you to the airport in the morning. You remind her of your luggage at the hotel. Later that night, your aunt's husband drives you to the hotel.

You kiss him quickly on the cheek, and he laughs and says he might see you again tomorrow.

The corridors are empty; you feel afraid. You put your suitcases against the door, turn the lock, and are glad you did so because in the middle of the night someone tries your door. You sit propped up in bed with the light on, dozing, listening.

Next day you fly out. Your husband is there to meet you, terse and unwelcoming. Tells you how you have put his family to a great inconvenience and you lower your head and let him load the bags into the taxi. He talks to the driver. You pick up the odd word and wonder why this place feels so like coming home – the fisherman standing in his tethered boat, feet placed wide, selling his morning catch; the constant song of horns, echoes answering echoes. A skyline spiked with minarets – the air heavy with diesel fumes – the heat – and you want to stay and wander among the noise of the city. But no, you must take the ferry, take the suitcases home; enter a flat no longer prepared in welcome.

The suitcases are placed in the hall. Your mother-in-law circles them, greedy to search through all the contents; to make sure that the presents you have brought her are the best. But your husband tells her she must wait until dusk, wait for your father-in-law. You must drink black tea out of small glasses. Eat pastries of cringing sweetness. Wait until he comes, and present him with his trilby.

Ah, Mashallah, these English make such quality.

You present your mother-in-law with the Kenwood whisk. If you had one at home you would use it all the time, but she takes it, as you had guessed she would, to hide in her room; a treasure to be gloried over in the silent hours of the long afternoons. Ever since you arrived she has been mouthing secretly at you from behind the men – *Cigarettas?* – then raising her eyebrows up into her scarf, or winking at you.

No mother, your husband says. *She has not brought you any cigarettes, what would father say?*

Your husband does not know that you have two boxes of Marlborough hidden among your clothes. You will wait until the day you are leaving and then present them to her. You will part friends. If you give her the cigarettes before then, they will know it was you that brought them into the house. This woman could never buy such quality cigarettes, except from the illegal street runners across the water in Istanbul. Boys, running, catching, shouting – *Marlborough... Marlborough... Marlborough* – as insistent as a machine gun. This woman would never venture there alone.

The aunts come, sit with you and drink tea. They eye you curiously, addressing you through your husband as they wait for presents, presents that your mother-in-law has persuaded him to let her have. You smile, nod, kiss their hands, and serve them tea in tiny glasses. He presents them each with a flat grey crochet hook. They grumble at how you treat such important old ladies and he laughs, his hand to his mouth, and asks them to forgive you for, you see, you do not understand their ways.

The brothers come for their Lacoste polo shirts, pulling over their heads their work-soiled T-shirts, showing chests cushioned with black hair and their father shouts at them for showing the women so little respect and they take their Speedo trunks and go out onto the balcony at the back.

Always you feel inadequate, that you have not bought enough and yet you dread the white envelope that you know will be waiting when you return home. You can hear him shouting, following you around the house,

How? How have you managed to run up such a large overdraft?

You could say – it is my money and I shall spend it how I see fit. But you have learned to keep your mouth shut.

At night you are alone, quiet in the back room of the bottom flat. You unpack your half of a suitcase that contains the few hard-saved, hard-sewn clothes. The thick green washing-up liquid has leaked. It will wipe easily from the cellophane wrapped cigarette boxes but not from your clothes. Wash after wash will not remove the rising suds and you will be scolded for being so wasteful with the water. You separate the soaked clothes from the dry and there, at the bottom, is your one extravagance – a pair of blood-red leather sandals; all leather, even the wedge heel and the stalk that

slots between the toes. You pick one up and smooth your hand across the grain. You place them under the bed but think better of it and put them back in your suitcase. You zip the suitcase shut and place it under the bed. Outside in the yard you hear the Alsatian that you have not yet seen, growling softly. The Imam calls, a single voice in the dark and, weary with strangeness, you sleep to be woken in the morning by your sister-in-law, Esra. At nineteen and already hurrying towards old age; a tooth missing, a belly slack from two small boys; sons to be proud of. She eyes you with envy; you are a threat, the wife of the elder son. A man-woman, an educated woman who chooses to help with the chores, who does not have to swill the yard or jump to her elders' command.

Before the heat of the day penetrates the quiet streets of wooden-slatted houses, you venture out with your husband. You carry a present that he has salvaged for the important aunt. The aunt you must visit. She thanks you curtly for the fine blanket. She wants to know what the other aunts received. Your husband explains and she smiles, toothless. You have gauged it right. She presents you with a hand-embroidered scarf.

You can wear it now - be a good Muslim woman. Mashallah.

You eat lunch at home in the courtyard. You are shaded from the sun by a vine, heavy with ripening fruit. It is strung along criss-cross wires. You try to help with the serving. Your mother-in-law bids you sit. For the first three days, you are to be treated as a guest in her house and besides, she sits down opposite, you are a good girl. You stare back puzzled. She nips your arm and raises her eyebrows up into her scarf, blowing imaginary smoke rings into the air. Esra serves you meatballs, salted beans and torn bread. She has tied her scarf tight at the back of her neck. Sweat is dripping from her pale forehead, gathering in her black brows. You thank her as she pours a cool glass of water for you. She laughs and says that as her older sister, you are welcome.

The dog whimpers hot in the pit below. He is chewing something red, a bloodied bone.

After lunch you go and stand by the rail and look down at the dog.

It is not a bloodied bone.

It is a blood-red sandal.