

Chapter Eleven

Magic Carpets

Steppenwolf: *Magic Carpet Ride* > *Lyrics*

Brian was unusual by Kabul standards. He was clean-cut, intellectual, and only smoked a little hash. His outward interest was filming a Kabul/Afghani experience. He had a Sony Beta recorder, which was analog and recorded on tapes but was considered state of the art. It took a considerable amount of effort to configure it properly and achieve decent video and sound, and at least two people were needed—one on the camera and one on the tape deck to monitor the sound.

But what really fascinated me were his shoes. He had designed and overseen the handcrafting of a three-eye lace-up loafer made from Oriental carpets. I'd seen nothing like them before. Unique and awesome, they were distinctive—like his personality. We learned later that he paid as much attention to the details in his Afghan business as he did in designing and crafting shoes from rugs. He's one of those who drifted into our sphere of influence, filtered through the Credo of the Road.

Brian and his traveling friend Mark attended one of the live music nights at our hotel. Our chillum caught their attention at the small gath-

ering. Neither Brian nor Mark had obvious traits that marked them as a particular nationality, but I noticed something that jogged my mental notepad for further investigation. Some laughter and joking opened the door to another chillum, which Brian offered to load up. He pulled out some handpressed Afghani, which was excellent. *Right. We're on equal terms.*

Through casual dialogue, we established Brian was most likely a Canadian, and Mark a Brit. Both had significant road dust on them after some months in Afghanistan. Brian, of course, had those exceptional shoes, which were a conversation starter. Camaraderie ensued, and they wandered into our hotel courtyard regularly. No invitation needed.

Mark was Brian's go-to guy as the subject of his videos. Our courtyard became a location shoot for the transition segments of the Kabul scenes. It was a good time, and we developed as friends. Lots of smoke, joking, and bullshitting, and a lot of respect. Brian was circumspect about his extracurricular activities, and we respected that. Lynyrd Skynyrd's song "Don't Ask Me No Questions, I won't Tell You No Lies" writ large. Scott and I became cameraman and sound guy. Dave was the master of ceremonies, overseeing activities with his signature grin, reflecting a calm consideration of events, and assuring a chillum was at hand at a moment's notice. As my first venture beyond photography, video captured my imagination and reared its head much later in my life. It also garnered a lot of unwanted attention from the locals, although I don't think it amounted to any kind of threat to whatever we all were up to.

Brian had the deportment of an intellectual who knew how to cloak it in convivial conversation and deprecating humor—a mark of a seasoned professional. He was good fun and provided us with a wealth of insight and useful local intel. He had extensive knowledge about Oriental carpets, which piqued our interest. In fact, he turned us on to one of his

sources. It was a key development and cemented the position of Brian as a Dot in my life.

The carpet contact was Noor, proprietor of a well-established business of Oriental carpet importing and distribution, and a retail store with a focus on authentic Afghan carpets, handicrafts, antiques, and jewelry. His store was along the route of our Kabul walkabouts. We were stoked at this bit of good fortune, especially the fact that Brian recommended him.



Collectively, we knew next to nothing about carpets (beyond that which we gleaned by questioning Brian). In addition, we had zero experience in legal importation to the US and had not identified our customers. Those facts were not a deterrent to our plan. Actually, we didn't even have a plan, but it felt like a good idea, and we proceeded—and drank more chai (tea) than we thought possible!

Finding carpets for sale in Kabul was as easy as finding sex shops in Amsterdam's Red Light District—no shortage of availability, but the quality of the goods varied dramatically. Fondling the merchandise in Amsterdam before you paid was frowned upon, but it's essential with carpets.

We channeled Brian's experienced counsel to us as follows: "It's a hands-on proposition—in fact, the first thing you do is turn it on its back and slowly caress the surface. You feel the texture, stiffness, materials, and look at the knots—the smaller the better, and the more per square centimeter the better. Turn it back over and look closely at both edges and both ends: Cotton warp or wool? Is the pattern familiar? Are the colors bright, or do they have a patina? Is the pile height mostly uni-

form? Only expertise and experience can delve into the more defining details like the dye used, the quality and type of wool, the provenance of manufacture, and the tribal affiliation—nomadic or regional. There is so much to know that accurate and reliable information is difficult to come by.”

We appreciated Brian’s patient and insightful guidance, but Scott, Dave, and I felt we had reached the limit of seeking any additional input from him without overstaying our welcome. We had to rely on Noor from that point forward. Hence the need to be comfortable and confident in his knowledge. Not having expertise or knowing our customer demographics in the US made it imperative that we got the best we could find and afford. Screening Noor got underway over chai—green or black tea. And lots of it!

Noor was a challenge to understand. A merchant in Afghanistan occupies a respectable place in the scheme of things, and must be a master of languages and foreign cultures. He must also skillfully maneuver among cultural and tribal realities while navigating third world bureaucratic obstacles. All of that while maintaining the liquidity to purchase product, keep the doors open, and cover expenses for and importing and exporting goods. A merchant capable of successfully executing those essentials demonstrates an admirable set of negotiation skills and application of clever thinking. Such a person is a highly gifted and intelligent human being.

But that doesn’t mean they think the same as you. Gaining insight into what makes a person like that tick is important. Not only to negotiate for the best price, but to find out if he is playing it straight with you. A recommendation from Brian was valuable, but we had in mind to purchase a lot of carpets and accoutrements like donkey bags, camel collars, and a few other odds and ends. This sizable investment needed

to be handpicked one carpet and item at a time, and that was only the basic proposition. Goods needed to be bundled, wrapped, and transported; customs formalities prearranged, fees handled, and other details attended to. Any errors or omissions along the way could jeopardize the shipment.

Most days, we could find Noor in his store lounging on a stack of Oriental carpets. He smoked Western cigarettes, and though we never smoked hash with him, I'd bet he would have agreed if it meant a sale. He was a portly man, always wearing a tailored suit, a dress shirt—but no tie—and stylish loafers. He sported a closely cropped full beard and black hair combed straight back—the style worn in Hollywood movies from the 1950s. Very un-Afghan! His accent in English was hard to place. Certainly not British or American. It's likely he was educated in Europe as he spoke many languages, including Russian and Chinese, with a well-honed ability to speak and understand English.

He was a very affable guy and interesting to engage in conversation. We needed, or at least wanted, to have a deeper understanding of his motivations. It was a challenge to navigate the fundamental cultural differences, especially without experience. Fortunately, it solved itself by us letting go of a determined effort and just engaging with and observing him.

Imagine walking toward the sound of music coming from a band playing in a park. You can't see them and didn't know there was a concert. At first you hear the drums, then the bass. As you get closer, you can make out the mid tones, then pick up the vocals. Before you can discern the song lyrics, you recognize the music—of course, that's Van Morrison! All the information comes together, recognizing the song as "Into the Mystic" by Van Morrison.

That's the way it went down with understanding Noor, and he proved to be pretty much what we saw from the beginning. He was a prime example of a Dot that emerges in stages, whose subtle progression of importance belies the depth of its significance.

Noor schooled us in more than Oriental carpets. His knowledge and experience of doing business in Afghan style was invaluable. Cultural insights, historical perspective, local customs, and skirting bureaucracies surfaced as a swimmer takes breaths between strokes. Investing several hours a day over some months was fun, enlightening, and put us in business. Easygoing, as honest as an Afghan carpet seller can be, and competent. We doubted we could do better. So, Noor it was, and we got serious about selecting carpets to ship back to the States.



Walk inside a carpet store and it immerses you in sensory delights. Usually in stacks, the individual carpets flow into each other, but you can sense each one as a unique piece of art, handwoven in a professional tradition that has passed from one generation to the next. The air carries a musty scent of history and the inevitable passage of time, and a deep organic aroma, rich and complex, emanates from the wool. The blend of sensory pleasures creates a feeling of being grounded, much like a concert piece that relaxes you into your favorite sofa at home. Like the ghostly finger in early TV children's cartoons, the wafting of aromas drifts through the air, lifts your body into a prone position, carries you over to a pile of carpets, and beckons you to relax in their splendor.

Handwoven carpets are magical, a powerful touchstone for history and tradition, representing a heritage woven into pieces of art. They are essential elements found in every tribal tent or home.

It takes exceptional talent and sore muscles to weave no more than 10 cm (4 in) of rug in a day. Depending on the size, a carpet can take as long as six months to complete. Even a small prayer rug can take a month. It's tiring, repetitive labor, toiling day after day.

Companies built large industrial looms to increase the speed of production, making larger rug sizes possible. However, companies prioritized meeting market demands by sacrificing creativity for volume. The best carpets are made by hand. The inconsistencies in size, pile height, and color are proof of a masterpiece, far superior to machine-made items.

Oriental carpets is a term often used for handwoven carpets like those made in Afghanistan. As are many things in this part of the world, the phrase is steeped in historical allegory and biased by a Western point of view. The term *Oriental* comes from “oriente” and refers to lands in the “East,” relative to Europe. The two prominent types of carpets in Afghanistan are Turkmen and Baluch. Turkmen are generally of higher quality. The Turkmen rug designs are specific to tribal groups in the same vein that Scottish kilts vary by clan.



Initially, entering Noor's carpet store felt like a mystical experience—a sanctuary embodying human expectations, hope, sorrow, tragedies, and success. Afghan carpets, a cultural icon, are an expression of the collective beliefs, aspirations, and values of a people—sometimes a tribal or family patrimony.

Noor would entertain us with stories of carpet hunters who braved treacherous mountain trails, bandits, wolves and, worse—government agents—while pursuing authentic antique carpets. Some of which, naturally, were in that carpet stack right over there! The truth was that Noor

supplied the wool and other necessary materials to small groups of people in tribal areas, and even a few nomadic groups, so they would weave carpets exclusively for him. Many of these small carpet weaving operations used horizontal frames, with women and children doing most of the weaving.

We frequented Noor's store with regularity and soon a flow developed. Greetings, followed by casual chat, including local gossip updates from Noor, all friendly and engaging. His well-honed social and business acumen promoted a rapport of confidence and trust. In some cases, with some individuals, it would be an intentional grooming process. It didn't feel like that with Noor and we liked him, so we let it ride, and it gave us access to better rugs.

We spent time and effort to gain enough knowledge to determine what kind of carpet was best suited for our target market in the States. It was a tactile activity, involving full body contact. We crawled around on hundreds of carpets, like a cat turning around in a circle after circle before settling down on one in particular. We grasped the reason for always finding Noor relaxing on top of a pile of carpets. It felt good. It was an embodiment of comfort—physical and emotional.

Noor kept a casual eye on us as his store assistant brought over one carpet at a time, laying it on the floor for us to examine. We applied all that we had learned from Brian and Noor, carefully inspecting the design, dye, colors, cotton or wool, edges, and both ends. We flipped the carpet, analyzing the warp, weft, and size of the knots. By now, Noor knew what we were looking for and why. If we choose the carpet, it was left in place and another carpet was brought out and laid on top. If we hesitated over a carpet, Noor tactfully pointed out something we overlooked. In doing so, he added to our knowledge without causing us to lose face. That carpet was taken away.

Noor's carpet store was like a cluttered, overstuffed museum. Taking a break between carpet selection, we drank chai. One's attention might be drawn to something that had escaped attention before. One of his assistants stood at the ready to scurry over and climb, dig around, or jump to get the item spotted and bring it over for consideration. That's how we accumulated the tchotchkes we thought would be cool and, we hoped, would sell.

I likened the friendly atmosphere of Noor's store to the neighborhood bakery in Amsterdam near Van Eeghenstraat, two blocks from the Vondelpark. That was my neighborhood, and I liked to shop in the small family-owned stores. Most had a strict regime of closing on Saturday at 1600 hrs, not reopening until Monday at 1300 hrs. If you didn't get your bread on Saturday, you were out of luck! I often stood in line with the neighborhood *huisvrouwen* (housewives) in their blue aprons over their house dresses, some even wearing wooden clogs. They met my efforts to learn Dutch with a mix of patient responses and exasperation. I habitually bought a particular brown bread—you had to ask to have it sliced. After reaching the front of an unusually long waiting line, and having gained some confidence with my Dutch, I uttered, "*Een stuk bruin brood besneden.*" I was the only guy in the shop. The bakery broke into an uproar of laughter. There I stood, chagrined and confused, waiting for it to quiet down and hopefully receive my sliced bread. After she had stopped laughing enough to speak, the woman behind the counter said earnestly in English, punctuated with a smile, that I had just ordered a loaf of circumcised brown bread. I learned two new Dutch words: sliced is *gesneden* and circumcised is *besneden*.

After that, the shopkeepers greeted me with special regard, along with smiles from the *huisvrouwen*. I also received fresh bread from the back room instead of the front display counter.



Having developed a trusted relationship with us, Noor shared his insights into Afghanistan and its people. More accurately, its tribes. Afghanistan remains a recognized country in the United Nations and by everyday people. But the designated borders are utterly meaningless to its inhabitants. Noor explained he was a Pashtun, one of the major tribal groups, along with Tajik, Uzbek, and Hazara. Many tribes and subtribes exist in the Central Asian countries of the “stans”—Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. The political borders are porous; the various tribal members go about their lives based on tribal customs. All have a very interesting history and have existed since... Well, almost forever, as far humans are concerned. Naturally, the tribe of most interest to us was Pashtun. They accounted for nearly half of the Afghan population and maintained a strict code of conduct called *Pashtunwali*. Their appearance made them easy to spot on the street. They wore what appeared to be pajamas—*shalwar kameez* in the local lingo— and white pillbox hats, and had beards. They also inhabited parts of Pakistan and throughout the Hindu Kush.

Noor mostly described the tenets of *Pashtunwali* as a strict requirement to treat guests as royalty. They had to provide guests with the best that a host could offer, and they considered guests to be under the host’s care and protection. That helped to explain the considerable graciousness that we experienced once we entered Afghanistan, particularly the Dot who appeared at the scene of our car accident between Kandahar and Kabul.

The hospitality Noor extended to us went far beyond customer care in Western habits. However, other tenets in *Pashtunwali* are not so

friendly. I only learned of those in later years. Sir Winston Churchill, who was stationed in the Pashtun areas of northern India and Pakistan in the early twentieth century, provides an insightful description in his book, *My Early Days*: "...the columns crawl through a maze of giant corridors down which fierce snow-fed torrents foam under skies of brass. Amid these scenes of savage brilliancy, there dwells a race whose qualities seem to harmonize with their environment. Except at harvest-time, when self-preservation enjoins a temporary truce, the Pathan [sic] tribes are always engaged in private or public war. Every man is a warrior, a politician, and a theologian. Every large house is a real feudal fortress made, it is true, only of sunbaked clay, but with battlements, turrets, loopholes, flanking towers, drawbridges, etc., complete. Every village has its defense. Every family cultivates its vendetta; every clan, its feud. The numerous tribes and combinations of tribes all have their accounts to settle with one another. Nothing is ever forgotten, and very few debts are left unpaid. For the purposes of social life, in addition to the convention about harvest-time, a most elaborate code of honor has been established and is on the whole faithfully observed. A man who knew it and observed it faultlessly might pass unarmed from one end of the frontier to another. The slightest technical slip would, however, be fatal..."³¹

With that description in mind, I'm reminded once again of my grandmother talking about the American version of familial feuds—the Hatfields and McCoys. Same theory, same closed-mindedness, same passing of feudal burdens from generation to generation. Afghanistan has existed as a region of civilization dating back to 3000 BCE. It both suffered and benefited from its location at a crossroads of trade along the Silk Road. Tribal influences were loosely aligned for centuries, and still prevail. Afghanistan was a kingdom when we arrived. It had been so for half a century before it became a republic during our stay. The king was

a Pashtun, Mohammed Zahir Shah, who turned out to be the last king of Afghanistan. In July 1973 his cousin, General Mohammed Daoud Khan, overthrew him with support of the Russians. Another passing of feudal type burdens, with modern overtones.



Scott and I were constantly taking photos. For both of us, it was a passion and fun. It could also get you out of a jam, which would come in handy on one of our treks over in Pakistan. But that's for later. With carpets, it was fun and part of documentation for the future. Noor became accustomed to us snapping flicks in his shop. Doing so also let us keep track of the carpets we had selected and were to be kept aside for us in stacks between our visits to the store. To the best of our knowledge, Noor kept to his word.

Our photography continued out into the street. Our daily forays observing and photographing the mass of humanity, doing and acting as Afghans are prone to do, was bewildering and enlightening. Curious Afghans were constantly around us, sometimes begging for money, often trying to convince us to give them money, and occasionally becoming angry. The latter was not a result of anything aggressive on our part, but ignorance that our appearance was unacceptable to some of them. There were a lot of foreign travelers, many of whom looked like us. In the view of those who felt wronged, our attire was an insult to Islam. Long-haired men were not the norm, but could be tolerated with a proper cap in place and a beard that was long and not trimmed. We adopted some of the local clothing, but drew the line at the plastic sandals that were worn year-round.

The truth is, we typically came into contact with a broad range of Afghan social classes on a daily basis. Although not typical business travelers, we still encountered high society, diplomats, bureaucrats, and poseurs at the InterContinental Hotel, but our interactions were superficial. Had we the opportunity to mingle longer with that stratum, we would have opted in, at least for a while. Our preference was the street, where photo opportunities were abundant and far more interesting than the lobby of a five-star hotel—most of the time. We had our hands full of absorbing Afghan behavior as it was. Afghanistan is a fascinating, unruly, tribally dominated region that calls itself a country—at least on the international stage. I am pained by the dreadful circumstances it has endured for the past four decades, full of turmoil, strife, and destruction.