

from The World Is My Home: A Memoir
James Michener

I once made a long trip over the Dasht-i-Margo, the desert in Afghanistan, to the ancient city of Herat, where I lodged in a former mosque with earthen floors. I had been in my improvised quarters only a few minutes when a very thin, toothy man with longish black hair and a perpetual smile entered and started throwing onto the dirt floor twenty or thirty of the most enchantingly beautiful Persian rugs I had ever seen. Their designs were miraculous—intricate interweavings of Koranic symbols framed in geometric patterns that teased the eye—but their colors were also sheer delight: reds, yellows, greens and especially dark blues that were radiant.

10 They made my room a museum, one rug piled atop another, all peeking out at me, and when they were in place and the smiling man was satisfied with his handiwork—I supposed that this was a service of the so-called hotel—to my amazement he handed me a scrap of paper on which was written in pencil in English: MUHAMMAD ZAQIR, RUG MERCHANT, HERAT.

Aware at last of how I had been trapped, I protested: “No! No! No rugs!” but without relaxing his smile the least bit he said in English: “No necessity to buy. I leave here. You study, you learn to like,” and before I could protest further he was gone. I ran out to make him take back his rugs, for I wanted none of them, but he was already leading his laden camel away from the old mosque.

20 I assumed he had learned from the hotel manager that I was to be in Herat for five days, and it was obvious that he felt confident that within that period he could wear me down and persuade me to buy a rug. He started on the evening of that first day; he came back after supper to sit with me in the shadowy light cast by a flickering lamp. He said: “Have you ever seen lovelier rugs? That one from my friend in Meshed. Those two from the dealer in Bukhara. This one from a place you know, maybe? Samarkand.”

When I asked him how he was able to trade with such towns in the Soviet Union he shrugged: “Borders? Out here we don’t bother,” and with a sweep of his hand that encompassed all the rugs he said: “Not one woven in Afghanistan,” and I noted the compelling pronunciation he gave that name: Ahf-han-ee-stahn.

30 He sat for more than an hour with me that evening, and the next day he was back before noon to start his serious bargaining: “Michener-sahib, name German perhaps?” I told him it was more likely English, at which he laughed: “English, Afghans, many battles, English always win but next day you march back to India, nothing change.” When I corrected him: “I’m not English,” he said: “I know. Pennsylvania. Three, four, maybe five of your rugs look great your place Pennsylvania.”

“But I don’t need rugs there. I don’t really want them.”

“Would they not look fine Pennsylvania?” and as if the rugs were of little value, he kicked the top ones aside to reveal the glowing wonders of those below.

40 When he returned that second night he got down to even more serious business: “The big white and gold one you like, six hundred dollars.” On and on he went, and when it was clear that I had no interest whatever in the big ones, he subtly covered them over with the smaller six- by four-foot ones already in the room; then he ran out to his camel to fetch seven or eight of the size that I had in some unconscious way disclosed I might consider, and by the end of that session he knew that I was at least a possible purchaser of four or five of the handsome rugs

“Ah, Michener-sahib, you have fine eye. That one from China, silk and wool, look at those tiny knots.” Then he gave me a lesson in rug making; he talked about

50 the designs, the variation in knots, the wonderful compactness of the Chinese variety,
the dazzling colors of the Samarkand. It was fascinating to hear him talk, and all the
while he was wearing me down.

He was a persistent rascal, always watching till he saw me return to my mosque
after work, then pouncing on me. On the third day, as he sat drinking tea with me
while our chairs were perched on his treasury of rugs, four and five deep at some
places and covering the entire floor, he knocked down one after another of my
objections: "You can't take them with you? No traveler can. I send them to you,
camel here, ship Karachi, train New York, truck to your home Pennsylvania." Pasted
onto the pages of his notebook were addresses of buyers from all parts of the world to whom he had
shipped his rugs, and I noticed that they had gone out from Meshed

60 in Iran, Mazar-e-Sharif in Afghanistan and Bukhara in Russia; apparently he really
moved about with his laden camel. But he also had, pasted close to the shipping
address, letters from his customers proving that the rugs had finally reached their new
owners. In our dealings he seemed to me an honest man.

On that third night, when it began to look as if I might escape without making
a purchase even though I had shown an interest in six rugs, he hammered at me
regarding payments: "Now, Michener-sahib, I can take America dollars, you know."

"I have no American dollars." Rapidly he ran through the currencies that he
until I had to stop him with a truthful statement: "Muhammad, my friend, I have no
70 money, none of any kind," and before the last word had been uttered he cried: "I
take traveler's checks, American Express, Bank America in California," and then I
had to tell him the sad news: "Muhammad, friend. I have no traveler's checks. Left
them all locked up in the American Embassy in Kabul. Because there are robbers on
the road to Meshed."

"I know. I know. But you are an honest man, Michener-sahib. I take your
personal check."

When I said truthfully that I had none, he asked simply: "You like those six
rugs?"

"Yes, you have made me appreciate them. I do."

80 With a sweeping gesture he gathered the six beauties, rolled them deftly into a
bundle and thrust them into my arms: "You take them. Send me a check when you
get to Pennsylvania"

"You would trust me?"

"You look honest. Don't I look honest?" And he picked up one of his larger
rugs, a real beauty, and showed me the fine knots: "Bukhara. I got it there, could not
pay. I send the money when I sell. Man in Bukhara trusts me. I trust you."

I said I could not impose on him in that way. Something might happen to me
or I might prove to be a crook, and the discussion ended, except that as he left me he
asked: "Michener, if you had the money, what rugs would you take with you?" and I
90 said "None, but if you could ship them, I'd take those four," and he said: "Those
four you shall have. I'll find a way."

Next day he was back in the mosque right after breakfast with an astonishing
proposal: "Michener-sahib, I can let you have those four rugs, special price, four
hundred fifty dollars." Before I could repeat my inability to pay, he said: "Bargain
like this you never see again. Tell you what to do. You write me a check."

When I said, distressed at losing such a bargain: "But I really have no blank
checks," he said: "You told me yesterday. I believe you. But draw me one," and
from his folder he produced a sheet of ordinary paper and a pencil. He showed me
how to draw a copy of a blank check, bearing the name of the bank, address, amount,
100 etc.—and for the first time in my life I actually drew a blank check, filled in the

amount and signed it, whereupon Muhammad Zaqir placed it in his file, folded the four rugs I had bought, tied them with a string and attached my name and address.

He piled the rugs onto his camel, and then mounted it to proceed on his way to Samarkand.

Back home in Pennsylvania I started to receive two different kinds of letters, perhaps fifteen of each. The following is a sample of the first category:

I am a shipping agent in Istanbul and a freighter arrived here from Karachi bringing a large package, well wrapped, addressed to you in Pennsylvania. Upon receipt of your check for \$19.50 American I will
110 forward the package to you.

From Karachi, Istanbul, Trieste, Marseilles and heavens knows where else I received a steady flow of letters over a three-year period, and always the sum demanded was less than twenty dollars, so that I would say to myself: "Well, I've invested so much in it already, I may as well risk a little more." And off the check would go, with the rugs never getting any closer. Moreover, I was not at all sure that if they ever did reach me they would be my property, for my unusual check had never been submitted for payment, even though I had forewarned my local bank: "If it ever does arrive, pay it immediately, because it's a debt of honor."

The second group of letters explained the long delay:

I am serving in Kabul as the Italian ambassador and was lately in Herat
120 where a rug merchant showed me that remarkable check you gave him for something like five hundred dollars. He asked me if I thought it would be paid if he forwarded it and I assured him that since you were a man of good reputation it would be. When I asked him why he had not submitted it sooner, he said: "Michener-sahib a good name. I show his check everybody like you, sell many rugs."

These letters came from French commercial travelers, English explorers, Indian merchants, almost anyone who might be expected to reach out-of-the-way Herat and take a room in that miserable old mosque.

In time the rugs arrived, just as Muhammad Zaqir had predicted they would,
130 accompanied by so many shipping papers they were a museum in themselves. And after my improvised check had been used as an advertisement for nearly five years, it too came home to roost and was honored. Alas, shortly thereafter the rugs were stolen, but I remember them vividly and with longing. Especially do I remember the man who spent four days ingeniously persuading me to buy.

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