Musbah's Story, as told by Musbah Eid written by Katherine Eid Wild

In the mornings before my father left for work, he would open a small tin of shoe polish, and prop his foot up on an old wooden box, and as he'd polish his shoes, he'd tell me this story:

When he came of age, my father put on his very best clothes, shined his shoes, and took a bus to downtown Beirut, Lebanon, to what they call Embassy Row. He walked into every embassy and asked for a visa.

You see, in Lebanon, where my father was born and raised, when you reach a certain age, you try to find the best way out of Lebanon. For many men, this means getting a job and a visa—a visa to anywhere—to Australia, South Africa, or Belize, or if you are really, really lucky, my father tells me, you get a visa to America.

But for my father, every door on Embassy Row was closed to him, so he took the bus home. He lay on his back in his bedroom and watched the ceiling fan circle slowly in the heat of the evening as he surveyed his options. His last resort was to follow a cousin to North Africa, so he saved up the little money he could and spent most of it on a one-way plane ticket to Libya.

And on a morning in 1967 my father shined his shoes, pressed his only shirt, and he set out walking. He walked to the door of every restaurant and merchant shop and asked for a job, but every door, again, shut in his face. And he walked all the way into the evening and then went home and on the second morning he shined his shoes and he walked. At lunchtime, he spent his last liras on a dry pita sandwich, and then he walked until the sun began to set he turned towards home, and just then, his eye caught the eye of a merchant, and he straightened up and retouched his shirt, and my father hurried over to the door over which hung a sign that read “ALTA TRAVEL AGENCY”.

A gruff voice inside asked, “Where are you from?”

“Lebanon,” my father answered.

“Yeah, my wife is from Lebanon. You want to work?”

“Ya, I want to work.”

“Do you know how to do tickets?”

“Ya, I know how to do tickets,” my father lied.

My father was led up to the manager, Mr. Fteis, who barely looked up as he handed my father a stack of paper and a binder and shut the door. My father looked at the small room furnished with a desk and a telephone. And he looked down at the stack of papers, a test, and he read over and over the boldface letters on the first page: BEY. TRI.

My father knew no one, had no prospects, he was hungry. And he had no idea how to do tickets.

Now, he would go home with no job and no future. And then the phone rang again. So my father answered it: “Halo?”

“Do you have the answers?” the grump from downstairs asked across the line.

“Well, you see I….”

“Read me to the first line.”

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And so my father read the airport codes to the stranger on the other end of the line, and the man read him the answers, line by line. When the test was complete, he instructed my father to wait there 10 minutes and then go and find Mr. Fteis and so for 10 minutes, my father thanked god for the grump man with all of the answers, and Mr. Fteis flipped through the pages, and then looked at my father and asked: “When can you start?” And my father shined a big smile and said: “Yesterday.”

And before long my father knew all of the airline routes. He knew how to book the tickets with free stopovers in London and Cairo and how to get the last minute deals with the shortest travel times. And soon there were repeat customers and then there were lines down the block for Alta Travel Agency.

And my father whipped up an extraordinary route for this man and with a few minutes to change planes in Europe he could get him home in just under 13 hours, but he didn't stop there. No, my father went straight to the airport and called in a few favors and jumped that man to the front of the line and with the man's luggage in his own two hands my father walked that man right out onto the tarmac with the donkeys. And the American shook my dad's hand and boarded that plane.

And when word came of a promotion, for a ticketing agent to move to Marsa Brega to write tickets for the Americans working in the oil fields, Mr. Fteis gave the job to my father. And when word came of a promotion, for a ticketing agent to move to Marsa Brega to write tickets for the Americans working in the oil fields, Mr. Fteis gave the job to my father.

This was in the days that the cart that brought baggage to the plane was still pulled by a donkey and on that tarmac my father boarded a propellor plane to Marsa Brega and showed up day one to his new job with his shined shoes and his calculator and he went from dorm room to dorm room where the Americans stayed and he issued them the finest tickets anyone had ever seen and one day, a phone call came for my father from the American Embassy with an urgent request for a last minute ticket for an American whose wife had just gone into early labor.

My father is clear, this was not generosity. It's not like they had to hold the plane, he tells me. But the bigger deal you make of things, the more heroic you appear when you pull it off.

he next day, the phone rang again. It was the secretary for the consulate at the American embassy, and she said the Consulate himself wanted to thank my father and asked if he would just hold one minute and they'd be connected on the line.

And my father opened his mouth and changed his life with a single question: "Would it be all right if I came in to meet the Consulate personally?"

My father has told me this story 100 times, how he showered and shaved and put on his very best suit. And always, at this point, his mouth drops down as he uses the back of his hand to wipe a sudden rush of tears that always catch us by surprise.

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That day, my father walked up to the American Embassy in Libya, where the secretary led him into a large office with floor-to-ceiling windows where standing there before him was the Consulate himself. And the man thanked my father for his help with the airline ticket and then said: And if there's anything we can do for you in the future, you call on us.

One thing my father taught me is that when the time comes, you must ask fearlessly for what you want.

"You know," my father said, "I've always wanted to go to America, and I'd just love to have a visa."

The consulate grinned and told him to come back tomorrow, and his secretary would get him all fixed up. Actually, my father said, I have my passport right here. "It was cheesy," my father says, "*but I was desperate*."

And that day, the secretary handed him his life, my life, a one-year visa to America. A piece of paper my father still keeps in his bedside table.

Visa #749. Embassy of the United States of America. Issued 24 August 1975. $4.50. And she waived the fee.

And when my father landed in America he didn't know if his cousin lived in Atlanta or Atlantic City. He had $200 to his name, a grocery bag full of clothes, and no English. And he walked.

He knew his cousin attended university, but he had no idea which one, so he visited them all. Repeating his cousin's name over and over again and again, the doors closed in his face. As dusk fell, a janitor at Georgia State University who felt particularly sorry for him, took my father into the library to flip through yearbooks to look for a face my father might recognize. 1971. 1970. 1969.

They flipped until it got late, and the library closed, and the janitor escorted my father to the courtyard to a park bench where he would spend that night hungry and alone, staring into his empty future. But the janitor must've felt particularly sorry for him because he saw my father there alone and called him back inside, reopening the library so they could look through just a few more yearbooks.

And there, in the middle of a leather-bound book in a language my father couldn't understand, my father saw his cousin's picture. And with his own quarter, the janitor dialed the cousin's phone number, and the phone rang. And rang. And in those days, there were no answering machines, and phones would ring forever if you had the time to wait. And it rang. And rang. And rang. Until halo? And my father's heard his cousin's voice, and the tears he'd been holding back all day rained down onto the marbled library floor. "*It's Musbah!*" he called. "It's Musbah Eid!"

My father closes the tin of shoe polish and puts the box away in the hallway of our home in the suburbs of America.

"That grumpy man in the travel agency and that janitor - they had nothing to gain by helping me. When I helped that American with the airline ticket, I had a reward in mind," my father says.

Well, if the universe repays us based on how pure our intentions are, then perhaps those men received a greater reward for their good deeds than my father. Though, *I can't imagine how.*