Arabian Knight

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10/5/20
When I was ten years old, my father finally got an amazing job opportunity that would later set me up for success, failure, and then success again. My father finally owned his own business, but in a way that would give him substantially less financial responsibility, but on the other hand would pay very good money. He ended up owning and operating a car rental company. The demands were very demanding physically, but it paid great commissions to support his family of six. I started to learn the business involuntarily, because I would go to work with him out of boredom, and after school I would walk to his store and get sucked into the business life.

My father was born in Beirut Lebanon. A war-torn country that was once called the Paris of the middle east. It truly is a beautiful country, with its breath-taking scenery it’s almost perfect. The hills look better than the one the Hollywood sign sits on, and has clearer waters than Hawaii. The people of that country are also the nicest people you could ever meet. This is usually because of their heavy religious influence as they are primarily catholic and Muslim. They take their religion very seriously, and this also is part of their unfortunate downfall. The food is admired by many diet experts and recommended vigorously by medical doctors. The Mediterranean diet is very healthy because it contains a healthy balance of nuts, fish, poultry and vegetables. They know how to make delicious food with just those basic items. Shawarma, which is a warm pita wrapped with freshly sliced beef that has been marinated on a big revolving skewer that it just dripping out meaty goodness. Then there are a couple pieces of light potato slices and then it’s topped off with a nice light yogurt sauce. This was my go-to meal for lunch everyday when I went recently as an adult.

Lebanon was always an international paradise that attracted many celebrities and lavish events. In the 1970’s tensions started to heat up due to the Israeli and Palestinian conflict. This
created a push from the Palestinians because they were being pushed out of their country by the Israeli’s. After that, the Palestinians went to Lebanon to seek refuge, but being pumped up with sever wrongdoing by the Israelis, the Lebanese Muslims attacked the catholic side of Lebanon. This was only because the country of Lebanon was divided originally as half catholic and half Muslim. Each religion lived separately from each other. The Muslims would start to attack the Catholics and a civil war would erupt. My father, at the tender age of fourteen would end up having to fight for his life and find a way out of his country. During the war, my father would lose his father to diabetes, and then his mother soon after from an undiagnosed brain tumor. Could you imagine losing your parents at that young of an age, and on top of that in the middle of a deadly civil war? That’s why I call him the Arabian Knight. I know it sounds cliché, but it really signifies so many things about who he is. He had to learn how to be independent from a young age. Where many children these days get upset because they couldn’t stay up late playing video games, or they have to finish up their homework so they can go skateboarding. Instead, my father was wondering if he was going to get shot while sleeping, or have a missile come directly to him.

My father would end up fighting in the war for another year until his brother got into the United States military, and using his military status, his brother would help my father get citizenship in the United States and my father and his brother would start fresh. When my father Zahi got to the united states, he quickly tried to figure out what this new country had to offer. Imaging going through so many major life events like war and death, and then moving to a whole new world. That’s what my father did. He taught me how to be independent. My father loves smoking cigarettes, in particular Virginia Slims. After a long day of work, he would go outside and light one up, and I’ll never forget the way he lights up his cigarette. He does this
James Bond motion of lighting it and taking a quick drag then he will lightly flick his arm after he took his first drag. He usually likes to light it up while standing. I unfortunately picked up that habit and would smoke with him outside. When we would smoke, we would drink red wine. Not white wine, but red wine. He would then open up about the war and how he had to fight in the war. He would tell me the craziest of stories that you would only see in movies. Every time I would go out for a smoke with him, it was a new story every day. He would tell me about the intense and gory battles him and his militia would engage in. I will never forget the story he told me about the sniper. My father was on night watch one night defending their village from the Palestinians, and he was the lookout on this particular night. It was now his militia counterpart’s responsibility to take over his spot and be the lookout. My father would then start to go to sleep and be ready for the next attack. As he was sleeping, he was awoken by gunfire. His first priority was to go to the lookout and see what was going on. The lookout was bunkered down by sand bags, and sandbags usually have the slightest cracks in them, even a fly could weave in and around them. As my father was walking up to his fellow militia man, a sniper shot his friend in the head and blood went everywhere. My father ran back into cover, and it would be a sight he would never be able to forget.

These were all stories that would get me to understand that nobody can guarantee anything for you in life except for yourself. The only person that I was ever able to rely on was myself, and I learned that from my father. My father would end up having so many ups and downs. For example, when he moved to the United States, he ended up opening up a deli and bait shop in the San Francisco area, which would end up making my parents very wealthy, but only for a short amount of time. As the store was doing very well, the neighborhood would start to turn very violent. Him and his brother went in on the store together, but my father would make
a very terrible mistake. He didn’t put his name on any of the business licenses or articles of organization, and on paper, it was solely owned by his brother. His brother was always a hot head and selfish, at least in my opinion. When the neighborhood started to get bad, my uncle decided to sell the store. My father asked him if it was possible for him to buy it off of his brother, but his brother declined. He even offered him three times the amount the store was listed for sale, but his brother declined. This would turn his life into shambles again, but he always found a way to pick himself back up. My father always told me to “go where the grass is greener”. I never understood what that meant as a kid, but now as an adult with a family of my own, I truly understand what that means now. We moved from a five bedroom and four bath triple story home in the hills to a single-story old house in Dixon California. Dixon was a very hot and small country town in Northern California.

Eventually my father would end up finding an amazing job in a town about an hour away in the car rental business. He would end up having an owner operator agreement with the giant car rental company, and his earning would be a true blessing to our family. Of course, it came with strings attached. As an owner operator for the company, he opened the store seven-day s a week managing all aspects of the business, and his paychecks would reflect his hard work. I remember after a long day of school in high school, I would walk over to his store and then hitch a ride home with him after work. This is where I would truly find my personality. My father worked in a town called Stockton in California, and Stockton was known for its violence. With a city torn by violence, we would end up having those same customers in our store. Car rental is a very expensive luxury to pay for, and with difficult requirements to rent, this would bring out a lot of altercations from customers. I remember how my father would deal with customers. He would give the nice customers great service, but would give attitude right back to customers that
had a temper. I was always a shy kid, and I always hated it. I soon learned how to not be shy just by watching my dad talk to these customers. One day after I came to his store after school, I remember a customer yelling at the top of his lungs for ten cents that the company owed him. Back in the day, car rental companies used to allow cash to pay for their rentals when the customer returned the car, however, in order to rent the car, the charges must first be held on a major credit card or debit card. Naturally this made sense, but it made things very difficult, because a lot of the times, we wouldn’t have cash on hand, and at times we would have to give the customers money out of our own pockets and then seek reimbursement from the rental company. Anyways, this customer is just yelling at the top of his lungs for the ten cents, and my dad snaps at him. “What kind of man are you yelling and screaming like a baby child all for ten cents!” This was like listening to Octopuses Garden by The Beatles for the first time. You’re on an acid trip and you can’t believe what you’re hearing, but all you can do is learn from it now. On another occurrence, I was once covering the store with my mother, and we used to rent out moving trucks, and again the cash upon return issue came up again. I will never forget that day, and how it would make me want to stand up for myself no matter what danger occurs. Two men returned a truck rental and I politely informed them that they needed to fill up their gas tank because that would break the terms of the contract and they would be held responsible to pay the fuel at triple the current local gas price. This is when they started to get violent. “What the hell is wrong with you that thing is full! I swear to god I’m going to beat your ass!” Now all of a sudden, I have a random guy that appears to be under the influence of drugs start to put up his hands and start trying to punch me, all while my mother is watching. She rushes out to help me and the other person start to advance towards her. I yelled “Mom go back inside! Run! Run! Run!” We scrambled inside and hold the front doors shut and I yell to my mom “Go get the keys
to lock the door I’ll hold them off!” It felt like I was in the most important tug of war fight, and it was the fight for my life. My mom finally gets the keys and is crying as she locks the door. She was scared out of her mind, and so was I.

From that day forward, I made a promise to myself to always lookout for the safety of my family no matter how badly I would have loved to “throw down”. As time went on, I decided to pursue schooling to become an air traffic controller. This position is employed by the Federal Aviation Administration and they do a pretty intense background check that includes an interview with an investigator that combs through your whole life history. I ended up meeting with this investigator and we had our meeting at my fathers’ store. My parents allowed us to use their back office, so that we wouldn’t be interrupted by anybody. As I was talking to the investigator, about three hours in, I started to hear yelling. I know the sound of my parents yelling because they yelled at us a lot when we misbehaved, and I started to hear them get into an argument with a customer. “Hey I swear to god I’m going to come back here and shoot this place up!” I hear in the distance. I looked at the investigator and said “I’ll be right back”. I shoulder thrusted the door right open and immediately locked onto the customer that was threatening my parents and walked right up to his face. I ran right up to him and yelled at the top of my lungs with veins popping out of my forehead “Hey man! If you have a problem, you’re going to have to sort it out with me! Now get your ass out of this store! You have no business here and I don’t care what your excuse is!” The look on his face was sheer shock and fright, and it was priceless.

His store was located in Stockton California; a very crime heavy city in Northern California. I learned though watching him everyday how he dealt with good customers and bad customers. I learned everything that I could, and soaked up all his customer service skills, and would later use it in my professional career to develop. I ended up thinking that car rental was
I always going to be a business I would never want to keep working in. I always hated car rental, I
was sick of the routine, and sick of the customers. I never would realize how wrong I was. I
ended up finishing up high school, and then went off to a local community college. I never
actually finished my degree because I always preferred having money as the short-term reward,
and put education on the backburner. I would always remember one thing that my father told me
when I was young, and that saying was “If the grass is greener on the other side financially, you
jump ship.” I always didn’t take his advice seriously; it would always go in one ear and out the
other.

I ended up getting a job in New Jersey as a manager for a new and upcoming major car
rental company. The city was very exciting and new, I met a lot of great people that I still stay in
touch with. I earned an exceptional reputation within the company, and that was all due to
working with my father. Working long hours, always short staffed, always working very hard
seven days a week. I turned a new location into the highest grossing sales and customer service
experience all because of what I saw my father do at his store. Of course, I had areas of
improvement to attend to, but I figured it out pretty quickly. What I learned through my father
helped me manage a large team effortlessly while having fun at work at the same time. I thought
I was going to go far with the company and in my professional career in car rental, but I got
comfortable to quickly. The company ended up merging with another company, and
unfortunately, I was laid off.

I ended up getting my two other brothers’ jobs with the company, but in different
locations, and they got laid off too. Once we had time to gather our thoughts, my older brother
and I were so upset and decided to start our own car rental company from scratch. I put
everything I had on the line because I thought that I could make it happen. I knew everything
about the business like the back of my hand. Or so I thought. So, me and my brother decided to
open up our car rental company in Las Vegas Nevada. We thought it was the perfect market to
start it in, but boy was I dead wrong. Las Vegas might be a very nice tourist place, with alcohol
and luxury hotels and casinos, but it was a very shady city. We would get threatened daily way
worse than we ever had experienced, customers would miss payments, steal cars into Mexico,
illegally race cars, cause crashes and commit robberies in our vehicles.

I couldn’t believe that I failed, and I failed very miserably. To the point that I had to file
for bankruptcy protection because I signed my name on so many loans that I personally
guaranteed. At the time, when you’re signing and you have your whole faith in yourself on the
line, you don’t think about the consequences, because you have so much faith in yourself. I
ended up learning the hard way, and it all finally caught up to me. I ended up ruining all my hard
earn savings, and my chances to buy a house anytime soon. Las Vegas chewed me up and spit
me right out.

Things started to look better when I moved back to California. I ended up getting a store
similar to my father’s store. I finally worked through my bankruptcy, and was able to save up
enough money to finally buy a house. All roads lead back to what you are good at, and I now
realize that I am my father.