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Breakfast with Issa

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*Written by Gregory Khalil*

**Almost every day someone will ask me** why I bother “wasting” my life on a “hopeless” issue. “Those people [Israelis and Palestinians] have been fighting for thousands of years and they’ll be fighting until the end of days,” the exchange begins.

The question always irks me, even though I often wrestle with it myself. Still, I always seem to have an answer—one that at least I usually find compelling.

After all, seemingly intractable problems like nuclear proliferation, extreme poverty, AIDS, terrorism, impending global water shortages, cancer and, yes, conflict in the Middle East will not simply disappear. We may never solve any of them. Yet absent divine intervention, we can be certain that each of these issues will bring us all even greater grief—likely avoidable grief—if good people of good will throw their hands up and walk away.

As for the Holy Land, I won’t walk away. Not from the people I love. Especially when America’s global standing and security are at stake.

Some months ago, just days before missiles started falling like heavy rain on either side of Israel’s border with Gaza, I received the same question. Only this time it was truly disturbing.

My dad Issa and I went out for breakfast near his home in San Diego. And I thought I heard a tinge of cynicism from the most unexpected of people, him.

A young waitress came by our table and poured coffee. He took a sip. “Wait,” he snapped, calling her back. She was startled. “Did you make this?” he firmly queried.

His irrepressible grin tempered the insult of a wagging finger. “Why yes, I picked the beans,” she played along in beaming singsong. “And I roasted them, and I ground them, and then I brewed them all by myself, just for you.”

“I thought so! Because it’s delicious,” he shot back, laughing. “But don’t you forget: you have the goats to thank!”

“Goats?” she asked, her sloppy grin fading to genuine consternation.

“Yes, you **MUST** thank the goats,” he said, his open hands and earnest look seeming to plead: how could you not?

Dad then dazzled her with the story of coffee’s discovery by a Yemeni, or perhaps an Ethiopian, goat herder’s goats. For thousands of years, she learned, humans believed coffee beans inedible. Until one day, just a few hundred years ago, perhaps thousands of feet above the Arabian gulf, in some verdant mountain valley, a goat herder noticed something remarkable: After nibbling on coffee beans, his goats began to jump about.

Curious, he tasted a few of the strange legumes. Confirming they were not in fact fit for human consumption, he tossed them into his campfire. Then the irresistible aroma of the roasting beans coaxed our goat herder into unlocking a simple secret that would soon change human history.

“Huh, you don’t say?” she paused. “That’s SO cool!” she exclaimed, walking away, her huge smile now resurrected.

But suddenly, Issa’s demeanor uncharacteristically changed. He carefully placed his coffee down. His smile waned. He looked me straight in the eye. And he abruptly asked: “Is there any hope in the work that you do? Or will the hotheads always win?”

Maybe it was the unrelenting torrent of horrific images coming from Basher Al-Assad’s Syria, a country where we ourselves had witnessed evil wrought by the hands of his father, Hafez Al-Assad, when we lived there thirty years ago. Maybe it was the weight of hundreds of thousands of minutes, some astonishingly beautiful, some unbearably painful, many more simply ordinary—but each and every one somehow distorted by this seemingly endless conflict. Or maybe it was a difficult morning in a particularly difficult chapter of our lives, having just left my mother languishing in her hospital bed, where she’s been skating precariously along that impossibly thin line between life and death since an accident three years ago.

Whatever the reason, my dad’s query came as a shock. Cynicism was a trait I had never even considered my dad capable of possessing. I have canned responses to others’ skepticism—but not to my endlessly hopeful dad.

**Dad began life in a world so far removed** from our own it sounds fantastical to describe.

In early January, 1927, on Eastern Orthodox Christmas, in Beit Sahour, Palestine, where the shepherds are believed to have received the good news of Jesus’ birth—and just a short walk from where Jesus himself is believed to have been born—dad became the youngest member of a large and growing family. Given the auspicious date, my grandmother Fahima, a devout Christian, named her youngest child “Issa,” or “Jesus” in Arabic. Finally, more than a month later, his birth was officially recorded—gifting us two opportunities to celebrate his birthday each year.

Issa, quite literally, was born somewhere along the surprisingly thin line that divides antiquity from modernity, the Old world from the New. Less than a decade earlier, at the end of the First World War, the 400 year-old Turkish Ottoman Empire had collapsed. The victorious British had taken over control of the region called Palestine, which today includes Israel, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. And tensions among Palestine’s ancient communities of Jews, Christians and Muslims—which were virtually unheard of just a few decades earlier—were on the rise.

A new political program, Zionism, aimed to address an age-old problem: horrific persecution of the Jewish people. Zionist Jews sought to establish a Jewish homeland in the birthplace of Judaism. They had received the support of Palestine’s British rulers. Many European Jews fleeing unthinkable persecution—which eventually led to the Holocaust—began flooding the land, adjusting to the foreign culture with difficulty. And many Christian and Muslim (and sometimes Jewish)

Palestinians rejected the Zionists' claim, asserting it was already their homeland.

And so the comparative calm of the previous centuries was broken. By the time Issa arrived in 1927, the stage had been set for a modern conflict of epic proportions.

Fahima, my grandmother, was certainly aware that the world was shaking around her. But when it was Issa's turn to enter the world, all she could do was what she knew, and that was what she had done so many times before: she gave birth at home.

Issa's first cries bounced off the arched stone walls of their simple house—a house hand-crafted by his grandfather's grandfather. Still standing today, the house is fashioned in the style of homes of the first Christians, cradling a way of life that Palestinian Jewish, Muslim and Christian families, like mine, had handed down from generation to generation since the time of Jesus and before.

Standing more than three feet thick, the walls trap warmth in the cool winters and beat back the often-brutal heat of the Holy Land's long summers. My father was born "upstairs," just before an earthquake downsized the two-room, two-story house to one. From then on, the entire family lived in the large single room "downstairs"—which itself was split between an upper area where everyone lived and slept; and a lower area, open to the rest of the house, where the animals lived and slept. This lower area is similar to what would have been the "manger" in the Nativity story. When my dad was growing up with his nine brothers and sisters, it was indeed a functioning manger—home to everything from sheep to chickens to a milk cow, which nourished the entire family.

Issa's path from that one-room stone house near Bethlehem to life as a theologian in America was something he could not possibly have imagined. He did well in school, but he could not afford to continue his studies after seventh grade. So he began farming my family's fields, which today lie between Bethlehem and Jerusalem. Every day, he and Fahima would wind their way on donkey back through Judea's craggy hills until they reached Jerusalem's Old City, where they would sell a local variety of cucumber called "faqous." And every night, my dad would somehow manage to continue his studies on his own. A kerosene lamp dimly illuminated his favorite texts on English literature, modern science and Christian theology amid the din of a dozen people, their guests and, literally, the bleating of the sheep downstairs.

Long before he won a scholarship to study at a Christian college in America (and long before he went on to earn his PhD in Divinity from the University of Chicago, where he met my mother, a professor of Art History and Classical Greek Archaeology there), my dad had earned something of a reputation in his small farming community—a reputation for being bookish, yet exceptionally loving, and always in good humor.

So that morning in San Diego my dad's query felt sharply out of place. "Is there any hope in the work that you do? Or will the hotheads always win?" These were words I would have never expected to hear from him, about anything, ever.

Because for Issa, like his namesake, hope was never something external; it wasn't something that you felt or found. Hope was a way of being and believing, regardless of circumstance.

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**I looked at him, almost incredulous.** I had to be misinterpreting him. Still I had no choice but to admit: “Well, things have never looked worse in the Middle East. I think there’s a good chance the ‘hotheads’ will continue to win.”

Dad seemed to agree, so I continued: “But they don’t always have to win. And as impossible as it might now seem, I see dramatic shifts happening. Those shifts lead me to believe that peace will be a real possibility soon. Maybe not for a few years. But soon.”

Now, my dad appeared to be listening. He had witnessed such dramatic changes just in the span of his life. From the rise and fall of empires to the end of Jim Crow; from World War II to the ascendancy of a hyper-connected virtual world; from the eradication of diseases to the birth of new nations. Like many in his generation, he had experienced massive and unthinkable transformation in every decade of his life, just as we do today, even if the seeming permanence of the present clouds all that came before and eclipses all that comes after.

So Issa knew, just as he and my mother Ann had taught me, that the way we took the world to be was not the way the world would always be. The world, after all, is a web of relationships that are constantly in a state of flux, continually being remade. And we are, necessarily, part of the remaking. So the fabled question of “can one person change the world?” was absolutely the wrong question. Every second of every day, each and everyone of us is recreating or reforming our world—fundamentally changing it—in the relationships we choose to embrace or shun, in the possibilities we choose to seize or ignore, and in

the love we choose to share or withhold. For better or worse, we all change the world, whether we like it or not, in the image of our hearts’ deepest desires and darkest fears. So the right question should not be whether one person can change the world, because each and every one of us does, but how can each and every one of us make it better?

The same of course was true in the Middle East. For just as there had been long periods of conflict everywhere human beings have settled, including the Middle East, so too had there been long periods of relative peace, including in the Middle East. Not only could the Middle East be different, but also it would be different. Which Middle East would we, together, recreate or reform?

But my dad looked down, staring at his omelet, seemingly unmoved. So I continued, perhaps more desperately trying to convince myself than persuade him.

I felt compelled to talk a bit about the “work that I do.” I explained how I find myself caught in such an awkward place, suspended in the most bizarre limbo between two competing trends, one deeply negative and one potentially transformative.

On the one hand, I’m in the Middle East almost every month, witnessing at breakneck speed a rapid decline in the situation on the ground. And with it, Israelis and Palestinians increasingly believe peace to be impossible. Yet on the other hand, I’m typically there with influential Americans, often Americans of faith, bearing witness firsthand to their remarkable transformations—which I believe to be hugely significant.

In fact, I pressed, my colleagues and I had stumbled onto an approach that we believe might one day soon condemn the Israeli/Palestinian

conflict to history's dustbin. "Really?" he asked. My dad didn't seem too impressed by my exuberance, which nevertheless rang familiar. He followed up with "hmmm, that's interesting," which is dad speak for "I'm glad you're excited but that's ridiculous."

I knew I would need to explain.

So I started at the end, affirming a gleaming truth that I believed must inform all engagement with the region: The only way forward in the Holy Land will promote the security, dignity and freedom of every Israeli and every Palestinian. Either every one wins or no one wins. Israel isn't going anywhere. And millions of Palestinians aren't going anywhere, either.

And then I began working myself backwards: America has always played—and will continue to play—a pivotal role there, whether we like it or not. And the region will continue to affect our core security interests, whether we like it or not. So it's not a question of whether we're involved, but how. Without positive and shrewd American engagement, our allies and friends will suffer and we will jeopardize American core strategic interests. That shift won't happen, however, without American citizens calling for such engagement. And since it is the Holy Land, American faith communities might, in fact, hold the key.

My dad seemed to be listening. So I kept talking.

I told him that I was now witnessing something remarkable. Among the leaders I often accompany to the Holy Land and their communities back home, I see a deeply moral and informed view on Israel and the Palestinians quietly flourishing. These folks realize that as much as we might like to, we can't just throw up our hands and walk

away. Yet they also see that for too long the lines of engagement have been drawn too rigid: To be "pro-Israel" is to be "anti-Palestinian" and vice versa. While Israel is like family to America, and America would never turn its back on friends or family, there could be no stability or justice for anyone there without security, dignity and freedom for everyone, in equal measure. Yet many Americans, particularly Americans of faith, have unwittingly helped entrench this destructive either/or dynamic: Typically acting out of the best intentions, they have rushed to the defense of one side at the expense of the other. In so doing, they often ignore both very real justice issues, which complicate things for everyone, and the overarching, gleaming truth, that whatever side they feel most connected to will only know peace if and only if the other side does too.

Now I believed a new day in America was fast approaching. I believed we would one day soon witness Americans of all stripes—Republican, Democrat, believer, non-believer, Evangelical Christian, Jewish, Muslim, conservative and liberal—commit their passions and their energies to supporting American policy that is truly pro-Israeli, pro-Palestinian, pro-American and pro-peace, all at the same time. Would it be enough? I could not know. But could peace ever bloom absent this homegrown American movement? Not in our lifetimes.

"Well that sounds good, but what would you say to someone who says too little too late?" he asked.

I hedged. In one sense, of course, the intention behind the question was right: Any additional suffering is too much suffering. And if people on the ground no longer believed in peace, does it make a difference if foreigners do? And what would

any of this matter if American, Israeli and Palestinian politicians refused to act in good faith?

Yet I had to push back. The bleakness of the current moment might feel timeless and immutable; but there would be some unpredictable, dramatic shift, as there always is. The long missing ingredient of a diverse, engaged and influential American movement committed to the wellbeing of everyone in the Holy Land will then, finally, have a chance at righting this ship. Would peace reign overnight? No way. Consequences of conflicts like these last generations. But good people of good will had to urgently prepare, especially because the “hotheads” already wield so much influence.

“Well,” my dad abruptly cut me off while slicing off another piece of his omelet: “To seek peace and pursue it, that is always the right thing to do. Especially when it seems impossible,” he said, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

But those words didn’t feel obvious to me at all. They hung in the air, heavy.

Nevertheless, one truth became clear, and I felt somehow relieved: My dad hadn’t become an overnight cynic; he was just prompting me to make small talk over breakfast.

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**“To seek peace and pursue it,** that is always the right thing to do. Especially when it seems impossible.” When my dad spoke those words, I didn’t then know if he agreed with my analysis. But it really didn’t matter.

Because in that fabled “larger arc of history,” ordinary people trying to right wrongs of historic proportions had to assume responsibility when any measure of success not only seemed impossible, but also likely was impossible. In the name of women’s suffrage or Civil Rights, for example, generations of Americans toiled everyday, in pursuit of a crystal clear ideal much larger than themselves and their nation, much larger than even their generation. It was on the bedrock of their faith in a greater good—wherever that belief came from—and their solemn sacrifice, that a more perfect yet still broken world has many times been reborn.

And I now clearly saw how these words, delivered so casually, formed the bedrock on which both my parents had constructed their unorthodox life. This was the approach that had sustained Issa through unimaginable transformations. And this was the approach that had fueled my mom Ann, whose story had entered its final chapter just a few blocks away.

Born to Danish immigrants in Boston’s Back Bay, my mother Ann’s first cries echoed off the sterile white walls of a hospital room not too far from the harbor where her father repaired ships’ compasses. She was the first in her family to go to college. In her twenties she had achieved fluency in seven languages, if one counts ancient Greek and Latin. And she had already received her PhD from the University of Pennsylvania when most other Ivy League universities would not even admit women.

Ann spent the next years travelling around Greece, Turkey and the Middle East alone—a tall, fearless, blondehaired, blue-eyed pioneer, who ran archaeological digs and humbly believed we are all capable of greatness, if we commit ourselves

completely to the common good. Once she even ventured to a backwater-farming town near Bethlehem, called Beit Sahour. She could not then have possibly imagined that some years later—and many thousands of miles away—she would fall in love with one of its sons, Issa, who would accompany her on many grand adventures, finally keeping an impossible twelve-hour-a-day, three-year vigil by her bedside so she would not have to suffer alone.

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**My phone began to buzz in my pocket.** News began flooding my inbox about escalating tensions along Israel's southern border with Gaza. I was headed back to Israel/Palestine in just a few days' time and I had just stood on the Gaza border two weeks earlier. I felt myself rush back to a moment of foreboding during that last visit.

My colleague Todd and I were visiting an Israeli friend, Roni, in the small agricultural community of Netiv Ha'Asara. Netiv Ha'Asara stands literally right on Israel's border with the Gaza Strip. Roni had just shared her story with some American friends, including how rocket fire from Gaza had killed her daughter's best friend. We drove together just a few minutes from her home and stopped at a lookout over Gaza.

I had been to these communities in Southern Israel many times, and have grown to love many people there. They live perched literally fifteen seconds from oblivion. Veritable temples to security litter the landscape—in every home, at every bus stop, at every playground. Bomb shelters and "safe" rooms block you at every turn. Fashioned out of reinforced concrete, sometimes three-feet thick,

they often try to mask the somber reality, posing as giant painted worms or some other nod to whimsy.

But the shelters remind one both of the communities' resilience and how fleeting life is. More than 10,000 makeshift rockets have fallen in the past decade, killing several dozen people and terrorizing hundreds of thousands more, whose days are routinely pierced with the deafening scream of sirens, alerting young and old, children playing and mothers bathing infants, that they have only fifteen seconds to claim yet another chance to cheat death.

As we stood there, two helicopters hovered behind us in the distance. Caught in that terrifying limbo between war and détente, they hung there ominously, seemingly dangling in mid-air, like model globes in a child's makeshift planetarium. For months, pundits were prophesying the coming bloodshed. We could not know when and if it would come. But that day the scarred sky seemed ready to bleed.

Roni began explaining the view to our friends, as she had many times before. But I tuned out. I peered into Gaza, imagining how much it had changed in the seven years since I had last visited. Because if Netiv Ha'Asara sits perched fifteen seconds from oblivion, Gaza is oblivion.

In fact, I had spent some weeks in Gaza during its last days of hope, when I had been advising the Palestinian leadership on peace negotiations with Israel. Israel had then decided to remove all of its permanent military bases and settlers from the tiny coastal strip. Israel heralded this as an historic gesture for peace. It had controlled the territory for decades, protecting 8,500 Israeli settlers, some of whom lived in seaside villas among over a million Palestinians in one of the most densely populated

areas on earth. Now it was leaving, without asking Palestinians for anything in return—except, Israel claimed, to prove that the Palestinians were truly willing and able to live at peace, now that Israel was giving them that opportunity.

Palestinians were excited that Israel was removing settlements. They had always contended, along with almost every country around the world, that Israel should never have taken their land and built armed Israeli cities there, against international law. But Palestinians were skeptical. What would Gaza look like the day after Israel left? They said that Israel might be leaving Gaza, but it didn't look like Israel planned on leaving Gaza alone. If Israel retained tight control around Gaza, keeping crossings closed and continued to assault it, they feared that Gaza would quickly descend into humanitarian and political turmoil. And many Palestinians cynically posited that this was not a "peace gesture" at all; rather, this was part of some nefarious Israeli shell game: Remove a small number of settlers from territory Israel doesn't want, Gaza; make Gaza a mess; use that so-called "peace gesture" and the Gaza mess as cover to move tens of thousands of new settlers into land Israel actually does want, the West Bank, especially around Jerusalem.

As I peered into Gaza, I remembered travelling down to a refugee camp in 2005, near one of the soon-to-be-evacuated settlements. I had spoken with some children there, playing in a small open area littered with trash. I had asked what they looked forward to after the Israeli settlers and military left. A girl, maybe eight, told me she wanted to see the sea. She had been born less than a kilometer away. She could smell it and feel its salty breeze. But the Israeli settlement and its security walls had kept her from ever touching its

waters. A boy, maybe her brother, chimed in: He wanted to play without getting shot at.

At least the girl would get her wish.

Since Israel left, life has become more difficult for Israelis and Palestinians on either side of the border. Israel initially retained control of all the crossings into and out of Gaza, which it kept largely sealed. Militants eventually stepped up attacks against Israeli communities, leading Israelis to believe that what they saw as their historic gesture for peace was answered with rockets aimed at kindergartens and synagogues. And the 2006 capture of an Israeli soldier by Palestinian militants fueled anger among Israelis. Yet the 1.5 million people of Gaza are still virtually sealed from the rest of the world, knowing an even harsher existence today than when Israeli soldiers directly ruled their lives. Many Palestinians now believe the evacuation was a ruse to divide the Palestinian polity and conquer more West Bank land. Meanwhile in Gaza, Israeli airstrikes have killed more than 1,500 people, tens of thousands of homes have been demolished, and the restrictions on travel and basic goods have crippled the economy, spiking unemployment to over 30%, while more than 70% of Gaza residents now depend on humanitarian assistance. There are few shelters. There is virtually nowhere to run. As an international diplomat once remarked, "Gaza is a prison and Israel seems to have thrown away the key."

Standing there, I imagined what Gaza would be like seven years from now, when a million more children would call this place home. Would their home be a virtual prison? What would they know of the rest of the world? And what would they think of it? Literacy rates are plummeting among this once

highly-literate population. Would they even be able to relate to the outside world? Or would this be a Lord-of-the-Flies scenario, with millions of children screaming to be seen?

Israel, of course, has legitimate security interests. Israel argues that it gave the people of Gaza a chance at freedom, but instead they elected a terrorist organization, Hamas, and launched rockets instead of roses. Israel is, of course, a state like any other, meaning that it not only has the right to defend its citizens, but also it has that duty. Forget who started it, what state would sit by as rockets rained down upon its civilians?

But what about the children of Gaza, who make up more than half its population? Are they not human too? Are they any less precious than the children of Tel Aviv, Paris and San Diego? Are they not deserving of security, dignity and freedom too? Do not the people of Gaza have a right of self-defense too? Forget who started it, what population locked up in a virtual prison would not react or fight back? And if Hamas is solely to blame for the extreme suffering of the people of Gaza (and not Israel or Egypt, which now holds the keys to Gaza's southern border), how will keeping millions of people locked in a virtual prison, generation after generation, make Israel (or anyone else) any safer? And even if it does, how is that right?

After all, we either believe that God lied when Scripture tells us that he created all of us in his image—Israeli,

Palestinian, Chinese, Danish, male, female, black, brown, Republican, Democrat, white, yellow or whatever. Or we lie to God and ourselves when we rationalize how we might believe or behave otherwise. As if “those” children—“those” Israelis, “those” Palestinians, “those” Jews, “those” Blacks,

“those” Latinos, “those” gays, “those” Muslims, “those” girls—are somehow different.

And I wondered what Gaza must have been like more than a century ago, when my grandmother Fahima's cries first bounced off the arched stone walls of her family's home there, a Palestinian Christian family whose roots could have extended back to Jesus' or Samson's times or before. I wondered what it might have been like for her, as a little girl frolicking freely in the salty breeze on Gaza's beaches, long before walls of separation and missiles had violated those pristine sands. She could not possibly have imagined that one day she would fall in love with a rugged stone dresser named Jiries from a backwater town near Bethlehem, who would eventually bear her a son named Issa on Christmas.

How beautiful Gaza's ancient port must have been, standing quite literally at the crossroads of Asia, Africa and Europe. Gaza had once birthed ships carrying spice, silk and books onto the bulging blue Mediterranean, cradling treasures from Old world to New. Would the ships ever sail again? And how different Fahima's Gaza must have been. She grew up long before Israel's founding in 1948, when a veritable flood of Palestinian Muslim and Christian refugees washed over this tiny territory like a tsunami that would never recede. Overnight, the population literally tripled. How impossibly difficult that must have been—for the refugees, who were told that they had somehow been born the wrong race and religion in their own land, now that Israel wanted a Jewish majority to become a Jewish state; and for the families like Fahima's, who had to welcome this flood of new, needy neighbors.

Could Gaza ever be known once again for all the good it brings to the world? Knowing so many

beautiful, good and industrious people there, I almost caught myself smiling because, I believed, somehow, someday, some seemingly impossible way, that day was inevitable. But then I felt—or thought I felt—the violent beat of a bass staccato pulse through my flesh. That rhythm knew me and I knew it. It pulsed in me and through me, as if it had been scripted into my being and I into it, marking a steady and eager beat that seemed like it had been cutting time since before humanity's dawn. Perhaps the helicopters were on the move, their propellers beating the drums of war? I looked back. But there they were, dangling still, like permanent fixtures beneath the paper-thin blue of a sky just eager to scream blood.

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**“Yallah? [‘Let’s go?’ in Arabic]”** my father asked, snapping me out of my dark reverie. He joked again with the waitress, this time about the food. Grinning gigantic and wagging his finger, he nevertheless admonished her: “Don’t forget to thank the goats!” reminding us how we often stumble upon the most transformational discoveries in the most unexpected ways.

And we headed back to my mom’s bedside, not knowing how many more days, weeks or months the vigil would continue.

As she lay suspended in that impossibly difficult limbo between death and suffering, we stood there smiling. Believing one day we could all know a better place. Yet realizing that today all we could do was show up and show our love (throwing our hands up and walking away was, of course, never an option). And hoping our loving presence might

possibly help her (and us) transcend suffering to know a last measure of peace on earth.

I faltered. I had to get back to “the work that I do.” After all, nothing had made my mom more proud than my following in her unorthodox footsteps, albeit in my own unorthodox way. Unable to speak or lift her head, I leaned over so she could kiss me goodbye.

And my father’s words haunted me, hanging like boulders in my all-too-feeble heart: “To seek peace and pursue it, that is always the right thing to do. Especially when it seems impossible.”

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