

Friends

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We meet in a coffee shop frequented by musicians, the space is filled with the buzz of students and instruments all sounding together. She is wearing a hijab and a smile that is broad and bright and makes me feel welcome. Her eyes radiate compassion and sorrow. I am stiffer, still wearing my professional demeanor. This is my neighbourhood. She has come from much further away: travelling by subway from Mississauga, by plane from Beirut, by transport truck from a refugee camp in Lebanon, clandestinely by foot from her hometown, a Syrian village under bombardment and destruction. Seemingly, we couldn't be more different.

According to the accepted truths of geopolitics, we are enemies. She is Muslim from Syria, a country that is hostile to the state of Israel. I am Jewish and my parents went to Israel for refuge as displaced persons from a Nazi concentration camp. She has been through hell. I have witnessed the ravages of hell through my parents' stories and lives. Refugee camp/concentration camp, refugees/displaced persons, escape, hell. But, geopolitics and our respective experiences of the hell they can inflict, are subjects of conversation for another day. Today, we have other things to talk about.

Mariam was an obstetrician in Syria. She worked delivering babies in the refugee camp in Lebanon where she and her family lived for 2 years. Mariam, her husband, and their 4 children were sponsored by my colleague's church group to come to Canada. He told me about the family. About how Mariam knows she will not be able to practise medicine in Canada and has now decided to become a midwife. About how there is a one-year program for foreign-trained midwives to prepare for their licensing exams in

Ontario. About how getting into this program is so important so that Mariam can qualify quickly and start to earn money for her family. But, to be admitted, she has to pass an oral and written English proficiency exam, including relevant medical terminology. Learning English is one thing, but where does one learn the secret language of medicine, the mysterious abbreviations and acronyms that are its dialects?

"I'll help," I said.

As the others in the coffee shop are playing their musical instruments, we are playing with a different set of instruments: forceps, stethoscope and a speculum. We are playing with a rubber fetus and a plastic placenta, which the musicians probably find rather strange. Mariam is trying to say difficult words like "placenta previa" but can't quite get her tongue around them.

"Try this, I say: Polly bought a peck of pickled peppers. Say it again 10 times fast."

"Now try this: Polly is a primipara with placenta previa. Say it again 10 times fast."

We fall into riotous laughter. Now, for sure, the musicians think we're up to something very strange.

Today, Mariam brings her daughters to meet me. Children's ability to learn a new language in which they are immersed is enviable; her daughters are fluent. Their hair is beautiful, long and curly; one has black hair, one red. We decide to go outside and take a picture. Three radiant smiles, a family trait. The girls flash peace signs. I suggest to Mariam that the fastest way for her to learn English is to speak it at

home with her children. She refuses. She wants Arabic to be the language of home. She wants her children to be able to speak to their grandparents, their cousins, their aunts and uncles. Losing that ability would mean losing their family. My parents learned English from me, my sister and brother. Mariam is right. We lost our ability to speak the goulash of languages from the Austro-Hungarian empire. But, in our case, it didn't matter. The family was already lost. There were no grandparents, cousins, aunts or uncles left.

We are both nervous as we prepare to face the head of the midwifery program. Mariam has to go for an interview and has asked me to come with her. We agree that I will be silent and only take notes, just to make sure she doesn't miss anything. The program head is clearly annoyed by my presence. Why was I there? Surely I don't expect special consideration just because I'm a doctor. Mariam too is damned by the "doctor" label. "What makes you think you can be a midwife just because you're an obstetrician?" the program head asks. Mariam and I share a conspiratorial look: we have landed in the fraught politics of physician-midwife relations, which have been contentious for at least a century.

We burst through the door of the building running and giggling like schoolgirls who have escaped a scolding. We don't know what the outcome will be, but we need to celebrate. We savour great big double-scoops of ice cream as Mariam tells me that her "back-home" — as she calls it — is famous for its ice cream. I'm saddened by my ignorance of her culture and country.

Some months later, we are celebrating for real. Mariam has finished the course, passed the exams, and is on her way to being licensed as a midwife. Her husband is here to celebrate. His pride — and relief — are evident.

Some months later at an event, I meet the colleague who originally introduced me to Mariam, and his family. I'm surprised when they call me "the angel" who helped Miriam.

She had told them how she would have given up without me. How it was my encouragement and positive words that kept her going. And now, she will be able to support her family.

This is a huge reward. They don't know how much I was rewarded too.

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