

## Break the Deadlock

**Kim John Farleigh**

Abu's car became another vertebrae in the street's metal spine. The spine's exhaust swirled with graceless freedom. Fire stains surrounded shattered windows beside bullet holes in concrete cadavers that lined the street.

Jim thought, I want to get close and I don't. Common-sense drives me back, while curiosity sucks me in.

They passed black-fabric death notices that covered a white wall. Orange Arabic lined the black fabric, the deceased named in a hue that suggested a glorious end.

A faceless, ebony woman, floating before the wall's whiteness, resembled a black ghost before a marble tombstone. A palm tree's green fingers, above the fabrics, seemed to be issuing last rites. A man in a wheelchair pumped himself past announced inevitability. He had narrowly missed dying himself, ebony spectres floating before a sunlit wave of remembrance.

A soldier stared dryly, like a fed reptile, from a tank's machine-gun mount.

Another form of death, Jim thought; one much slower.

A helicopter had appeared above his head as he had been waiting on his hotel room's balcony for Abu's call. Almost within touching distance! Without warning! Just like that! Silent! Right there! Rotating blades! Silent!!

The helicopter's silence, Jim thought, epitomises how people often get it: Sudden realisation—then gone.

A vacant lot was packed with trucks. A sign nearby said: *Slow down: Excessive speed could lead to the use of excessive force.*

Traffic meandered around waist-high, concrete barriers, the footpath shielded off by sandbags and barbed-wire.

A bored soldier behind a machine gun on a tank's top mirrored the surrounding desert's languor. Hazy agitation writhed on the horizon. Blood-red reflectors on a Humvee's back resembled glassy wounds. A comatose soldier in the Humvee's machine-gun mount looked as if all feeling had been sucked out of him by war's shut-down of emotion.

An Iraqi soldier, wearing black sunglasses, and slouching on one leg, was beside his American commanding officer, piercing-eyed American face spewing out: "Move that truck!"

The Iraqi was *translating*.

"Move that truck!" the American screamed.

The smug grimace on the Iraqi's face was *a demented smile!* The guy looks nuts!, Jim thought.

Abu edged forward.

"Stop!" the American yelled.

Abu continued edging forward. The Iraqi, with a laughing-skull grimace, was screaming in Arabic.

"Stop!!" the American screamed again.

Abu stopped; jerked forward, stopped again, the Iraqi screaming.

"The Iraqi is telling me to go!" Abu said.

"Listen to the American!" Jim screamed.

"Get out of the car!!" the American screamed.

The Iraqi was now pointing his gun.

Jim was pushed against a wall, palms against brick. Gun-barrel shadows fired dark rays over the wall. Survival's bird lifted Jim's mind from its cranial shell. Debilitating possibilities had fluttered, like crazed angels, before fluttering worry yielded relief's smoother flight.

"My passport's in my shirt pocket," he said. "I'm flying on *Airserv*."

The American, a fireball of jumpiness, studied the passport. Frenetic concentration burnt in his eyes. Belief in great schemes had been shattered in the American's head by survival's yelp.

"Park in the lot and wait," the soldier said. "Someone'll take you to the airport."

The grimace of smug delight remained on the Iraqi's amused face, like a stain of mad titillation.

"That's why people die at checkpoints!" Jim said. "Because of *translators* like him."

A new development in cruel entertainment, crueller than nature. Was it calculated to show greater will through savage madness? Or was this suspected infiltrator a lone actor, delighting in violence without being under threat?

"Stop the car," Jim said.

"Here?!"

"Stop!!"

The car was pointing at forty-five-degrees across the road, holding up traffic. The Humvee's soldiers lifted their heads as horns blew, comatose corporals receiving life injections, their wild-eyed commanding officer striding across the road, Jim's head out the window, the commanding officer screaming: "I told you to move!"

Jim pointed at the Iraqi soldier and yelled: "He's telling people to keep going!"

"What!?"

"He's saying the opposite to you!!"

"Yes! Yes!" Abu added, bending forward to look at the American. "He told me to keep going while you were saying STOP!!"

The American's forehead lines of disbelief disappeared. Clarity gave his face smooth realisation, speculation sharper in clearing vision.

"Okay," he said. "I'll deal with it. Park in the lot."

Brown dust hovered where men were waiting for their vehicles to be inspected. War demonstrates how creative life is in producing death.

"That guy's an infiltrator or he's playing live computer games," Jim said.

New possibilities flooded cerebral territories like eerie lava.

"Mad," Abu said, shaking his head, his eyes beaming out rays of horror. "Mad!"

He smacked his steering-wheel. The source of Abu's dismay was now apparent to Jim—at last!

"You know," Jim said, "that discoveries are inevitable, but you can't imagine....."

"What a crazy fucker!" Abu seethed.

Jim's need for discovery now felt irrelevant; something far greater had risen above it.

"More madness!" Abu hissed. "That other madness replaced by this!"

That other madness had been Saddam Hussein.

"Unbelievable!" Jim muttered.

"I thought I was a disaster tourist," he added, "but that....that's...."

"That's," Abu said, "a new war for a new era. Look what the Americans have brought here! They're so innocent!"

Jim now believed that he felt what ordinary Iraqis feel. The moral concussion that had been hammering Abu's mind for

months was now shaking Jim's conscience as he rested an elbow on Abu's car's roof. Rust had mauled metal around the headlights, a gap between the grill and the bumper where the metal had died, the car rotting like Iraq.

Abu lay on the bonnet, vacantly facing vacant heavens, this incident another appalling discovery in a creative vat of troubling occurrences, the muted desert mirroring the ambivalence of the immense light of impartiality that capped the world.

Men huddled in the shade produced by trucks, their shadows like black omens on dust.

Jim felt the heat touching his nose and earlobes. Air baked under a blue blaze. Jim felt Abu's vulnerability, his eerie hopelessness, his morbid ineptitude, the belittling that cruel impunity produces, new feelings—breakthroughs in sympathy—the unexpected *rewards* of curiosity.

And these feelings aren't sporadic, he realised; they accumulate into permanent scars.

A loud swat had made him rush to the balcony when he had been in his hotel room, a flame rising over the buildings on the other side of the road. Intertwining, black DNA smoke currents had ascended, dissipating into blue. The shallowness of the explosion's swat had been so shallow that it had had no pitch, unlike thunder's symphonic euphony.

The black smoke had melted, interlocking ebony-gas veins disappearing with amoral ascension into azure.

Jim's telephoto lens had brought the incident closer, Jim having thought: Those fumes lack a cloud's grace. Sporadic violence in a steamy soup of languor. One extreme or the other.

He had lowered his camera, the sporadic gone, back to safe-distance illusion.

Then the helicopter had swept over the balcony. Then another helicopter—unannounced—faint engine hum heard briefly, fast shadow, then gone, black birds of death.

A soldier said: "Are you Jim Holmes?"

"Yes."

"Follow about eighty yards behind us. Don't get too close, okay?"

"Okay."

The hand that fell away from Abu's face was sweaty. He now had to drive down that death road—and back—his head simmering with possibilities; his reward: some desperately needed dollars.

The armoured vehicle, dwarfed by celestial sapphire, moved down the long road, Iraq's magnitude turning it into a dot of insignificant steel. Nothing looked secure or strong in Baghdad—even steel—everything made vulnerable by towering circumstances.

White lines curved and curved as if the destination was perennially the horizon. Palm-tree explosions topped brown, tornado timber. A concrete fence lined one side of the road, a military barracks the other. Barbed-wire topped

a wall over which protruded a lookout tower. Twenty-fours on alert.

“When you’re young,” Abu said, “you don’t know about all the ways of dying....Later you know there are many ways, but not until you’ve seen war do you realise how many ways there are. Each day brings another.”

Accumulation often shook his hands.

“I can imagine,” Jim said.

And partially he could, too.

“While waiting for you on my room’s balcony,” he said, “a helicopter appeared above me—just like that! No sound! They could have shot me. I was holding a telephoto lens that looks like a weapon. People with guns in tight situations usually don’t bother with thinking.”

The road became a car park. Metal containers faced a hangar. Soldiers were unloading an arms’ shipment. More possibilities for killing.

Abu parked besides the airport’s main doors where sandbags faced a timber board. A sign on the board said: *Remove magazine and clear all weapons prior to entry of terminal*. Bullet holes adorned the sandbags. A gun had once fired accidentally in the departure lounge, a briefcase getting speared by lead. Now no loaded weapons were permitted inside.

Abu opened the boot and removed Jim’s bags. Abu’s rapid movements, emphasised by the desert’s stillness, made Jim

assume that Abu had to be in another place quickly to do another job.

Jim handed over the money and they shook hands. Abu dashed into the car, fleeing after a quick goodbye, his car shooting behind trees and then disappearing.

Jim entered the terminal, relief enhanced by the satisfaction of having felt what they feel. He even felt proud. And now he was returning to where death comes after long, sedate stretches of time, back to where people engage in the slow accumulation of limited knowledge, where the crawling attainment of information allows you to feel comfortable. Very few awful surprises existed where he was going back to; where he was going there were usually just positives, like a child's world.

He decided to go back outside to experience a level of heat he had never known before, a new climatic experience in which the sun's fury covered him in an invisible furry sheath. A humid languor had stumped the world into abeyance, nothing seemingly having the energy to move under the sun's ferocity, so quiet it seemed as if nothing had ever happened in that place whose changes had the snail's pace of evolution.

The desert tilted up to where the horizon's pales edges supported hard blue. The sapphire above the lighter horizon seemed to be denying gravity, like inverse reality.

The focal length between Jim's eyes and the computer screen he was looking at later that day in Amman

contracted and expanded as he read: Baghdad Airport attacked with rocket propelled grenades.....

He seemed to shrink. Just chance he wasn't dead! He could have been there, the first victim! Of course! That's why Abu wanted to flee! *So innocent.....*

Every day, he thought, brings more ways.....Death at any moment. While you're eating; while lying in bed; outside airports! Especially if you have worked for foreigners.....

Pride became shame. Imagine, he thought, always learning about new ways of dying—and doing it with imagination!

Base fear just climbs, peaks rising and rising—until?

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Abu charged back down the road, speed his only security. Palms flashed by. The desert's immense space caused worrying, unwanted exposure. He expected to see rocket-propelled grenades coming his way, his eyes roaming on full alert.

The checkpoint's congestion emphasised how suicide bombers cause mayhem. Knowledge was making life worse; knowledge, a previously beautiful thing, had once made life an adventure. Now it was poison. There are so many ways.....

The future was contracting, claustrophobia caused by having worked for foreigners. The resistance could get him any time, his days finishing with drilling headaches, bags around his eyes resembling the rotting metal growing around his car's headlights.

Fusing days became wads of sameness, like waiting for something positive that seems increasingly unlikely to arrive.

Each car bomb rippled vulnerability through the swamp of insipidity that he was trudging through towards a destination that appeared increasingly remote. The future was deterioration.

He collapsed on his living-room floor, clutching his head, his brother having been shot by the Americans, the occupiers having returned fire after their passing convoy had received a round from within the same building that his brother had been visiting. The savage impartiality of that unpaid-for death triggered a vengeful need to break the inaction that had been murdering Abu internally. Even the soldiers knew when it would be over for them. They had dates.

His mother's tears didn't stop him from planting his first roadside bomb, the work done under a million-light sky whose magical stability created a false feeling of promise. And why not plant bombs? The future was non-existent, an adolescent-like failure of temporal perceptions charged up by fear and resentment.

The fear-accumulation peak was now so high that only kill or be killed or kill yourself existed. A tightening fist of awareness had squeezed out from life's pulp these three pips of possibility, an outcome the occupier called terrorism. Some of the occupiers may even have believed this.

And Abu believed he killed someone from the same unit that had killed his brother.

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**Kim John Farleigh** has worked for NGO's in Greece, Kosovo, Iraq, Palestine and Macedonia. He likes to take risks to get the experience required for writing. He likes painting, art, photography and architecture. 151 of his stories have been accepted by 89 different magazines.

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