Four Thousand Dollars from Baghdad

by Matt DeVirgiliis

Jogging along Penn Station's mucky floor with the herd, I ran though the day's schedule in my head: meeting first thing, two meetings later in the morning, and a conference call at two. My train was twenty minutes late and I forgot to iron my shirt. A good start.

I darted through the open space near the tall escalator and staircase, heading toward 7th Avenue, and glanced up quickly enough to notice a National Guardsman holding an American flag, motionless and reverent. Nine more guardsmen stood single-file behind him. Beside the row of guardsmen, stood a row of ten New York City police officers. Behind them, four bagpipers and two drummers. They were all dressed for presentation, pressed uniforms, kilts, and shoes shiny as mirrors. The group stood in formation off to the side, allowing everyone to bull through.

Thunk. Thunk. Thunk. The base drum easily filled the cavernous building. The rat-tat-tat of the snare joined and the bagpipes came in low.

I stopped. In my hurry to catch a late train and make my meeting, I had forgotten.

The procession worked its way to the center of the open area, at the bottom of the stairs, and the bagpipes started their Amazing Grace.

Others stopped. We bowed our heads and remembered the first plane.

The day before, I had been talking to my uncle about getting embedded with an Army unit in Iraq; I wanted to fulfill my sense of duty and thought my writing was the answer - a prose-shooting patriot.

Hemingway said that war was a great subject for a writer to experience and write about. Writers who didn't get the chance were

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jealous. My cousin, an EOD specialist with the Navy, was heading to Iraq in a few weeks. I wanted to go. I wanted to see war.

The bagpipes went silent and I made my way to the office. My day went on and though my fingers typed, my mind was stuck on war. How can I see it… feel it?

“Fly to Baghdad,” said Jason, a colleague and confidant. “Wait until your cousin gets there and buy a ticket.”

“That's crazy,” I said and walked away. Crazy and brilliant.

Six weeks later, I sat in a sauna of a cab and pulled out my wallet, proud of my determination. “How much for the seven miles to Baghdad?” I asked cabby.

“Four thousand US dollars,” he replied.

“That's crazy."

“This is the most dangerous road in the world and you want to drive down it. You crazy,” he said.

“But it's not that far.

“About four thousand dollars away,” said cabby.

The air-conditioned cab was no match for the sweltering heat outside. I was told to be prepared, be ready for a wall of heat. Choking heat. My forehead poured like a hydrant and my deodorant quit before I got off the plane. This wasn't heat. It was hell. Freaking Jason and his grand ideas.

I tilted on the cracked, pleather cab seat, peeling my left leg up like a security cap on a new jar of peanut butter.

“So, crazy, do you have four grand?” asked cabby.

I didn't have it. Even if I did, I wouldn't have given it to him. What was I thinking?

Kaboom!

The cab jolted and the ground shook. Leaning forward, I peered through the windshield toward Baghdad and saw a plume of dark, gray smoke. “I think I've seen enough,” I said. I handed him a twenty and stepped out of the cab and into the blanket of heat, immediately covered in sweat and humiliation. Four thousand dollars to Baghdad and I gave twenty.

On board the plane, I successfully fled the carnage, while on the ground my cousin drove straight into it. I pulled out my calendar and counted down the days to his return, to the day I'd tell him how far away I was.