



Source: Bay Fang, 'America weighs air strikes on Kurds in Iraq', *Chicago Tribune*, DPA in *The Age* online, 24/10/07.

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This morning he made himself a strong espresso before going to the computer to check his email where he knew the prompt for the day would be waiting in his inbox. The chosen prompt, that would form the starting point of his story, was 'It's not Kumbaya' and it was accompanied by a link to an article in *The Age*, entitled 'America weighs air strikes on Kurds in Iraq'. The prompt was a quote from a US 'official' commenting sarcastically on the administration's threat to dispense with diplomacy and consider a military solution to the persistent actions of Kurdish rebels entrenched in the mountains of northern Iraq. At this point, having read the article and browsed some historical references, he had finished his coffee and wondered if he might not need another one to get him through the task of writing this story.

The impetus for the US considering the use of cruise missiles against the fighters of the PKK (Kurdish Workers Party) is that the guerrillas have been killing Turkish soldiers, 40,000 of whom are amassed on the southern border where Turkey meets Iraq, poised to invade the area known as Kurdistan. The Turks are opposed to the establishment of an autonomous Kurdish state and have been more or less at war with the Kurdish people since the days of the Ottoman Empire. The US is concerned that a Turkish incursion into northern Iraq will inflame an area that provides the only semblance of stability and good news to emerge from Operation Iraqi Freedom. The White House and the Iraqi government regard the PKK—whose origins are Marxist-Leninist—as a terrorist organisation because their tactics have included the use of suicide bombers and other means of asymmetric warfare.

He went back to the kitchen and made another coffee, watching the gas flame caress the base of the espresso pot, listening to the gurgling signal that the job was done. He returned to his office, sat back in his chair and stared at the monitor, trying to fathom some connection between what he was doing, his life there in a comfortable suburb of Sydney's northern beaches, and the situation of those fighters holed in up in ancient mountain hideouts. Nothing came to mind. The prospect of linking the prompt, the source article and his life experience to Kurdish history was utterly beyond him. He could make no move to craft a piece of fiction that would be relevant to the lived reality of a Turkish soldier in a tank, a PKK guerilla asleep in a cave or a Kurdish girl watching a helicopter gunship circle her village. His imagination did not fail him. He was incapable of turning it and his capacity to write half decent fiction to the task of drawing a line of sight that demonstrated respect for the subject.

Of course, he could resort to fictionally characterising certain players in this geopolitical drama as good and evil according to his own sympathies and political alignment but to do so would be transparently ineffectual and trite.

He could circumscribe an arc of implication linking Australian politics to US global hegemony that would cast him as complicit in the fallout from Operation Iraqi Freedom. Australian middle class liberal writer sits at his desk in the morning sun sipping black coffee and struggling with his muse. Later in the day he will go to the cinema to see Angelina Jolie play Daniel Pearl's wife with a perfect French accent. Artifice, in the face of a reality so stark, so alien in its corporeal brutality and exotic, crushing difference. He could write obliquely, fill his text with space for the reader to do some work, to fall through the gaps into their own imaginings. He could refuse the authorial voice. He cannot reach this story. He cannot make it up. Someone's laughing, Lord.

Some years ago he visited Belfast during an especially volatile period. The day before he arrived, the Europa hotel, dubbed the world's most bombed, had lived up to its reputation by taking another hit from the IRA. He booked into a smelly room on Cromwell Street, a couple of blocks away. He was traveling alone, with a backpack and was regarded by the locals with nervous suspicion as he made his way across the town square from the bus station. He passed a nineteen year old British squaddie cradling his automatic rifle and whispering into his lapel radio. He kept walking. Halfway across the square he turned around and saw the squaddie aiming his weapon at him, locking him into the telescopic sight. It was an example of the intimidatory tactics used everyday against citizens in Northern Ireland. The squaddie had no intention of shooting but he sent him the message that he could if he wanted. For a moment he felt the passing chill of warfare. Two days later he was in Paris, writing in a café.

Finally, he is confronted with the pretense of fiction. Words fail him. He needs more coffee. Perhaps that is the extent of his connection with the Kurds, the Turks, the Iraqis. They all need coffee to get through the day, to fuel their motivation, to provide momentary respite from the inevitable. In the marketplace talking with friends and smoking strong cigarettes; beside a fire surrounded by snowdrifts, huddled against the wind with a rifle on the shoulder; in a chilly mess tent with young men wishing they could go home; standing watch at the gas stove brewing it for her father. The black liquor of contemplation. The cursor blinks. His fingers hesitate, hovering above the keyboard like pale spider legs. Every new word carries the weight of history, the burden of tomorrow as it appears, etched against the shimmering white background of the present. He looks at his watch and sees that time is running out. The deadline looms. The coffee cup is empty. The story untold. Someone's praying, Lord.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Boris Kelly.*