



Wall of Fire

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SYNOPSIS

Throughout this war which is stunning in its savagery, I have managed to cordon off my feelings from my thoughts. To compartmentalise. But now the images of carnage are mounting; my psyche is flooding like a dam bursting its walls. I dream of vultures, pausing for the death throes of their prey. Of former sports stadiums converted to concentration camps. Of an expressionless expression. And of a silk scarf, fluttering in the breeze.

Dominic Vukasinovic has retreated into intellect. Cultivation of the mind, at the expense of emotion, has been his narcotic. But now that path is as lethal to him as the most potent drug or alcohol. And far from insulating him, excessive self-reliance has made him dangerously vulnerable.

Arriving in Sydney, Australia, after fleeing the war in Yugoslavia, he is outwardly safe at least. Now the snipers with which he contends are **subjective**. In his attempts to relate to his therapist, Alison Gage, who confronts internal battles of her own, Dominic taps depths of feeling which have previously been inaccessible. And which he is ill equipped to navigate.

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Part 1 Sarajevo 1994

1. Dominic

I see something.

I crane forward to see it better. And feel the ligaments of my neck stretch and scream in protest. A pail of what appears to be red paint is flung at me.

Instinctively I raise my hand to protect my eyes. Before realising that I am shielded by glass, that I am in my car, and that it is the windscreen which has taken the onslaught.

Only it is not paint that has been thrown. It is blood. The streams and rivulets of which make of my windscreen an expressionist painting.

Along the roadside groups of people are congregated. They are busy driving five inch nails – which gleam like money – into makeshift crucifixes. Huddled under a tree is what appears to be a family (*surely the small figure is that of a child!*) And I know with paralysing shock what is soon to happen.

I can barely contain the horror which rises in me. Which causes me to tighten my grip on the

steering wheel, to inadvertently accelerate. And to careen directly into what are now premature victims. *My victims.*

Oh my God.

The last thing I see is the crumpled figure of the child. And the slack arm of the mother from whose body it has been torn. Strangely, incredibly, I also see the contorted but smiling face of the man who is not yet dead.

At least, his sightless eyes seem to be saying, you cut short our suffering.

And the figures at the side of the road, as if relieved to be spared a task for which, after all, they felt no relish, turn to congratulate me.

Another image (*there are more, always more*).

This time I am with friends. This time all seems to be well.

We are having a picnic. We have selected a stately tree to sit beneath. Its richly clothed branches cast deep shade over the blanket on which we sit. The trunk of the tree is gnarled and tangled. It radiates solidity. And I enjoy a brief moment of serenity before something makes me glance up.

The inert body of a man hangs from a branch above. And there are other figures, swinging from other trees in ghostly parabolas.

The bile flows in my throat like a poison. I nudge my companion that he may witness and confirm what I am seeing. But he merely nods pleasantly. After the briefest of glances, he focuses again on the bread roll he is buttering. And on the wine he has just poured.

‘Yes’, he says. ‘Aesthetically pleasing, isn’t it?’

As I gape in dumb incredulity, he gives me a look akin to complicity. And proffers a glass of wine which I am too stunned to reject.

They torch a church, and the flames rise like a benediction.

A wall of fire materialises before us; you expect the Holy Spirit to appear at its heart. There are no people in the church (*what a pity, you can almost hear them thinking*). The burning takes less than twenty minutes. Only the blackened edifice remains.

The phallic spire still intact.

The happy arsonists, murmuring quietly in deep contentment, pick the ruins delicately.

Fastidiously.

The worst are when people figure among the victims. The most excruciating are when they are people I know.

I wake in a cold sweat, my sheet soaked, my head pounding.

Once I woke to the sound of bullets. Or so I thought. Before realising that it was hail sounding on the roof. And that the particular horror from which I was emerging - both mirror and portent of actual horrors from which others do not emerge - was hallucinatory.

I am exhausted in the aftermath of these dreams. I am all day haunted by them. I leave in the morning with a saturated psyche. The macabre contents of which erupts without warning or catalyst.

Once I was mid-sentence in a lecture to ten students (we operate now – I can almost smile at this – on a ‘skeleton staff’). And a scythe took shape before me.

I yelled to the startled students to beware. Some of them were not even startled.

Sometimes I think it is my days that have become surreal, my nights a faithful reflection of reality.

But this spillage from my subconscious into the daylight hours is a new development.

And an increasingly disturbing one.

During prior periods of this war, the war which has stunned us in its savagery, I have managed to cordon off my days from my nights. To compartmentalise the daylight Apollonian realm from the dark Dionysian one.

It is important I do this for my students' sake, if not my own. The decision to keep open the university was a deliberate act of hope and defiance. A sign that reason and learning could continue in the face of the madness. But except for a handful of students, the lecture theatres are empty. What would it do to the few who remain, against such odds, were their teachers to capitulate in front of them?

As I am perhaps starting to do now.

My psyche is flooding like a dam bursting its walls.

And yet some internal divisions remain. My reasoning faculty observes such lapses, which are increasingly the norm, with an almost clinical detachment.

I wonder what our few remaining students think. Some of them still take copious notes. Or at least appear to do so. But perhaps it is gibberish which trails from their pens. Perhaps it is less the desire for their education to continue than a clinging to ritual which accounts for their continued presence against such heavy odds.

I try to make it worth their while. I hear myself mouthing the words and phrases of a person in my position.

But it is making less and less sense to me. As perhaps to them. Maybe we are all clinging to the threads of normality. Until now I have felt it important to do so.

But I don't know that anymore.

I don't know anything anymore.

Perhaps they would be relieved were I to abandon the pretence, leaving them free to do so as well. As I was tempted to do yesterday.

No, more than tempted. Almost compelled. It was only with the greatest effort and self-restraint that I managed to keep myself in check. One of my students - Dimitri, with the sad, serious eyes – came to me after class. I knew without a word being exchanged that he had come for personal advice.

Advice! When at this point I can scarcely put one foot in front of the other.

Which must not yet be apparent to others.

I did my best to reassure him that reason would prevail in the end. That it is still worth the effort to keep planning; that the miniature of individual effort still counts. But I don't think I believe it myself anymore (*did I ever?*) The unbidden question further frightens me.

And today. Today I was as close as I've been to complete mental capitulation.

Despite (*or perhaps because*) my conscious resolve is still strong.

I felt I had become an automaton. That the words I was mouthing were empty slogans which had nothing to do with me. To the subject I was discussing. Or to anything else at all.

I felt that the concepts I was trying to explain had become detached from any relationship to anything. That they were abstractions of abstractions. And perhaps had always been so.

I felt that perhaps now, for the first time, I was seeing things as they are. And found myself thinking (I who could always discipline my thoughts!)

You are not an academic any more. If you ever really were.

You are an actor.

2. Dominic

Sarajevo 1984. The Winter Olympics.

Almost impossible to evoke now, in the midst of devastation. People from all over the world had flocked to visit. The towns and resorts had been vibrant with energy and cosmopolitanism.

Where is the international interest now?

The depth of external indifference shocks him.

*'It's not Africa this time!' he wants to shout.
'It's Europe!'*

'It's not `over there!' You yourselves were here!'

But after a while the indignation freezes in his throat. Because even as the snow is stained with blood, the global inertia has congealed like rain in sub-zero temperature.

Why images of the 1984 Winter Olympics are returning to him now is difficult to fathom. He

is beset by them. And is surprised by how many of them have been preserved intact.

He tries to resist those which are more personal. Focusing on them means an emotional thaw which, until now, he has managed to keep in check.

This is pain of a different kind. Which, as is his wont, he has all but succeeded in combating with intellect.

The Winter Olympics had been his last winter with Maja. Looking back on it now, it seems as if it was the last time he had come close to experiencing emotion.

Consciously he hadn't registered the loss. Paradoxically, it represented a victory of sorts; product of the most difficult battle he had fought with himself.

Only now, consistent with his general psychic deterioration, he wonders whether it hadn't been a crushing defeat.

He hadn't allowed himself to grieve in the wake of Maja's departure. With one unnerving exception, in which he had briefly cried like a baby, he had redirected his energies to professional achievement. Which had yielded different, if ultimately less satisfying, rewards.

Two major books, an array of conference papers and an associate professorship had provided comfort of a kind. Thinking meant he didn't have to feel.

There had been other women after Maja. But these affairs had been strictly utilitarian. In his newly parlous state, he even experiences a pang of remorse about that. Wonders whether, and hopes not, he inflicted any casual wounds from which others might be suffering.

As he is suffering now.

But what he had experienced with Maja wasn't casual. *Why is he even now trying to pretend otherwise?*

His academic ambition had been as voracious in her aftermath as his desire had been for her. Whatever his distaste for psychoanalysis, he can't fail to appreciate the extent of his sublimation.

But why are images of her and their time together returning now? And with such crystalline purity? Like perfect, indelible hand prints under the many layers of consciousness. Their long inaccessibility imparts a sharper edge to their capacity to hurt.

One avalanche has precipitated another. He is submerged by a psychic landslide to which it is becoming increasingly difficult not to succumb.

Maja. The very name (*so long since he has spoken it!*) diffuses an ache. The belated intensity of which stuns him.

He had fought hard against her memory. As he had initially resisted *her*. Not that she had been

the one to come on strongly. Quite the reverse in fact.

But his pursuit of her – determined, even relentless in some respects – had masked his psychological guardedness. It had been months before his emotional barriers, jealously guarded, had crumbled along with his physical defences (those had collapsed immediately).

The first few weeks of their relationship he had experienced a mind/body split so vast as to threaten the loss of equilibrium he seems to be facing now. Later she told him she had never met a man as insulated as he. Perhaps his remoteness had comprised part of his attraction for her. Maybe she had set it as a personal goal to crack his resolve; to see how long it would take. By the time she succeeded she was in love with him, if she hadn't been before. And he with her.

At least, she had said she was in love with him. But he intercepts himself with this impulse to question and potentially destroy. A long