



Chapter 1

It's not a well-known part of the world, Kosovo, but in the northern hemisphere autumn of 1998 this mountainous region of the Balkans has become the backdrop to television news bulletins everywhere. Something appalling is happening in Kosovo; something that generates images of the sort that people in the West associate with the unruly republics of the Third World. Columns of refugees, despair etched on their faces, shuffle along roads littered with burning vehicles; broken bodies lie in ditches, corpse stacked on corpse, mouths open in the rictus of the violently slain.

Fifteen thousand kilometres away on the other side of the world, in sleepy Adelaide, Australia, dinner with friends stalls while we wander into the living room to see the latest images from Kosovo on the seven o'clock news. Someone murmurs, 'Is this really happening?' and we shake our heads and experience that mixture of impotence and disgust that news journalism and the telephoto lens have made so familiar to middle-class folk like ourselves ever since the Vietnam war. A fresh hell is being created before our eyes, and it is hardly

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to be credited that the enlightened nations of Europe are allowing this new hell to grow and grow only sixty minutes by jet from Paris and London.

And it is in Kosovo that the term 'ethnic cleansing' has developed a currency that reminds me and millions like me of the hideous events of the mid-twentieth century, when a newly triumphant European power began the systematic extermination of a race. For the Nazis also spoke of 'cleansing' when they meant mass murder, and it occurs to me as I gaze at my television screen that whenever national leaders start applying metaphors of ablution and disinfection to human beings, you can expect killing on a large scale to follow. The Serbian leaders who are promoting this 'cleansing' of Kosovo are equally attracted to rationalising murder by talking of cancer and infection, of scalpels and surgical intervention.

These metaphors – disinfection, surgical excision – become so compelling to those who employ them that they overwhelm all other considerations. If you talk of people as pollutants, then cleansing means getting rid of the polluting children as well; if you talk about people as a disease, then cutting out the malignancy means the kids have to be cut out too. I have a child of my own, a five-year-old son. While I'm watching the news, he's drifting off to sleep in his bedroom. In another time and another place, he might be thought a pollutant, and so might my wife, so might I. It is in the choice of metaphors we apply to the people who share our planet that we express our humanity, or lack of it.

What I see and hear of the war in Kosovo makes me consider a surgical intervention of my own, but in my case no metaphor is involved. I am a trainee cardiothoracic surgeon at

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the Royal Adelaide Hospital, but earlier in my medical career I had daily experience of the type of wounds being inflicted in Kosovo; wounds caused by automatic and semi-automatic weapons fire; by the explosion of anti-personnel mines, hand grenades, mortar rounds and artillery shells.

It was in Southern Israel during the first Intifada of 1992 and 1993 that I'd witnessed what bullets and shrapnel could do to the human body, and where I'd learnt how effective modern surgery could sometimes be in restoring the wounded to the world. I was a member of an Israeli MEDEVAC team making runs into Gaza to retrieve injured Israeli soldiers and Palestinian civilians. Most retrievals in such situations are made under fire, and so this experience and training has prepared me for work in a war zone. Based in Ashkelon, near the border with the Gaza strip, I volunteered to help in a MEDEVAC team attached to the hospital in which I was working. The attraction of the battlefield, where rapid surgical intervention is especially crucial – and in many cases life-saving – was too hard for this young surgeon to resist.

Saddened and sickened though I am by the images of war swarming on my television screen, I've no clear path to involvement. I mooch about, discontented, until I hear of calls from United Nations member states for volunteer field medical staff. My visceral response is, 'I'll go to Kosovo'. But in the way we do, I run one of those internal debates in the parliament of my skull and listen to voices arguing that I can't hope to make much difference in Kosovo, that it isn't really my war, that I have a beloved wife and adored child to care for here in Adelaide. Arguing back and forth with myself in this way is really a type of sham; I know exactly what I intend to

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do; I intend to go to Kosovo. My own Slovenian grandfather on my mother's side survived Dachau and Mauthausen. If I can't feel roused to action by Milosevic's concentration camps, it will be a betrayal of my memories of that gentle and compassionate man.

And then there is a question of skill and training. Not everybody can negotiate the surgical treatment of blast injuries to the chest, abdomen, limbs of a human being, close the wounds and supervise post-operative care. But I can. And I can do so under less than ideal conditions, in the field, in the back of a jeep if I have to. And knowing that I can, makes it seem that I should.

Perhaps this phoney debate I've conducted in silence is really a preparation for the rowdier one that may break out when I tell my wife that I want to go to Kosovo. Donna, however, is surprisingly reasonable in her point of view: she would never obstruct my path to something that is dear to my heart. She knows what drives me. She knows that is who I am. She sees my point of view but she's also standing up for home and hearth. After all, there was nothing in our marriage vows about me running off to a war zone four months into our domestic life. Her concern also lies with the effect this could have on my young son Jackson, who is still adjusting to the demise of my previous marriage. A woman taking on a man who has been married before feels that her husband will try especially hard to get it right this time. Surely I know better these days.

I do know better in certain ways, but in other ways my experience of life since my time in Israel, in Gaza has made it more difficult to say no to Kosovo. This will sound perverse, but it's the very fact that my life has become more satisfyingly

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settled that has made going to Kosovo so imperative; it's the thrill of watching Jackson growing up; the joy of being loved and understood by Donna; the promise of a rich and rewarding life stretching before us. Each day I awake to security; each month my delight in being alive is enhanced. And my home town is Adelaide, tranquil Adelaide, the most civilised city in Australia.

I am not a person who sees in his mind's eye a beacon on a distant hilltop that signals the ultimate destination of the human race. Every community harbours its complement of thugs, bullies, egomaniacs, sociopaths, just as surely as it includes a great many people of genuine goodwill, people who accept the guidance of their better angels. In some communities – in the Australian community, for example – the worst impulses of people are restrained by tested institutions and by the rule of civilising laws. But I do have a spiritual reverence for justice. I don't want to fight the Serbs, but I do want to take a couple of months out of my life to undo some of their harm.

By the time I'm ready to leave on 27 April 1999, I have Donna's blessing, up to a point. She is, after all, as sickened by what is happening in Kosovo as I am. She says, 'I knew you'd go before you knew yourself. But take care. I want you back in one piece.'

Packing my bags, kissing Donna and Jackson goodbye, I'm not in anything like one piece. Guilt and remorse wrestle with conviction. I say what people heading towards harm always say to those they love: 'I'll be fine, don't worry.' But you can't know that with certainty. Many times in Gaza, I could easily have come to grief. I say it again in the car on the way to the

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airport, and maybe twice more before I reach the departure lounge. 'I'll be fine, absolutely. Don't worry about a thing.'

Her eyes now brimming with tears, she asks, 'Who are you trying to convince?'