
Dominique Sylvain

Dirty War

Publisher: Viviane Hamy

Date of Publication: January 2011

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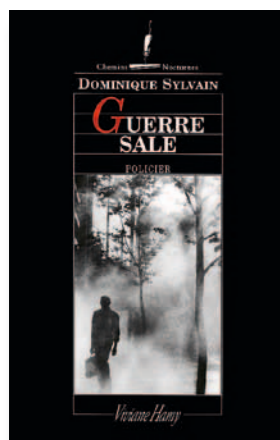
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BIOGRAPHY Dominique Sylvain was born on 30 September 1957 in Thionville, in the Lorraine. She worked for twelve years in Paris, first as a journalist, then as head of internal communications and sponsorship for Usinor. Then, for six years, she lived with her family in Asia. As a result, Tokyo, where she spent three years, inspired her first novel *Baka!* (1995). She is now living again in Tokyo where she works as a full time writer. Her nine novels have all been published in the “Chemins nocturnes” collection of Éditions Viviane Hamy.

PUBLICATIONS With Éditions Viviane Hamy, in the “Chemins nocturnes” collection, some of her more recent novels include: *La Nuit de Géronimo*, 2009; *L’Absence de l’ogre*, 2007 (paperback Points, 2009); *Baka!*, 2007 (new edition) (paperback 2009); *Manta Corridor*, 2006 (paperback Points, 2011); *La Fille du Samouraï*, 2005 (paperback Points, 2010); *Passage du désir*, 2004 (paperback Points, 2009).



Florian Vidal, a lawyer specialised in weapons deals and Franco-African relations, has been murdered horribly: burnt alive beside a swimming pool, handcuffed, with a burning tyre around his neck.

Five years before, Toussaint Kidjo, the Franco-Congolese assistant of Lola Jost, who was at the time the police commissioner of the 10th arrondissement in Paris, had been murdered in the same way. It was this murder, which remained unsolved, that had pushed Lola into taking early retirement. For her, there is an obvious connection between the two cases. So she picks up the investigation once again, but in so doing she treads on the toes of Sacha Duguin, the commandant in charge

of the case, but also a former lover of her friend Ingrid Diesel, an American with a mind-blowing physique, who is masseuse by day and stripper by night in Pigalle, with whom the commandant continues to have a stormy relationship ... Lola soon has to admit that she will get nowhere on her own, and the enemy is far more powerful than she first thought. In this delicate context, what role can our duo possibly play?

Dominique Sylvain has gone back to the improbable pair of *Passage du Désir* and has made a powerful comeback with a perfectly orchestrated novel. One twist leads to another, while the dialogue sparkles, as *Dirty War* advances at a relentless pace.

Chapter 11

Lola Jost was giving her old cupboard a real going over. She chucked around the cardboard boxes, rummaged through them then, having found nothing, started all over again with a groan. Sigmund watched all this from a safe distance, making the occasional questioning yap. The neighbourhood psychoanalyst's Dalmatian was wondering what on earth its guardian was up to.

— About time, my sodding wellies! She roared showing off her find. Just what we need for stormy weather. Ain't that the truth, my lad?

Another plaintive yap from the handsome creature, who now sensed that the unthinkable was about to happen. Lola was going to leave their cosy nest to venture out into the deluge, and no one was going to be able to talk her out of it.

— We've been stuck here for ages. And Antoine will tell me off if you don't get any exercise. Anyway, your spots won't melt. Of course, I could improvise a raincoat for you from a plastic bag, but you wouldn't like that, would you?

She pulled on the old boots she had just found, the hat and coat that her friend Ingrid Diesel had given her for her birthday, put the leash on Sigmund, who put up a modicum of *résistance*, but nothing was going to stop her now. Then the two of them found themselves out on Rue de l'Échiquier being hit by diagonal salvos of rain. Lola headed in the direction of her favourite joint.

As she went through the door of *Belles de jour comme de nuit* the landlord-cum-cook was polishing some glasses. Lola gestured to him.

— Perfect. A shot of house white is just what I need.

Without a word, Maxime Duchamp placed two glasses on the bar, filled

them with Muscat de Beaumes-de-Venise, then picked up a towel to rub down Sigmund, who licked his hand in gratitude.

— Your Muscat isn't bad, and seeing a human face again is a real relief, said Lola, as she massaged the small of her back.

— What's up with you?

— The same as for everyone in Paris. This endless, sodding monsoon. What's more, Antoine Léger has gone off to sunnier climes with his family and has left me Sigmund to dog sit. I used only to have rheumatism, now I also have responsibilities. You couldn't give me a bowl could you?

— Of course. What for?

— Sigmund's a quadruped, but that's no reason why his snout should be always stuck on the pavement. He needs spiritual uplift. Do you know what Théophile de Busarque had to say about the matter?

— No, Maxime answered, with a smile.

— *Wine is a cloud of knowledge that rains only on lovers of existence.* Now that's what I call a thought which is both light and deep.

And Lola poured a drop of Muscat into the bowl. The Dalmatian simply sniffed at it.

— This creature will end up opening its doors of perception an inch or two before it goes back to its master. Otherwise, all is lost for the canine race. Just like it is for everything else.

Talking about doors, Captain Jérôme Barthélemy pushed open the one leading into the bar. He seemed a touch put out. Even more so when he noticed Lola.

— How nice. It looks like you've just bumped into your tax inspector.

— Not at all, boss. I was actually looking for you. But, in the end, I don't know if I'm that pleased I've found you.

Lola Jost hadn't been the neighbourhood police commissioner for years, but her former underlining still behaved as if nothing had changed. Was she going to be the *boss* until the bitter end? Apparently so. At the same time, the ex-commissioner had no idea what her ex assistant was on about.

— Spare me the small talk, my lad, and get to the point.

Barthélemy mouthed his speech silently to himself for a few seconds, before coming out with what he had to say.

— We've discovered the body of a young Parisian lawyer. He's been murdered.

— Where?

— In Colombes. By the Olympic swimming pool.

— Drowned?

— Burnt alive, with petrol, and ...

— And what?

— He had a tyre ... around his neck.

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Dirty War

Lola put down her glass. For an infinitely long second, the faces of Maxime and Barthélemy dilated. She flopped down onto the floor. If she was going to faint, she might as well do so horizontally.

Her friends' voices penetrated a wall of filthy cotton wool just before she lost consciousness. They were calling out her name.

* * *

He had given his name over the intercom. She was now waiting for him on the landing, her lips quivering, in a pose of denial. She was a petite blonde, aged about thirty. With fine features, worn down by anxiety.

— You're not here about Florian are you? ... Nothing has happened to him, has it?

— We've found your husband in Colombes.

— Is he ... dead?

— I'm afraid so. I'm sorry.

She threw herself at him, hitting his chest. He grasped her hands, came out with some soothing words, then let her sob against him, while tightening his arm around her shoulders. In a daze, she went back into the flat, where he noticed a black suitcase in the hall. The living room stank of tobacco, but provided a magnificent view of the façades of the Senate and the Luxembourg gardens in the rain. Nadine Vidal's figure now stood out in front of a high window; she was crying, her forehead pressed against the glass. The muffled sound of traffic filtered up, from five floors down. A miniature woman in a huge, deserted flat. He wondered if they had any children.

How had her husband died? Sacha asked her to sit down, she refused, and then asked the same question again. He told her. Then what he had to say hit her, and she rushed into the kitchen to throw up in the sink. He wanted to comfort her, but was brushed off with a nudge of her shoulder.

She got her breath back, then rinsed her face.

She now agreed to sit down, and lit a quivering cigarette. He gently asked her questions. The day before, her husband had received a phone call. He had left at about half past seven in the evening without saying where he was going, but had promised to be back by eleven. The next morning, his car had still been missing from its parking place.

— Do you know who called him?

— Florian didn't talk much about his work.

— Really?

— He was working for Richard Gratien.

Sacha knew Gratien by name. He was a big fish in the world of Franco-African relations and on first name terms with all the big names in the ministries of foreign affairs and the defence. He was a lawyer with a background that

was both opaque and crucial: he worked as a go-between, in the world of arms deals.

— And your husband had an appointment with him this morning?

— Yes.

— Were things problematic between them?

— I don't think so.

— Was Richard Gratien involved in a delicate case?

— All cases are delicate.

— And did your husband have a case about to come up in court?

— Florian didn't plead in court. All he did was draft contracts for commercial exchanges, so as to facilitate contacts.

She took a long drag, then closed her eyes for a second. Her hands were still trembling.

— Did he seem tense lately?

— No.

— Were there any other important phone calls? Or unusual meetings? Or a clash?

She simply shook her head. He promised to do all he could to find the murderer. So long as she helped him.

— You don't seem to like Gratien.

She didn't answer.

— Why is that? Sacha pressed the point.

— Florian lived in his shadow. When we met at law school ... Florian was already working for him.

— What was he doing?

— He was his assistant. I think he was already helping him to draft contracts.

— What kind of relationship did they have outside of work?

— Gratien paid for our marriage.

— Didn't your husband expect his own family to do that?

— Florian had stopped speaking to his mother.

— For how long?

— For years.

There was now anger in her eyes. He let her take all the time she needed to work it off.

— I told him that he should get a grip on his life. And he was starting to listen to me. But it was a hard decision to make. It was tough to refuse all that money. And then ...

— And then what?

— You can't just walk away from someone like Gratien and turn over a new leaf.

— Why not?

— He sucks the very blood from you and your family. And so, you have to

run ... My idea was to start all over again from nothing ...

— What do you mean?

— Moving abroad, with both of us getting jobs in an international law practice.

— You're a lawyer?

— I'm a criminal lawyer in one of the best practices in Paris. And I've worked hard to get there, even giving up on the idea of having children ... but this time, I was ready to resign.

— Had your husband told Gratien about this idea?

— No, it was just between him and me. I kept bringing it back up. I thought that with time ...

— I noticed that there's a suitcase in the hall. Were you about to go away?

— Yes. Right in the middle of the night. I'd left a dozen messages on Florian's cell phone, I was beside myself ...

— Can you explain?

— We had both been working like mad things, him with his life and me with mine. We hardly saw each other. It was all becoming absurd ...

— You wanted to teach him a lesson.

— I just wanted to go away for a few days, to stay with one of my friends, I thought it would serve him right. How stupid I was ...

More tears. He grabbed a pack of tissues and handed it to her. Then noticed a crushed scrap of paper on the floor. He unfolded it: a nicotine patch. Just like the one in Vidal's bag.

— And you're sure he didn't come back last night?

— That patch is mine. Florian didn't come home, so I started smoking again ...

— Did your husband know Toussaint Kidjo, a police lieutenant who was born in Africa?

— I don't think so.

— Kidjo died five years ago.

— What does that have to do with my husband?

She took some time to swallow the explanation.

— So his name really means nothing to you?

— No.

— Lieutenant Sébastien Ménard is the investigating officer on my team. I'd like him to have access to your husband's personal papers. I mean, to his office on Rue de Seine.

— When?

— As soon as possible.

— So give your man a ring. And let's get it over with.

Sacha called Ménard and told him to join him on Rue de Vaugirard.

— Has Richard Gratien contacted you since the missed appointment of this morning?

— He hasn't stopped. I ended up unplugging the phone. I couldn't take anymore ...

— Could you give me his personal contact details?

Vidal's lair overlooked an inner courtyard bordered by ancient trees which soaked up the light. A set of African statuettes stood on the marble mantel-piece: warriors with seashell eyes and heads stuck with feathers, who seemed to be watching over the place.

— Did your husband use email in his work?

— Of course he did.

— I don't see a computer. Did he have one in his office?

— He had a laptop. But he generally used his BlackBerry. Any bulky correspondence was dealt with by his secretary, Alice Bernier.

Nadine Vidal composed the combination of the safe, removed a large leather notebook from it, then noted down an address and cell phone number, which she gave to Sacha.

— Would you mind? He asked, pointing at the book.

She handed it to him. It contained hundreds of names copied down in a fine hand.

Kidjo wasn't one of them.